This report describes a survey of current User Experience (UX) practitioners to establish the value of a strong portfolio during the job application process, and to define what features create a strong portfolio. Responses were collected via a formal survey distribution, informal informational interviews, and a literature review of formal publications and professional blogs. During data collection, all levels of industry were consulted, from local, national, and international development firms.

Nearly every UX position advertised carries the note that a portfolio review is a necessary component of candidate selection. As such, portfolio creation is a large part of professional development and a critical component of the application process for current and future UX designers. However, portfolio creation remains an art form, and can be difficult for inexperienced designers to tackle without guidance and preparation.

Headings:

Design -- Portfolios

Design -- User Experience
USER EXPERIENCE: PORTFOLIO DESIGN

by
Robert West

A Master's paper submitted to the faculty of the School of Information and Library Science of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Information Science.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina
April 2013

Approved by:

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Advisor
Introduction

The field of web development is one of great potential for new graduates of information-based studies. It combines a diverse group of thinkers from related fields, and depends on real creativity and problem solving skills. Few other markets allow self-trained employees without advanced degrees to be promoted as rapidly, and the dependence on employees with technical skills beyond the expertise of management is a big factor in technology company structures. Web development is a business based on collaboration and teamwork, and it is common for members of the team to have different specializations that cover a range of responsibilities. Companies need people who can leverage the skills of others while contributing skills of their own.

Because companies often hire based on skill more than academic affiliation, job seekers are in the unique situation of being able to sell their talents directly. This is most often done through the use of a professional portfolio site, especially for user experience (UX) designers. Unfortunately, the portfolio is just one of many specific areas within UX that have yet to be officially defined and accepted by those who make up the professional

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As it stands now, there are great ideas and practices in place, but the industry is young enough that individual practitioners have to construct their own professional ethos. The portfolio then, is a major component of professional growth. It is also a place to display talents, abilities and creativity. As Dr. Leighton K. F. Lui of the University of Hawai’i’s School of Architecture is quoted in *Portfolio Design*:

> A portfolio has the potential to provide a much more holistic view of a student than a resume can even suggest. If it is well done and it includes concept process sketches as well as some thoughtful commentary, the portfolio can give one an idea of how a person thinks and solves problems. It also may reflect the student’s priorities and skills relative to how much effort went into the various aspects of the design.³

This statement drives home the importance of thoughtful design in portfolio creation and its capacity to show employers true talents well before an in-person interview. This kind of self-marketing is a great opportunity for job seekers, although few authorities in industry seem interested in laying out exactly what a portfolio should include. Basic pointers are shared if you really do some digging with informational interviews, and there are many blog posts with titles to the effect of “what to put in your portfolio,” but these are more general points rather than a map to creating a successful portfolio. Through an extended investigation it is possible to get a general sense of what a strong portfolio should include, and this study was designed to make that knowledge as formal as possible despite the scarcity of source material.

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² ibid
To dismiss the argument that a portfolio site is not necessary for a graduate of an information science program, here are some representative job listings for recent positions that have been posted either on the organization’s parent sites or the Jobs section of uxmag.com, one of the few resources built specifically around the UX community. None of these posts neglect to mention a portfolio review as being a necessary component for consideration.

Figure 1: Amazon.com

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4 Amazon Corporate, *Job Description: Principal UX Designer, Universal Shopping Experience*, http://www.amazon.com/gp/jobs/209411/ref=j_sr_3_t?ie=UTF8&category=*&jobSearchKeywords=ux&location=*&page=1
Figure 2: Biamp Systems

**QUALIFICATIONS**

- 5+ years of experience design (Web, Enterprise, Application UI, Mobile, Games, Information Visualization).
- Ability to communicate (verbally and graphically), ideas, decisions and reasoning with clarity and confidence.
- Demonstrated experience with Adobe and Microsoft products.
- Familiarity with enterprise product development.
- Knowledge and design experience with UX / IxD / UI.
- Demonstrated knowledge in UX Architecture.

- Portfolio demonstrating a range of design styles, diversity of projects, and a clear personal aesthetic.
- Must be able to work on multiple projects and prioritize tasks for each.
- An ability to think strategically, yet implement at the tactical level.
- Strong analytical problem solving, organizational, and product management skills absolutely required.
- Excellent written and oral communication skills. Must be comfortable in front of customers, sales teams, and executives.
- Ability to work in a cooperative manner to coordinate efforts from multiple functional teams to achieve a specific goal.

Figure 3: Spotify

- 7+ yrs experience in UX roles at a consumer focused tech or media company
- Exceptional communication skills; ability to speak fluently and clearly explain design decisions to business partners and engineers
- Design leadership experience across the entire product lifecycle and multiple product launches
- Ability to rapidly produce multiple UX/UI concepts and prototypes; balancing pixel-perfect attention to detail against opting for low-fi design to optimise workflow and process
- Bold vision for the future of Spotify as well as digital and social media in general
- Mobile experience a plus
- A love for music

Submitting a strong portfolio in design that showcases deep visual and interaction design skills is a must; show us you know how to create a great experience.

About the band

At Spotify, we’ve connected millions of people to their favorite songs and created a service that people use everyday to play, discover and share music they love. As Spotify’s design team, our mission is to delight users by making the complex easy, the boring fun, and the generic personal. This is a fast paced and ever changing environment, we seek original thinkers to join us who are eager to redefine Spotify and change the world of music.

This last post by streaming audio service Spotify is perfectly direct and spectacularly vague in the same moment. “Show us you know how to create a great experience,” which is not the most detailed description of requirements. Clearly, employers expect applicants to know exactly what a “strong portfolio” is, and demand that the portfolio be available for review well before the interview stage of the application process.

During a presentation to the User Interface Design course at UNC-Chapel Hill this semester, presenters from software company SAS made this statement about what students seeking employment in UX design should “Be: Portfolio’d, Technically skilled, Relevant, Networked, Experienced, and “Alright”. “Here, “portfolio’d” means have a portfolio. “Alright” means not a total pain to work with everyday. The presenters stressed that the list was constructed in order of importance, with the portfolio being the number one most important thing a job seeker should have. This means that technical skills, experience, and not being awful are all secondary to having a portfolio. It is somewhat at odds with UNC’s “to be rather than to seem,” but it does reflect the necessity of the portfolio during the job hunt.

The quote below is from Patrick Neeman, a blogger and UX designer who created the UX Drinking Game. It is a tool to express frustrations with working in the UX field in general, but particularly as a

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place for designers to vent about annoying clients. This post is humorous, but a firm statement that portfolios are a necessary element of any professional designer’s toolkit.

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Background

For a detailed understanding of what a professional portfolio might be, it is necessary to explore the practices established by the art community. The art industry is based on production, how many “great” works an artist completes will define their career. As a consequence, artists—and more recently architects and designers—carefully preserve the products of their labor across their careers, both for personal use as well as professional. As their work grows in volume, it is necessary to prune the collection back to a select few pieces that highlight their skills, accomplishments, and professional identity. This smaller collection of highlights is often referred to as a portfolio, and in most cases is as valuable to these professionals as their school affiliations or past work history.

This same phenomenon is seen with the much more recently evolved workforce found within web development. The ease with which files and websites can be shared across the web has made it easier than ever for an individual to advertise their abilities to diverse audiences across the very medium they work in. This is a critical point because not all professions that have grown with the web offer a product that directly corresponds to traditional services provided in the physical world. For example, in your offline life, you might expect your car mechanic to have a pristinely maintained vehicle, or even a restored classic automobile. In the

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9 Harold Linton, *Portfolio Design*, Foreword
same way, website developers must show their skills through their code and final products.\(^\text{10}\)

On the web, consumers speak with their wallets every day by visiting or making purchases from sites that are well designed and function as expected. Just as companies and businesses are accountable to the quality of their web services, the professionals who design and build those websites are accountable for the quality of their products. The easiest way to convince a possible client that you have great skill in web development is to show her a sampling of amazing websites you’ve built. For developers, those who work in the actual code and structure of web development, it is incredibly easy to purpose build a simple but clean page to show your competency. This is also a great opportunity to show off proficiency with new technologies clients may require. In the same way, graphic designers can point prospective clients to past projects that highlight their skill in logos, layouts, or branding.

When it comes to User Experience (UX) design, a sub-category of web development that has been widely accepted in value and importance in recent years, however, the creation of a portfolio or professional website can be much more difficult.\(^\text{11}\) The problem is rooted in the somewhat ethereal and subjective nature of user experience design itself. The word


\(^{11}\) “The Importance of User Experience,” http://www.adaptiveconsultancy.com/web-design/website-design/ecommerce-web-design/the-importance-of-user-experience
“experience” is the key here. When visiting a website or using an application, are users able to accomplish their goals without unnecessary duress? Is the task itself as pleasant and simple as it can be? Or in very specific circumstances, is it as fun or as entertaining as it could be? These are the metrics by which UX is measured.\textsuperscript{12} This established, how does a UX designer use their design skills to advertise their competency via a portfolio or website?

Before moving into what makes a UX portfolio, it is necessary to understand user experience design as a profession and as a community. On one hand, the community is incredibly collaborative and very open to new ideas and practitioners. There are forums, blogs and websites all dedicated to sharing techniques and gathering feedback. To list a few major resources:

- [http://ux.stackexchange.com/](http://ux.stackexchange.com/)
- [http://uxmag.com](http://uxmag.com)
- [http://uxdesign.smashingmagazine.com/](http://uxdesign.smashingmagazine.com/)
- [http://viget.com/inspire](http://viget.com/inspire)
- [http://www.upassoc.org/upa_publications/user_experience/](http://www.upassoc.org/upa_publications/user_experience/)
- [http://adaptivepath.com/ideas](http://adaptivepath.com/ideas)
- [http://usability.com](http://usability.com)
- [http://betteruxportfolios.wordpress.com/](http://betteruxportfolios.wordpress.com/)

In contrast to this high visibility collaboration, the other side of the coin is a bit darker, for two reasons. The first being that the most advanced research in user experience is done by major corporations who rely heavily on employee non-disclosure agreements (NDA’s) to keep advantageous findings from being shared with the larger community.\(^\text{13}\)

The other major issue is that the collaborative and open nature of the UX community makes it possible for individuals without any real knowledge or experience to join the conversation. This can be both good and bad, but the lack of filtering can cause concerns where quality of information is concerned. Further complicating things is the dynamic nature of the field. No single person is entirely in the position to accurately say what UX really means. For a small development firm building apps for local startups, UX looks very different than it does for large firms that may only have a few very well funded clients.\(^\text{14}\)

There is no single accepted definition of user experience, but there are many variations that more or less mean the same thing.\(^\text{15}\) This reality will likely persist for some time, as the UX community is large but lacking in a defined, unified strategy. As might be expected of a field


\(^{14}\)Russ Unger and Carolyn Chandler, A Project Guide to UX Design: for user experience designers in the field or in the making (Berkeley: New Riders, 2012), 42

characterized in this way, there isn't any single entity or organization defining what UX is and what makes it good or bad. There are a few pioneering names in the field who still have a great influence, most notably Jesse James Garrett and Bill Buxton. Garrett is the author of *The Elements of User Experience*, which is as close to a bible as UX will likely get. In *Elements*, Garrett lays out exactly what his take on the practice of UX design entails, and the most basic steps to practicing in its most literal sense. Garrett defines user experience as “the experience [a] product creates for the people who use it in the real world.”

Outside the context of his larger book, Garrett’s definition certainly seems lacking in any purposeful usefulness, but his work brings about a point that is fundamental to UX design, the role of process. Process is everything to a practicing user experience designer, and it defines them as a professional. Process is also the reason development schedules differ between web development firms of dissimilar size and scope. Process then, is something that must be a significant component of a design portfolio. This is where Bill Buxton’s contributions to the field make their greatest impact. At the root of his work surrounding creating better products and resources is the critical importance of design thinking. The definition of “design” or “design thinking” is in itself a subject of study. Not surprisingly, every expert who studies or ‘does’ design, has their own idea of what design actually is. As a creative labor, to some extent this makes

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sense. No doubt however, there are designers similar to some of today’s UX experts who think more about how to conceptualize, market, and sell their visions rather than come up with something simple and effective to communicate the task and practice of design.

Because there are so many great definitions of what the term “design” really means, it can be helpful to think of it in terms of its smaller facets as illustrated below:

For a more traditional take, the Wikipedia definition of design is “the creation of a plan or convention for the construction of an object or a system.” Stopping here, the definition is fairly straightforward. However, reading on to the many variations of design definitions rapidly shows that there is no consensus whatsoever as to what the “correct” definition of

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design is. This is not a fault of Wikipedians all trying to make their voices heard. An investigation of scholarly texts on design shows that these authors also coin their own definitions for design. That, or they heavily modify a definition posed by previous thinkers to make it their own. Buxton is no different. His definition takes pages to relate, and essentially boils down to design being the product of careful study and thinking done by individuals who are trained in design for the end result of making things better. Following this thought is the necessity for sketching throughout the design process.\(^\text{19}\) Out of context this is an absurd way of trying to define a concept, but it does show the extent to which current thinkers are not bound by convention when forming their own ideas around what design is or should be.

While this discussion addresses design to a usable extent, what about design thinking? The Wikipedia definition of design thinking is as follows: “the methods and processes for investigating ill-defined problems, acquiring information, analyzing knowledge, and positing solutions in the design and planning fields.”\(^\text{20}\) In a victory for collaborative online resources, this is one of the better definitions available, as long as the reader holds some vague notion as to what design means to begin with. Design thinking is at the heart of all good design and development, as it is really just a process for taking in a situation and then evaluating what

\(^{19}\) Bill Buxton, *Sketching User Experiences: getting the design right and the right design* (San Francisco: Elsevier, 2007), 97
needs to be done to meet goals.\textsuperscript{21} The best part of design thinking is its ability to be applied successfully to wildly different circumstances. In some ways, it could be argued that design thinking really boils down to thinking in a deliberate way, or better yet, thinking with a process. As mentioned above, process defines UX design, but the way process is applied more generally by companies in industry is worth investigating further.

Similar to the terms already put forward, process is difficult to define apart from its most abstract “series of steps you take to reach some result.” This simple description makes process a tool that can be easily applied to any task that needs completion. With time and resources, it is possible to define a single process for a scenario that gives the best probability of a favorable outcome. Processes can be developed for any situation, great or small. One of the best applications of process is with the design and development model. While designing, process formalizes the entire approach and affects project outcomes just as readily as the object being worked on.

One popular approach to web development is the agile framework. There are many variations and detailed descriptions are widely available. But, at its core, agile is simply a process for deciding what to do next. A set of workdays is created, and tasks that can realistically be completed during that period are reviewed and assigned. Over the course of the workdays, short meetings are held to keep everyone informed of progress or delays. At the conclusion of the working period, a meeting is held to see

\textsuperscript{21} This definition was written by the author to illustrate the concept
what went well and what remains to be done. Then, a new meeting kicks off planning for the next work period, and the process repeats.\textsuperscript{22} As a process, the agile model doesn’t always work, particularly on jobs of very limited scope or complexity. In those instances, other processes are employed to schedule development work. The simplest case might be a brief meeting between a client and developer, followed by the developer doing some work, and then a delivery meeting where the product is shared with the client. If a firm sticks to small projects like this, they might modify this process to improve it, but as long as they apply the model to each job, it is still a design process.\textsuperscript{23} A survey of current UX recruiters and designers proves that current professional opinion supports this idea of process being a critical element in user experience design.

\textsuperscript{22} Kelly Waters, “Agile Development Cycle,” \textit{All About Agile}, May 4, 2011, \url{http://www.allaboutagile.com/agile-development-cycle/}

\textsuperscript{23} Yvonne Rodgers, Helen Sharp, and Jenny Preece, \textit{Interaction Design: beyond human-computer interaction} (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 329
The Study

The problem with a study that seeks to write a formula for a successful anything is that if it were easy, someone would have done it already. While many in industry understand what a portfolio needs to be, it is not usually in their interests to share that knowledge. A few individuals have the responsibility to recruit talent, and they might share some insight—as they have for this research. Ultimately though, making a strong portfolio is not something that current professionals teach through the course of their work. After interviewing professionals in several different contexts, it can firmly be said that the most useful information came from friendly conversations rather than the direct questioning of the formal survey. Being friendly and personable was the only approach that yielded quality information. It is almost as if recruiters wanted to give a helpful piece of advice only after this researcher showed some measure of professional competence and mutual respect had formed. In contrast, the results of the formal survey produced generalities very similar to many opinions posted online. However, the comments taken in the study are direct from UX designers at established firms, so they carry much greater credibility.

To increase the number of opinions included in this study beyond those networked with personally, hiring managers and UX directors from varying levels of industry were interviewed formally via an electronic survey designed and distributed with the Qualtrics survey tool. The sample
size was deliberately small at 15 professionals, but was intended to be representative of the diversity found in web development firms. An international firm based in New York represented the upper reaches of development work. They have a small set of very large clients with very deep pockets. The second firm has three offices nationally, and represents the typical well-established web shop with basic operational structures firmly in place. Last is a local firm that caters largely to regional startups and, increasingly, to corporations looking for faster delivery than internal teams can manage.

Participants were given the following questions in this order, with the intention of making the survey echo a basic informational interview:

1. What is your position title and what are your primary duties?
2. Do you have any insights to share on how your industry currently uses or does not use a portfolio review as part of the hiring process?
3. Explain the capacity in which you currently or previously reviewed candidates for positions, and how their application materials (portfolio site, submitted work, etc.) affected your review.
4. While presenting themselves, what are the most important areas that an applicant should focus on when creating a sample of work, and how should they present their materials?
5. What challenge do newly graduating job seekers experience that a strong portfolio could address?
6. Are there any existing resources or guides to portfolio creation you find exemplary?
7. Please provide several links to any online portfolios that you feel accomplish the task of demonstrating professionalism and technical competence.

8. Please use the space below to add any points you wish to share that were not related to any of the previous answers.

The response to the survey was an acceptable twenty percent completion rate. However, the limited number of participants would have required a greater response rate to generate serious statistical validity. That limitation noted, the responses collected do corroborate information gathered by the literature review and informal interviews. Taken together, the information is highly consistent and should be considered during any conversation related to the importance of professional portfolios in web design.

One additional limitation of the survey is that respondents did not represent the entire spectrum of industry as intended. In fact, all respondents are employees of the mid level national firm. This is not ideal, but it does suggest that the opinions of these respondents are less susceptible to the extremes experienced by the smallest and largest design firms. Also noteworthy, responses from this company reflect their culture of contribution within the field, which is a pleasant discovery.
Results

From the survey responses, some very good points were discovered. As mentioned, many of the ideas shared by respondents were in line with what has been written about in popular resources online. Despite attempts to protect anonymity in the survey wording, all respondents made references to either themselves or their companies, so it is necessary to summarize the findings rather than include the responses in full form.

All from the mid-sized national firm, these respondents provided a few more details about their working environments. The company has ~50 employees, and the respondents all act as user experience design consultants while also contributing to development work, recruitment efforts, and research. The respondents reported portfolio review to be a critical phase of the recruitment process, with the portfolio often being what determines which applicants are offered interviews. One respondent said this about portfolios, “We’re looking for work samples that show critical thinking, a breadth of experience, and the ability to communicate design decisions.” Another response is worth quoting in its entirety, referencing portfolios as a part of the hiring process.

We place a large amount of weight on candidates’ portfolios, especially in the screening process. We use it to validate: * The candidate’s role in the project (and indirectly, how they work with others) * The level of critical thought that the candidate is capable of * The candidate’s design sensibilities and knowledge of UI design and IA. * The candidate’s ability to communicate concisely and effectively. * The scale of projects the candidate has been exposed to. * The candidate’s personal design process (i.e. do they
make reasoned or haphazard design decisions) * The design and elicitation methods the candidate employs or has been exposed to.

When asked about the weight given to the results of the review just described, the respondent noted, “It’s not uncommon for application materials to exclude a candidate from a formal interview.”

Question 4 of the survey gets to the most valuable information shared by respondents. Here are two responses that capture very well just what is important to focus on while creating a portfolio. More importantly, they present two perspectives which are shared by many in the field today. The first:

Off the top of my head: 1. Show your work. It's critical to see how you think. The underlying point to communicate is how you got from project brief to final product. The rough sketches, wrong directions, unexpected insights, etc. all weave an interesting tapestry that helps us understand you and your thinking. 2. Make it clear what you did. Most projects are team efforts, so clearly identify where your work ended and others began. Too often, portfolios are built around final comps, which the UX designer may not have done. 3. Provide sufficient detail (but don't write a novel). It's hard to judge whether UX decisions are good without context. So let us know about the project objectives, constraints, and your contribution. My colleagues might disagree, but I like to know what you would have done differently in retrospect. There's always something that could have been done differently. Of course, if you do go here, never blame others. 4. Pick a range. 3-4 pieces is typically sufficient, especially for most starting candidates. Make sure they represent a breadth of skills. This could be large vs. small projects, I/A vs. IxD projects, self-directed vs. client work. 5. Use a narrative format. The term "portfolio" often leads people to think they should show their work like a visual designer. Often, this is not the right approach because so much of UX is non-visual (or at least, not terribly aesthetic.). I find that a case study approach works much better, because you can craft a story with both prose and visuals.
Just as well put is the second summary, which puts forward the popular method of using a story to tell hiring managers what the project entailed and how the applicant solved problems specific to that project:

The most important thing is for an applicant to tell us a story around their work. We need to understand the context of the work they're showing us. What was the problem they faced? How did they approach the solution? What was the rationale for the solution? Work presented without context doesn't help us get a sense for the applicant's skills or process. The presentation is less important, but should be clean and easy to access. Online is best, but PDF is OK.

Fittingly, the last response included in full gives a final plug for sharing personal design process through the professional portfolio. It comes from the question prompting the respondents to address how having a portfolio built can help newly graduated job seekers in specific.

Most new graduates will only have class work to show off, and the final result usually isn't much to look at. By focusing on the problem solving process, we can see the real work that went into the project. Also, a few good examples are better than a lot of bad ones. Good project selection can really help show off a graduate's skills.

One of the most agreed upon areas of portfolio design is the demonstration of deliberate process. This component is found heavily in the literature surrounding the topic of portfolio design. Because the identification of process is found in both the formal survey and the literature review, it suggests general agreement across the industry.
Suggested Resources

In this section are links to several of the best resource and portfolio examples provided by respondents in the survey. Unfortunately, this was the least rich content area of the survey, with several respondents even reporting that they really should have a collection of good portfolios sites, but they just haven’t taken the trouble to make a list of their favorites. It continues what seems to be the theme of this research: it is far more popular to do user experience design than it is to attempt talking about UX in concrete terms.

Resource for reference:

http://viget.com/inspire/the-viget-guide-to-a-great-ux-portfolio

Portfolios determined to be above average quality:

http://brian-talbot.com/portfolio/


The second portfolio example comes with a generous caveat, “There’s so much that’s terrible about this portfolio, but Dave Werner does an excellent job of using video and a monologue to describe his process.” The disclaimer does discredit the portfolio significantly.
Application

More than anything else, a portfolio is an opportunity for an applicant to share who he is, what is important to his professional work, and how he approaches that work. Of the dozens of informal posts written on blog creation (very few of which are any more specific than the vague definitions already discussed) one in particular delivers what consensus argues is the best approach. In the post 7 Steps to a Kick-Ass UX Portfolio, Will Evans makes the case that the best way to demonstrate competency in the UX field is by applying a deliberate process to the portfolio itself.⁴ To begin, define goals and objectives. In most cases the goal is simple: show the hiring manager at X design firm that I deserve a spot in their shop. Taking it a step further, the portfolio should be designed with that hiring manager as the portfolio’s intended user. Every decision made regarding content or appearance should be made with that user’s task in mind. If a hiring manager is the intended user, know that a portfolio must stand out from the crowd of portfolios he might review in a given week. At the same time however, the portfolio can’t simply be eye catching and loud, as any page that makes a reviewer cringe will not be one he will choose to look at any longer than necessary. Finding the balance in between is key.

As with most professions, it is understood that a new UX employee at a design or development firm will have to modify her style to fit the

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working style of the larger company. Why then would it matter how well she approaches problem solving if she will have to change her style? The answer is that the awareness of process is something managers need to see in candidates. There is no substitution for the demonstration of a well-planned and well-executed product. T. Truman Capone, Director of the School of Visual Arts at Virginia Polytechnic University shared these words on portfolio planning:

> It is extremely important to plan in advance and be consistent in keeping archives of your exceptional work. Only utilize about six to eight good ideas or designs in your book. Prospective clients want to be sure you can do quality work, and a few good ideas can actively prove that. Design your book as simply and elegantly as possible. It is the content and how you communicate it that are important. The portfolio tells the prospective employer that the designer understands the relationship between design and business.25

> While hiring managers are receptive to creativity while reviewing applicants’ work, they almost all require a demonstration of deliberate process to confirm an applicant’s suitability. It is not enough to produce great work by accident. It can be done a few times, but not on a daily grind, project after project. An applicant who understands the value of a deliberate approach that maximizes the possibility of a successful product will beat an applicant with a flashy style in almost every case. This is the single most important element of a quality portfolio, but it has yet to be applied in all curriculum dedicated to UX design. Those students who are up on current practice in industry however know the value of process and portfolio creation where job hunting is concerned. One current SILS

25 Harold Linton, *Portfolio Design*, 147
student who was recently offered a great position with a national firm had this to say about portfolios:

Design is all about planning, testing, and iteration; in other words, process. Good design doesn’t just appear fully formed, no matter how simple or obvious the final product may seem. Design process is what employers want to see, and that’s what is really impossible to show without a portfolio. Even if you have a great GPA and are incredibly bright, showing up to a design interview without a portfolio would be a huge mistake. By doing so, you are showing that as much as you know, you don’t understand the most fundamental aspect of design.26

26 Current SILS student, quoted April 17, 2013.
Argument

The main conclusion of this story is greater than a simple “everyone working in UX needs a portfolio.” While that is true, there is a bigger lesson to learn. It is that time spent in an undergraduate or graduate program studying coursework in UX or programming or project management gives an ample quantity of long-term projects to fill a beginner’s professional portfolio. The projects won’t be the most stunning work that hiring managers see. But they can illustrate a student’s skills, especially when project scope is considered. Student projects done for credit will never be as well-thought or as polished as projects done for paying clients. However, even a simple project can become a great piece in a professional portfolio. In fact, class projects are an opportunity to make something from almost nothing. Students can demonstrate their capabilities in a worst-case scenario situation. Few firms will throw recently hired designers under the bus. Instead, new employees work under the guidance of senior designers, learning skills along the way. A class project is much more of an excuse to show potential than it is a demonstration of a fully developed skillset. This kind of content is exactly what successful UX designers have in their portfolios today.

A further benefit of populating a portfolio with class work is that rarely will that work be owned by an entity other than the student. In industry it is very common for employees to agree to non-disclosure agreements at the time of hiring. These NDA’s prohibit designers from
sharing their work with other entities while under the NDA. There has been some discussion recently that interviews are an exception to this rule, but popular opinion remains on the side of NDA’s being strictly followed in practice. This established, having a few strong class projects to include in a professional portfolio forms a great foundation of work to share that is free of any doubt as to ownership and legality of sharing. On a similar note, if class projects are done with the intent to include them in a portfolio to be shared with future recruiters and hiring managers, the odds that strong deliverables will be produced are much higher than if only done for class credit.

There is one final point to be made, and it is one of opportunity. There is almost no curriculum available for training the coming generations of user experience designers. Standardizing the field and its necessary training is a compelling opportunity to consider. Few professions are as lacking in role definition as UX design is today. As a field rooted in design and the arts, it would be helpful to look at the schools of design and architecture for guidance when forming curricula. A critical component of design training is work done for practice, along with the creation of a well-presented portfolio to collect that work.

As a very natural first step, the curriculum for a dedicated user experience design training program could revolve around this model, particularly in the area of portfolio creation. If portfolios were built as classwork, and students were allowed to critique and improve their
portfolios under the guidance of an experienced UX designer, a very large component of their professional development would be achieved, and the experience earned by the exercise would be useful not just in future interviews, but also in the way students face design challenges for the rest of their careers. It is possible to say even, that it would help students recognize and develop a process of their own.
Conclusion

The foreword of *Portfolio Design* includes the following statement from world-famous architect Cesar Pelli:

> When I look at a design portfolio, I am interested in the content, of course; but I am also interested in the design of the portfolio itself. Sometimes it tells me as much as the work it presents. In it, I can judge the person’s eye: the images chosen, how they are placed on a page, how the captions are designed, the choice of type, the color of paper, the design of the cover. I can also tell if the designer is conservative, adventuresome, flashy, restrained, neat, or sloppy.

The portfolio also tells me about the abilities of its designer to communicate ideas and images in graphic form. Much like in a building, there is a great deal of freedom within the physical limits set by the medium and the cultural limits set by convention, and I can tell about the judgment of the designers by how constrained they have been by these limits or by how much freedom they have taken with them. I can even judge how well they have managed their time in either overdoing the portfolio design or in having established an efficient process for preparing it.

Finally, I can see how all of these decisions have come together in a single object; that is, how coherent with the work illustrated is the form in which it is presented, and, just as important, how coherent is the portfolio with regard to the person that it represents. In the design of a portfolio I encounter many of the same issues, problems, skills, and talents that are necessary to produce architecture.27

Rather amazingly, the comparison between the demands of architecture and those of user experience design are almost exactly the same where portfolios are concerned. Granted, materials may differ, but the detailed artistry remains. Academic programs intent on creating lasting and competitive curriculums for UX would do well to apply some of the teachings found in traditional design programs.

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