

Presenting the evidence

Dear DON

I've made a New Year's resolution to keep a professional portfolio this year, as I want to get organised about progressing to the next stage in my career. I can see the sense in continuing professional development, and I know it will give me a better chance of promotion or finding another job in the field.

My problem is, I don't know where to start. How do I begin collecting evidence, and how can I tell what's appropriate to include?

Yours, Frankie

Dear Frankie

We'll find out everything you need to know to get to grips with your portfolio, and report on it in the next issue - on one condition: that you keep a diary for us on how you get on compiling yours.

Yours,
DON editor

Keeping a portfolio sounds as if it could be a useful move for career development. So what's involved, how straightforward will it be – and is it worth it? DDN finds out.

So you've made a resolution to keep a professional portfolio. But first things first: why bother? Aren't we all resistant to extra paperwork?

According to the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development, employability in today's market largely depends on 'self-directed development'. In other words, employers are increasingly looking for evidence that job applicants have kept themselves up to date and constantly looked for chances to improve knowledge and increase their experience. Continuing Professional Development is about 'consciously' updating professional knowledge, and is 'a state of mind, more than a set of rules of a programme of study', says the Institute.

So think of the portfolio as a career passport, to move around the field. It's not just a formal record of qualifications and a listed employment history; done properly it will show evidence of your achievements to give future employers a fuller picture of your ability. The investment will be long term: your portfolio should be a living project that grows alongside your career. As well as resulting in a record of what you have done, the exercise of planning and compiling a portfolio is also meant to be developmental. It's aimed at making you consider your future aspirations – and how to get there through planning your next move.

There is no rigid format for a portfolio – but it must be structured systematically, so it is easy for someone else to navigate and understand. Essentially you are telling your career story, using examples from your daily work, so you need to plan the evidence to best reflect your competence. The golden rule here seems to be 'quality over quantity'. Vast amounts of items, haphazardly presented will not impress. Worse than that, they will be counterproductive and detract from your nuggets of experience.

Presentation is important, so first of all, think how you will organise your evidence. Most people use a lever arch file, divided into sections. You can consider compiling an e-portfolio – a digital record of achievements, which can be easier to store and send – but most people still opt for the paper format, which is easier to pick up and look through.

Next, think about the items you will need to collect to show your competence in a range of situations. You can look for examples in your recent past, but try not to use evidence that is more than two years old as your aim is to demonstrate current competence and show you have up-to-date skills. You can draw on your experience of activities outside the workplace, such as voluntary work, if you need to supplement examples from your current job.

To compile evidence from documents produced at work, have a look at care plans, records of meetings and assessments, action plans, reports, letters and emails. Select examples of these documents, if you think they demonstrate your competence in a particular area or record relevant experiences. If you need to use documents that are confidential and cannot be removed from the workplace, provide a written statement describing your involvement and achievements, and state where the document can be found. You should also remember to remove references to any personal information when you use case studies in your personal history.

Another useful approach is to collect statements and testimonials from people who have witnessed your performance at work. You could ask managers or colleagues to sign and date work, and ask service users for feedback whenever it seems appropriate. Get into the habit of collecting evidence about different pieces to work to demonstrate your competence in different situations.

Organising your portfolio is quite straightforward, but it is worth planning the structure before you begin. Start with the title page – your name, job title, organisation, contact address, phone and email and the purpose of the portfolio (such as any qualification you are working towards). Follow it with the contents page, listing sections of your portfolio that will be separated by the file dividers.

Next comes your personal profile. Give a brief summary of your job, and include a job description or role profile. An organisation or department chart should also go here, if you have one,

along with a copy of your up-to-date CV.

A 'professional development' section should then give evidence of your personal development plans. These could include documents relating to training and development you have done, or want to undertake, and can give an idea of your future intentions for career development. Include relevant qualification certificates in this section.

For the next section on drug and alcohol national occupational standards (DANOS), copy the key units that are relevant to your job. You can take these from your current job description or role profile, or from a qualification or award that you are working towards.

Then comes the section with your evidence records. For each DANOS unit, you need to provide a written statement that shows that you have met its requirements, referenced to the sheets demonstrating your evidence. A clear way of doing this is to include a grid or matrix, listing the items of evidence and showing how they cross reference to each unit's requirements.

At the end of your portfolio, compile all the evidence you have collected in one section. This works better than distributing evidence throughout different sections, as good pieces of evidence can be relevant to more than one unit. Number each item of evidence for easy reference, in the order that you have placed it in the portfolio, and make the section even clearer by including an 'evidence index' at the front of it.

So that's all there is to it! It goes without saying that the evidence must be your own work – or if you include examples from team work, make it obvious what your own contribution was. Include each piece of evidence in your portfolio for a clear reason – to prove your competence. If you're not sure what an item proves, don't include it. Volume is not the purpose of this exercise; you won't get brownie points for extra stationery.

Remember to keep your evidence clear and to the point, without duplication. You can reference a piece of evidence as many times as you like, but include just one copy of each item, clearly referenced with a simple, consecutive numbering system. Make it easy for the person reviewing your portfolio to see easily what you are trying to demonstrate. You are trying to showcase your experience, so why make the evidence difficult to find?

Above all, bear in mind that much of your portfolio is about demonstrating what you've already done and the knowledge you've gained. With a little organisation you will realise how much scope you have to make the next move in your career. **DDN**

In future issues of DDN: follow Frankie's diary as she begins her portfolio.

If you have any queries relating to professional development, email DDN Career Clinic, c/o claire@cjwellings.com (or write to the editor at the address on page 3) and we will try and find an expert answer for you.

Where to get more help

The 'management resources' section of our website gives a range of support tools from different organisations to help you with DANOS and compiling a portfolio. Links from the site will take you to the DANOS microsite from Skills for Health; DANOS implementation guides and workbooks from Pavilion; a software package from the Management Standards Consultancy (who helped to develop the DANOS standards) and MAPS; and Capacity Builder – a free software package produced by Skills for Justice.

Visit www.drinkanddrugs.net

If you are an NVQ candidate, you should work with your assessor to agree the most appropriate evidence and the best way to present it. You can keep action and assessment plans, developed with your assessor, in your portfolio.