

Sometimes It's Worth the Headaches

Working in Challenging Environments

By Larry White, East Carolina University

My colleagues and I were conversing recently about our professional work history and how we had ended up where we were in life. Most of the tales involved a scrape or two with a challenging situation or individual who changed a career path. Almost all of the tales involved a person ending up in a bad set of circumstances and, not knowing how to address the problem, made the choice to find a new employment setting. Most everyone commented that they wish they had had more knowledge and experience of how to deal with difficult work situations, because if they had these skills, they may not have had to relocate or start over somewhere else in the profession. A few mentioned that they wondered what they would do now if they suddenly found themselves in a difficult work environment and tried to imagine how they would respond.

I began by stating that I had similar experiences. My tale included some of the more memorable details regarding some of my work experiences in library and retail service provision and administration: facing weapons being wielded by homeless patrons, chasing people to retrieve children taken from their parents in the library, patrons being run over by cars in the parking lot, trying to catch wild animals in the stacks, and a variety of the normal types of staff and management problems and issues.

Several of my colleagues commented that the jobs I had worked did not seem to be very desirable. I then explained that I had usually been advised not to pursue these difficult positions by friends and well-wishers because they were "shortcuts to unemployment," "nobody has ever been able to make it work" or (my favorite) "it will make you an aspirin junkie!" My colleagues were astonished that I had pursued work situations in the past in spite of being warned to stay away from these stressful situations. I explained that I had taken these jobs in order to broaden my experience because there were advantages to working in these difficult situations.

There was a method for the apparent madness in working in challenging environments. The primary advantage was learning first-hand how to successfully work through the challenges and improve my knowledge, skills and abilities to become a more effective employee/leader. While one can effectively read, learn or role-play about how to handle workplace challenges in a classroom, the scenarios and the ideal responses learned in the classroom seldom occur or are resolved according to the text. The classroom knowledge is helpful, but may not be enough to make one competent. An actual difficult experience and implied consequences, benefits and duress requires applying one's intellectual and experiential tools in order to learn:

- The variety and degrees of challenges one may face and their appropriate levels of response.
- How to successfully deal with your own setbacks, conflicts, successes and negative experiences.
- To observe other's successes and examples.
- To stretch the boundaries of what you can accomplish and manage in order to create personal growth and coping skills.

All of these experiences combine to create a broader and deeper set of knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) for you to draw upon with future workplace and personal challenges and increases your chances of addressing them successfully. Even an unsuccessful experience in dealing with a challenging work environment can be valuable. Frequently in the for-profit world, the employee/manager who has worked through the biggest failures gets promoted faster because of their experience in dealing with extreme situations.

A secondary advantage is that one can often learn more about effective management/organizational operations when one is faced with more than maintaining the status quo in a successful work place environment. A challenging work environment creates a wide variety of problems that require the application of innovative actions, technologies and alternative solutions. In a challenging work environment:

- Communication barriers are stronger, thus effective responses require extra effort to identify effective communication channels and formats to successfully rebuild organization coordination and culture.
- Resources to accomplish organizational goals are often declining, requiring creativity and flexibility in systems and staff work processes in order to effectively delivery expected outputs and outcomes to stakeholders.
- The culture of the organization usually is pessimistic and egocentric, creating stakeholders (internal and external) who are not engaged in a dynamic fashion or sharing a common vision. Creative solutions are required to motivate and refocus stakeholders on organizational goals and a unified vision.

Working experience in a non-challenging work environment may not generally provide for the scope or frequency of opportunity to demonstrate and stretch an individual's KSAs, creativity, innovation, communication, or problem-solving skills. Exercising your KSAs for working in a challenging environment is comparable to preparing to run a race: one prepares for a race by training harder or running longer distances or faster times, not by resting or reducing one's training levels.

The last advantage to working in a challenging work environment is that the expectation level of success is usually low. Generally, challenging work environments have a history of underperforming individuals, teams, and leaders. If, for example, everyone who takes a particular job lasts less than a year and productivity continues to decline over years, then the organization does not have high expectations that the new person/leader will be successful. Therefore if you do not achieve a high level of performance, it is not wholly unexpected.

However, if you can achieve even a modicum of success in the challenging work environment, you will be deemed an effective member/leader or even a miracle worker, which in turn can develop new opportunities to expand your KSA repertoire. Having a strong set of KSAs that allow you to effectively address workplace challenges cannot not only advance your career opportunities, but might reduce daily stress and the need for starting over every time a new challenge is experienced in the work environment.

Becoming an Effective Library Advocate through the Use of Persuasion

By Ruth Zietlow

Why write about persuasion?

Our profession has a unique and important view on society's need for high quality information resources. This view needs to be heard outside of our profession. We need to develop and hone our advocacy for wide access to reliable, high quality information. I have been a professional librarian for more than ten years. Within that time, I have seen weak ideas succeed, and strong ideas fail. "Selling" a project or idea is a difficult and intimidating task but there are some persuasion techniques we can use to become more effective.

Persuasion: what is it not?

Peter Drucker has an entire chapter devoted to decisions in his classic *The Practice of Management* (Drucker, 1954). He describes the process dryly and succinctly "Decision-making has five distinct phases: Defining the problem; analyzing the problem; developing alternate solutions; deciding upon the best solution; [and] converting the decision into effective action." (Drucker, 1954, p.353). Many are dismayed when they follow his advice in developing and presenting a proposal and still fail.

I have found myself revisiting an important article written in 1998 by Jay Conger, while he was an assistant professor of organizational behavior at McGill University. Does the following paragraph ring true for you?

"If you are like most businesspeople I have encountered, you see persuasion as a relatively straightforward process. First, you strongly state your position. Second, you outline the supporting arguments, followed by a highly assertive, databased exposition. Finally, you enter the deal making stage and work toward a "close". In other words, you use logic, persistence, and personal enthusiasm to get others to buy a good idea. The reality is that following this process is one surefire way to fail at

persuasion." (Conger, 1998, p.84)

Persuasion: what is it?

Persuasion is the process of guiding decision makers to adopt your reasoning on an issue. An important characteristic of persuasion is that the decision maker makes his or her decision freely and without threat. This is essential for real buy-in and wide support of a decision.

According to Conger, there are four distinct and essential steps involved in developing a presentation to decision makers (Conger, 1998). They are:

1. Establish credibility
2. Frame goals on common ground with decision makers
3. Reinforce positions with vivid language and compelling evidence
4. Connect emotionally with the audience.

1. Establish credibility.

This is the most crucial step in being persuasive (Conger, 1998; Cialdini, 2001). Credibility develops from two aspects of the persuader: her expertise and her relationships (Conger, 1998). Both expertise and relationships are developed over time. This reality explains much of the frustration new librarians feel when their energetic and fresh ideas are not immediately embraced. The new librarian must rely on her credentials to substitute for her audience's observations of her expertise. She must also develop a strong reputation to gain her audience's trust. The most persuasive presenters are not known for mood extremes or inconsistent performance (Conger, 1998). A lack of consistency represents risk, and risk is a major factor in the decision-making process.

While the credibility of the advocate is crucial, other factors are important as well. Robert Cialdini, Professor of Psychology at Arizona State University mentions five more factors that feed into persuasiveness. (Cialdini, 2001) He argues persuasiveness requires a combination of the following:

Liking —People like those who like them. Developing a bond early in a relationship provides a strong foundation to build on further. Additionally, giving praise has been shown to increase one's likeability.

Reciprocity —People appreciate generosity. Though gifts are a "crude application" of reciprocity, they have been shown to be effective in generating goodwill, and increasing retention. Not all generosity is tangible. Time and attention are also reciprocated in a professional setting.

Social proof —This refers to the use of peer pressure, when it's available. If you do not yet have credibility with your audience, find someone who does have that credibility and is sympathetic to your point of view. Your message has a higher probability of being well received.

Authority—This harkens back to the Conger's expertise factor in developing credibility. Cialdini has an excellent point when he states:

amid the teeming complexity of contemporary life, a well-selected expert offers a valuable and efficient shortcut to good decisions. Indeed, some questions, be they legal, financial, medical, or technological, require so much specialized knowledge to answer, we have no choice but to rely on experts. Since there's good reason to defer to experts, executives should take pains to ensure that they establish their own expertise before they attempt to exert influence. Surprisingly often, people mistakenly assume that others recognize and appreciate their experience.

This exposé of expertise is often difficult for librarians. The helpful, modest and trustworthy professional image clashes with that of the competitive, effective and perhaps boorish professional. It becomes a tradeoff between building authority and increasing likeability.

Scarcity —Cialdini makes the shrewd observation that if particular information can be portrayed to be a scarce commodity, people will often pay more attention and give it more credence that they otherwise might.

All of these factors are commonly considered when preparing the message you wish to convey. Now let us turn our attention from our message to our audience.

2. Frame goals on common ground with decision makers

The next step in persuasion, according to Conger, is to frame goals on common ground with decision makers. Find the common reference points between you and your audience, and design your message around them. Conger offers good advice when he says "good persuaders often enter the persuasion process with judicious compromises already prepared." (Conger, 1998, p.96)

3. Reinforce positions with vivid language and compelling evidence

Conger believes evidence can only be conveyed if it is given a context. Data by itself is meaningless, and the symbolism of numbers is cold. To best way to express their meaning is through stories, anecdotes, humor, and metaphor.

4. Connect emotionally with the audience

We often downplay the role of emotions in our modern lives, and this is a mistake. Conger states:

Good persuaders are aware of the primacy of emotions and are responsive to them in two important ways. First, they show their own emotional commitment to the position they are advocating. Such expression is a delicate matter. If you act too emotional, people may doubt your clearheadedness. But you must also show that your commitment to a goal is not just in your mind but in your heart and gut as well. Without this demonstration of feeling, people may wonder if you actually believe in the position you're championing.

Perhaps more important, however, is that effective persuaders have a strong and accurate sense of their audiences' emotional state, and they adjust the tone of their arguments accordingly. Sometimes that means coming on strong, with forceful points. Other times, a whisper may be all that is required. The idea is that whatever your position, you match your emotional fervor to your audience's ability to receive the message (Conger, 1998).

Using the lessons

In looking back at my successes and failures, I find much wisdom in the advice given by Conger and Cialdini. Our profession has important work to do. My hope is that you will find this summary of their ideas helpful as you prepare your next presentation that furthers our important mission.

Bibliography

Cialdini, Robert B. "Harnessing the Science of Persuasion." *Harvard Business Review* 79, no. 9 (Oct. 2001): 72–80. <http://search.epnet.com>.

Conger, Jay A. "The Necessary Art of Persuasion." *Harvard Business Review* 76, no. 3, (May/June, 1998): 84–96. <http://search.epnet.com>.

Drucker, Peter F. *The Practice of Management*. New York: Harper and Row, 1954.

Ruth Zietlow, M.B.A., M.L.S., is Assistant Professor and Minneapolis Campus Librarian, Metropolitan State University, ruth.zietlow@metrostate.edu.

Online Portfolios

Career E-Portfolios: The Next Standard in Career Development

By Casey Schacher

This is part one of a two-part special article.

In a society immersed in technology, companies and businesses must have a competitive digital presence in order to contend for contracts and clients. This presence may include digital marketing tools such as promotional CDs as well as Internet representation in the form of web sites. Similarly, recent graduates and new career professionals need

advertising strategies that utilize technology in an effort to fully promote their career and educational skills and experiences. This article will focus on career e-portfolios as powerful, yet complex, marketing tools for today's professional.

A traditional career portfolio is an "organized collection of self-selected artifacts and self-generated reflections, developed for a specific purpose and audience, which demonstrates the author's professional knowledge, skills, dispositions, and growth over time."¹ Also referred to as electronic portfolios, online portfolios and author web sites, career e-portfolios contain all of these "traditional" elements, only in digital format. Generally speaking, a career e-portfolio is a traditional portfolio that requires a computer in order to be accessed, viewed, and manipulated. Yet this definition cannot and does not completely describe the vast and dynamic qualities of career e-portfolios.

E-portfolios come in multiple formats and serve a variety of functions. Although in his article, "The Digital Convergence," Gary Greenburg states that the ideal e-portfolio is accessible via the Internet, other common delivery methods include multi-media elements such as CD/DVDs, USB keys, zip disks, and floppy disks.² Without a doubt, e-portfolios hosted on the Internet offer the greatest marketing potential since they can potentially reach anyone, anywhere, and at anytime. They can include writing samples, graphics, animations, movie and sound clips, databases, web logs (blogs for short), mail forms, hyperlinks, interactive surveys, etc.

Functionally, there are three main types of e-portfolios: developmental, reflective and representational. Developmental e-portfolios are a record of everything that the owner has done over a period of time, thus creating a "gallery" of the accomplishments as they occur.³ This most commonly used type of e-portfolio offers a general overview of the author's educational and professional background. Reflective e-portfolios include personal reflection on the content and what it means for the owner's development. This type provides opportunities to demonstrate how course work has contributed to professional development and is useful for those who have recently graduated and have little real-world experience and for those who are currently pursuing continuing education. Representational e-portfolios show the owner's achievements in relation to particular work or developmental goals and are, therefore, selective and especially useful to professionals working towards targeted job positions of increased responsibility, such as management, or a change in professional focus (e.g. reference to project management). Rather than providing a brief overview, a representational portfolio highlights key information in effort to show how the author is and has been building the skills appropriate for the job. Most career e-portfolios use a combination of these types, mixing and matching where appropriate.

Regardless of the type used, there exist key elements that are becoming increasingly standard in career e-portfolios, including:

- A résumé that includes the author's career and educational highlights.
- A brief, personal biography that usually serves as an introduction to the content.
- Records of formal and informal education and training. Records of formal learning and training include information about completed courses, such as titles, lengths, and enrollment and completion dates. Records of informal learning identify the skills and knowledge developed, the manner in which that occurred (e.g. conferences, online), and the source of learning.
- Artifacts, or examples, of projects for which the author served as a primary or supporting contributor.⁴

Librarians and other information professionals can benefit from utilizing e-portfolios. As information creation, storage, and retrieval are becoming increasingly digitized, much of the work of information professionals occurs in electronic format. In fact, information professionals regularly generate digital artifacts perfect for e-portfolios, such as bibliographies, instructional materials, electronic tools, web pages, policies and procedures, charts and graphs, reports, cataloging records, and staff training materials.⁵ As professionals already intimately connected with technology, information specialists are ideal candidates for career e-portfolios.

In addition to including digital artifacts and other e-portfolio elements previously mentioned, librarians can provide further content relating to their education, career, and aspirations. A librarian's e-portfolio may also contain a reflective statement about the responsibilities and philosophies of librarianship as well as a section detailing how she or he puts them into practice.⁶ Information regarding professional/scholarly development, activities and objectives can be an effective method of showing how a professional's regular participation in continued education and specific career-related activities has led to a greater understanding of professional identity and future goals. Artifacts detailing service activities, including external involvement with professional organizations, should be accompanied by a detailed explanation of how those activities represent the information specialist's greater service philosophy. Finally, a conclusion section provides an opportunity to describe how librarianship and professional/scholarly activities, goals, and service operate together to form a more complete picture of the professional's values, background and potential.

E-portfolios offer many advantages to career professionals. They provide a way to keep important professional and

educational documents organized and easily accessible, an opportunity to showcase educational beliefs, works in progress, career roles, and accomplishments, and a way to increase visibility and highlight skills and experiences that would aid in career advancement and the obtaining of leadership positions.⁷ E-portfolios are also easy to reproduce and distribute to a mass audience and can be readily duplicated in a cost effective manner (often the price of a CD or a monthly fee for web hosting). They can be distributed to several people simultaneously via the Internet or document sharing.⁸

One of the main disadvantages of career e-portfolios is that they are difficult to tailor to individual employers offering unique positions. A hunter in today's fluid job market will likely be submitting resumes for a variety of positions and may find themselves hindered, rather than helped, by his or her career e-portfolio. Voula Cocolakis, director of the Career Centre at the Haskayne School of Business at the University of Calgary, Canada, says, "People don't like generic resumes. It automatically puts you in the 'no' pile."⁹ This same concept threatens to tarnish the advantages of e-portfolios. Employers are often flooded with qualified applicants, and job seekers must utilize every resource possible in order to stand out as a competitive candidate. In theory, an e-portfolio can be a powerful presentation tool that creates a rich, positive portrait of a candidate in an employer's mind, but, in reality, it commonly falls short of this goal by functioning as a generic summary rather than a specific and targeted presentation. Any attempt to customize an e-portfolio to fit each and every potential employer's interests would be difficult, costly, and perhaps impossible depending on availability of resources such as technical expertise, software availability, and bandwidth.

Another apparent disadvantage of career e-portfolios is the volatile nature of computer and Internet technology. While traditional portfolio materials (i.e. paper and binders or leather cases) are virtually timeless, the resources used to create an e-portfolio are undergoing rapid development.¹⁰ Consequently, the owner must be conscious of technological changes that could affect accessibility and performance. Hardware improvements, coupled with updates in scripting language and browser compatibility, could quickly render a once fully-functioning e-portfolio useless. Preservation of digital content requires constant maintenance, and e-portfolios are no exception to this rule.

As difficult as e-portfolios are to maintain, even more challenging is the creation of rich, dynamic content. Digital document creation implies a certain amount of technological know-how; content that encourages interaction on the user's end (i.e. dynamic content) may require extensive knowledge of programming languages and development software such as **Dreamweaver** (Macromedia). Although many web hosting providers offer both stock templates that readily incorporate personalized content and professional design services, such as those offered by Website Pros, that create interactive and fully customizable sites, these services can be both costly and time consuming.¹¹ As a result, limited financial and time resources and minimal technological expertise can create a barrier to entry into career e-portfolios for many professionals.

Areas related to career e-portfolios that should be further investigated:

Internet-based e-portfolios provide anyone, anywhere instant access to detailed information regarding a professional's career and educational background. Yet how secure is this information and to what extent could criminals take advantage of having access to it? Recent reports reveal that online resumes, which provide even less information than an e-portfolio, are being accessed not only by legitimate employers but also by "offshore criminals out to steal identities or bring low-level recruits into international crime rings."¹² Victims of these scams can experience financial loss and even criminal charges. What technology, laws, and procedures are in place to protect e-portfolio authors from being targeted and taken advantage of by sophisticated criminals and crime organizations?

Many web hosts, such as **Godaddy.com**, offer free web logging tools that enable clients to include blogs in their personal web sites. Recent reports, however, suggest that blogs can hurt employees whose employers monitor their online activities. In fact, Delta Airlines, Google, Microsoft, Wells Fargo, and even Starbucks have terminated employees for their blogging practices.¹³ Are blogs appropriate for career e-portfolios and, if so, what function could and should they serve?

Coming next month, Part II: How influential will online portfolios be in tomorrow's job market?

References

1. Heath, Marilyn. "Are you ready to digital? The pros and cons of electronic portfolio development." *LibraryMedia Connection* 23, no. 7 (2005): 66-70.
2. Greenburg, Gary. "The digital convergence: Extending the portfolio model." *Educause Review* 39, no. 4 (2004): 28-36.
3. Heath.
4. Carliner, Saul. "E-portfolios." *T+D* 59, no. 5 (2005): 70-74.

5. Elmhurst College Faculty Council. "The professional portfolio for librarians." 2000
<http://www.elmhurst.edu/~susanss/TheProfessionalPortfolioforLibrarians.doc> (accessed November 22, 2005)
6. Ibid.
7. Anderson, Mary Alice. "Yes! You should create a professional portfolio." *MultiMedia & Internet@Schools* 12, no. 4 (2005): 34-36.
8. Heath.
9. Sankey, Derek. "Build a better resume in online environment: Technologically based submissions currently the trend." *Windsor Star (Ontario)*, Final Edition, June 20, 2005: B6.
10. Heath.
11. "Why choose Website Pros to design your website?" *Yahoo! Small Business*, November 22, 2005.
<http://smallbusiness.yahoo.com/webhosting/wsp1.php>
12. Kirby, Carrie. "Online resumes turn risky." *San Francisco Chronicle*, Final Edition, July 4, 2005: Sec. B.
13. Jackson, Kate. "Mixing blogging with work can lead to unemployment." *The Boston Globe*, Third Edition, July 3, 2005: G1.

Casey Schacher is a student at the University of Missouri–Columbia's School of Information Science and Learning Technologies; casey@caseyschacher.com.

We would love to have your **feedback on these articles!**

Copyright 2004–2005 ALA-APA. Contact Jenifer Grady, 50 E. Huron, Chicago, IL 60611, 312-280-2424, jgrady@ala.org for more information.