

Supporting the career outcomes of professional programs: The relevance of portfolios and case studies for Masters of Marketing students in their job search

HD McKay

Walker Management Library, Vanderbilt University, hd.mckay@vanderbilt.edu

Why should Academic Business Librarians support the career outcomes of professional programs?

Many of the key performance indicators for graduate business school programs are related to the employability of its graduates. Statistics such as the time lag from graduation to employment and salaries impact school rankings. Moreover, students investing in expensive professional degrees want to see a good return on investment, as soon as possible. These issues are clearly of strategic importance to business schools and as such, it is important for business librarians to demonstrate their value by contributing to their improvement. The best way to do so is to nurture a collaborative working relationship with career services. Many academic business libraries have partnered with career services to create LibGuides, present library resources, and deliver workshops (Whilhelm, 2021). At Vanderbilt University's Owen Graduate School of Management (Owen), both the Career Management Centre (CMC) and Walker Management Library (business library) are housed within, and focus largely on, serving the Owen community. Library programming organized and delivered in collaboration with the CMC, such as a library resources for job search during CMC's career week in the spring semester, reliably result in better participation and potential impact. We consistently hear from employers that our graduates are well-prepared in knowing their employers, their customers, and competitors. Building on this successful pattern, in Spring 2023 the Walker Management Library team explored how it might support new CMC programming in the form of job search small groups for graduate students in Marketing. We were particularly interested in building awareness of using portfolios.

Portfolios and case studies can serve as important assets in the job search. At the outset, portfolios can be used as a way to 'put oneself out there'. More specifically, candidates may be asked to provide one as part of an application. In the post-screening process or for a second interview, candidates might be asked to present a case study of their choosing or one they provide. During an interview, candidates can draw on a portfolio or the mental outline of a case study to answer a question effectively, even if they are not explicitly asked for one. Lastly, candidates can send a brief document as a follow up to an interview, adapted from what they saw and heard from the interview.

Exploring the relevance of portfolios and case studies in the job search journey.

The Masters in Marketing (MMark) program is a one year program at the Owen Graduate School of Management at Vanderbilt University. This program is a relatively new one that has grown rapidly in the past few years. Designed for developing young professionals, students often come directly from completing an undergraduate degree; in most cases, students have 0 - 3 years of work experience. As Owen students and alumni, MMark students receive wrap-around career support including a dedicated career coach to support them throughout the job search process.

Employment outcomes reporting show that MMark graduates have successfully gained employment in the areas of consulting, sales, customer insights, digital and social marketing, advertising and public relations. Having recently joined the Walker Management Library as the liaison to the MMark program, I reflected on my own experience in recruiting and hiring for junior roles in consulting and content marketing in a corporate setting. What surfaced top of mind was that helping students prepare a strong portfolio of work to showcase their abilities could help them stand out in these fields. When I met with the MMark career coach, I learned that while career services had previously explored platforms for creating online portfolios, the role or importance of portfolios was not currently being covered. However, the career coach did see some potential to explore the topic further since she was aware of a few alumni who had created some form of an online portfolio of their work during their job search.

The timing was also fortunate in that the MMark career coach had recently started weekly small group meetings during the spring semester. Five groups met informally with the career coach to share ideas and actions related to their job search. The purpose was to motivate each other and hold one another accountable on committed next steps. The career coach and I thought these sessions would be an excellent 'fail safe' opportunity to experiment with new material on the role of portfolios in job searching.

The fail-safe experiment and key take-aways

I prepared a brief talk with a handful of reference slides and was ready to adapt the content to the needs of the conversations that emerged. I 'delivered' the talk five times over the course of the week, adapting the speaking points with each iteration. Some groups were quieter and harder to read; others were engaged and thankful for providing resources they never considered. At the end of the week, I revised the deck and speaking points to capture three key messages that were unclear or missing:

1. *Explain how and where portfolios fit in to their job search.* Each small group was different but some consistently asked questions suggested that students were not sure how and where portfolios fit into their job search process. Some had portfolios from doing work in graphic design but didn't think it would apply in this case. Others had used portfolios as an assessment tool for specific undergraduate class purposes and wondered if they could leverage it in the same way. Still others just were not sure how and where portfolios or case studies might show up in the job search process. After addressing each of these questions during the talk, I updated the presentation deck with a visual (see figure 1. below). The deck now begins with a slide visualizing how portfolios and case studies might show up in the job search journey.

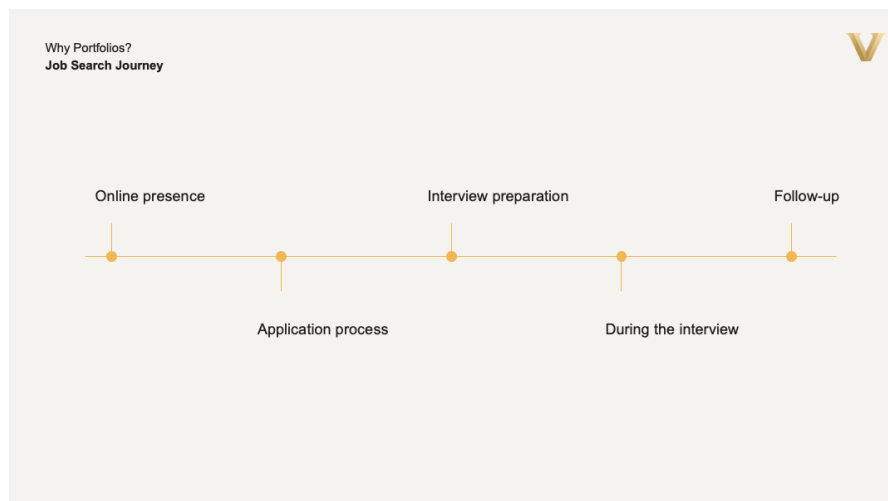


Fig. 1. Relevance of portfolios in the job search process.
Note. Screenshot of slide. McKay, HD.

2. *Rebrand library resources as premium content to help students differentiate themselves and their degree.* As a good librarian, an early version of my talks focused on different types of resources and content types that are available for preparing their portfolios. In conversation with the students, I realized that a more helpful framing would be to show them how the resources can be used to differentiate their abilities and degrees in the job market. Our trade publications content can help them emphasize the ‘professional’ nature of their degree and demonstrates familiarity of the sector they want to work in. In 2022, the MMark program was designated as a STEM degree program, which allows international students to extend their training in the US by 24 months. The libraries’ premium, curated data resources can be leveraged by students to demonstrate their technical data skills. The program is situated within a business school, which means students are competent about the strategy and business side of marketing and our company and industry resources can be used to help demonstrate as much. Lastly, as a program embedded within a highly ranked research institution, students know how to engage with important developments in relevant fields such as consumer psychology, and our research literature resources can help them demonstrate that as well.
3. *It’s about ‘finessing’ the heavy lifting you’ve already done.* Portfolios can sound like a heavy lift when students already have substantial curricular and co-curricular loads. It’s important to close on the key message that they’ve already done the heavy lifting. It’s more about finessing what they’ve got, and delivering their story to connect with what their prospective employers are looking for. The portfolio or case study doesn’t have to be an entire website or blog—it could be a brief but well-organized deck or a well-honed origin story that you can tell at the drop of a hat.

An experiment in progress: where next?

The week following my presentation, the MMark career coach reported that many of the students found the session very helpful and that some of the students were getting started on their ‘portfolios’. We will continue to monitor the usefulness of the talk, and the concept of portfolios, or if something else might be even more useful, in their job search process. We might

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also compare the outcomes with those who did not participate in the small groups entirely, as about half of the cohort participated. In the medium term, we will monitor what kind of feedback employers give about how our students are performing as candidates, and what role, if any, portfolios and case studies play. I am also interested in speeding up the learning cycle and finding ways to gain feedback from employers on the relevance and usefulness of portfolios throughout the year, rather than waiting for another cohort to start.

Career services can be a natural collaborator for business librarians: their priorities are aligned in terms of maximizing their respective resources toward improving the career outcomes of their graduates. Career services staff can hold close relationships with their students, manage the cadence of engagements, get direct feedback from employers and are always looking for ways to enrich their programming. Librarians can bring insights from professional work experience and leverage the premium resources of the library collection to add depth and engagement to career service programming. Neither business librarians nor career centers have all the answers, but working together they can experiment towards improved success for their students' and their organization's strategic goals.

References

Wilhelm, J. (2021). Joint venture: An exploratory case study of academic libraries' collaborations with career centers, *Journal of Business & Finance Librarianship*, 26:1-2, 16-31. DOI: 10.1080/08963568.2021.1893962