

CAREER TALK--Keeping Track of It All: Building Your Social Work Portfolio

Contributed by Regina Trudy Praetorius and Laura Lawson

Well, we have been writing this career column since 2003 and we hope it has been a valuable contribution to your professional development. Over the years, we have written on marketing your degree, creating your résumé and other professional correspondence, interviewing, professionalism, professional development, areas of practice, career transitions, and transferable skills. However, in sharing these various aspects of "career talk" with you, we have left one thing practically untouched: keeping track of your professional development.

This issue is an especially appropriate venue for this important topic as this will be our last Career Talk column. We have enjoyed our time as voluntary career columnists with *The New Social Worker* but are moving on to pursue other interests. We wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors and hope you will share all you know with future social workers as we have attempted to do with you. Why a Portfolio?

You might be asking yourself why a résumé isn't enough. A résumé may be enough. We're not saying it isn't. However, a portfolio can serve you in two ways: 1) documenting what you've done and evaluating your professional growth and 2) giving you an extra edge with employers. When employers first receive your résumé and cover letter, your goal is to entice them into a more in-depth evaluation of you and what you have to offer as a candidate. As many of you know, the social work market is saturated in many geographical areas and/or in many practice areas and settings. Unfortunately, many of us will look "similar" on a résumé. But, for example, if you have an Internet-based portfolio on your résumé and cover letter, an employer is able to quickly visit the page and get a clearer and more detailed picture of you. This may land you an interview before others who may appear to have more to offer than you. Additionally, once you are in your "dream job," the portfolio will be useful in performance evaluations and in promotion evaluations. Often, those making these types of decisions (e.g., an executive director or board) are far-removed from your daily performance and will be relying on the reports of others. The portfolio is your way of filling in gaps that may not be addressed readily. For example, if you have been volunteering on a crisis hotline while working as a case manager at a state agency, those evaluating you for promotion may be unaware that you have a wealth of counseling and crisis intervention skills to share. Now that we've hopefully convinced you to build a portfolio, let's get talking about how to give yourself this edge. Getting Started

After one or two years of professional practice, chronicling how your job duties have changed and how your skills set has grown through practice and continuing education is daunting. Taking care of our daily duties at work and home are enough to send us into memory overload. Keeping folders with altered job descriptions, old résumés, and documentation of various trainings (whether in-services or continuing education) will be life savers. This type of "paper trail" (though many of us may have a "digital trail" at this point) is the foundation of your portfolio.

Begin with your field experiences and document your work, volunteer activities, and continuing education experiences. You may also want to include examples of your work. For instance, if you have written a grant, you may want to include a copy of the application. We would include copies of all of our Career Talk columns. You may want to create a mock case plan or intervention plan based on a typical case plan or intervention plan you use with your clients. Descriptions of programs you have developed or enhanced are also useful.

Include anything that you think might be attractive to a future employer. (By now, you have a very good idea of what those items might be!) After a few years of practice in the field, these may seem irrelevant, but many employers are intrigued to see how time has shaped you. Since the portfolio is an extension of your résumé, it should be as detailed as possible. Regardless of whether you create a paper-based, CD, or Internet-based portfolio, an employer will be able to focus in on the areas of interest rather than having to scour through the entire chronicle of your professional life.

Paper, CD, or Internet-Based Format?

For the most part, the answer to this question will vary. However, we strongly suggest that you have a paper copy of your portfolio for your own records. This should be an extended copy including documentation of each of your entries in the "official" portfolio. For example, certificates documenting your participation in a continuing education program would be in your "official" portfolio, whereas the handouts and notes for the program would be in your personal copy as a refresher for you when you address such inquiries in an interview.

Aside from your personal paper copy, the format should depend upon two very important issues: what you are most comfortable with (now is not the time to learn to build a Web site unless you are not in immediate need of the portfolio) and what would be easiest for employers. Some employers, such as some small nonprofits, might prefer a paper copy for a variety of reasons, including out-of-date technology (e.g. slower processors, dialup Internet access). However, the

drawback is that providing each potential employer with a paper copy of your portfolio can become an expensive endeavor. One option for saving a few dollars and meeting the needs of the employers is to disseminate the digital portfolio (whether CD or Internet-based) and offer a paper copy upon request.

We wish you the best in your career endeavors and encourage you especially to do this extremely important activity for your future career goals. It may seem time-consuming at first, but once it is constructed, updating it will be simple (and should be done often!).

What Do I Put In It? The Basics

Your portfolio should include a greeting or cover letter, table of contents, résumé, and the following five sections:

- Expanded descriptions of employment (job descriptions, case plans, intervention plans, newsletters, other samples of your work)
- Awards and certifications (documents such as certificates can be scanned into a computer file to be included on your CD or Web site)
- Continuing education (copies of certificates or other proof of attendance)
- Publications and/or presentations (Powerpoint slides, programs listing you as a presenter)
- Other documents (such as newspaper articles about your work)

Portfolio Resources

The Social Work Portfolio (Book), B.R. Cournoyer and M.J. Stanley, ISBN 0-534-34305-8

Documenting Success and Achievement: Presentation and Working Portfolios for Counselors (Journal article), S.H. James & B.C. Greenwalt, Journal of Counseling and Development, Spring 2001, Vol. 79, p. 161-165

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