



# **Why Your Portfolio Isn't Getting You Interviews**

Let's be blunt: the UX/UI job market is saturated. When recruiters (and hiring managers) review UX portfolios, they're not just browsing pretty pictures; they're hunting for signals that you can actually do the job in a live product environment.

The cold truth is:

**Most UX/UI roles — especially senior ones — never get advertised.**

The majority are filled quietly, through specialist recruiters who already know who to call; previously interviewed candidates, or internal referrals. When a role is advertised, it's often because:

- A hiring manager is going DIY and trying to avoid the recruitment fee.
- HR or internal TA teams are trying to generate a pipeline, but may have limited knowledge of what the business is actually looking for.
- Or, occasionally, a seasoned recruiter is advertising a role that sits outside their usual network.

For every open role that **does** get advertised, there are dozens, often hundreds, of applicants. That means you're not only being assessed on the strength of your work, but you're also being filtered. Fast.

One reason many candidates get lost in the noise is the rise of “bulk apply” tools — browser extensions and platforms that enable people to submit dozens (or even hundreds) of applications with just a few clicks. It's fast, but it means applying without fully reading the job description or tailoring the application. As a result, companies and recruiters end up flooded with irrelevant CVs, which makes it harder for everyone — especially genuinely qualified applicants — to stand out.

To manage the volume, many companies use ATS (Applicant Tracking System) software. It scans applications for relevance and assigns a basic match score. If that score falls below a certain threshold — say 70% — the application might not reach a human reviewer at all, and is rejected with an annoyingly generic email. It's not ideal, and it's definitely not personal, but in high-volume hiring, where attracting automated applications can be a problem, it's sometimes the only way to keep the process manageable.

Even when your application *does* get in front of a real person, it's often in a fast-paced, high-pressure context. Reviewers don't always have time for a deep dive on every profile, especially when there are dozens (or hundreds) to get through. That means we're skimming first, looking for clear signals that you're a good fit.

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If something's unclear, overly vague, or doesn't quite land, it's easy to get passed over — not because you're not good enough, but *because your value wasn't immediately apparent*.

Unfortunately, this often means rejection with little feedback, which is understandably frustrating when you've invested time and effort into your application.

This is why your presentation matters. A lot.

A great portfolio doesn't just show good work. It guides the reviewer quickly, and clearly communicates what you did, how you think, and why you'd be a strong hire. It builds trust by doing the one thing most portfolios don't:

Making it easy for us to say “Yes”.

Here's how to give yourself a better chance.

**Simon Carson**

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## Look for roles you're a good fit for — then bypass the ATS.

Instead of clicking “apply,” take some time to do some research. The recruiter's or hiring manager’s name is sometimes right there in the ad, or easily found on their website or LinkedIn. Send them a quick, thoughtful email.

**I’m always going to read an email that’s sent directly to me.**

If it’s short, friendly, and has a great portfolio attached, you’ve got my attention.

It doesn’t need to be perfect. Just show you’re genuinely interested and appropriate for the role. You’ve just put yourself WAY ahead of the game, and won’t get bounced by an algorithm.

We want to understand your process, not just admire your final deliverables.

## Tell the Story, Not Just the Outcome

Design isn't about outputs. It's about decisions. And yet, many portfolios skip straight to the glossy end result; all screen mock-ups and zero narrative. That's not a case study; it's a sales brochure.

Every solid case study should walk the reader through a clear arc:

- What was the problem? Who was the user, and what pain point were you solving?
- What were the constraints? Time, tech, stakeholder chaos — tell us what shaped your decisions.
- What did you actually do? Not what the team did. What was your role?
- What changed along the way? Iteration, testing feedback, compromise. The messy bits matter.
- What was the impact? Even if it's anecdotal, did the user experience improve? Did the product ship?

Think of it like a documentary, not a highlight reel. We want to understand your process, not just admire your final deliverables.

## Be Honest About Commercial vs Non-Commercial Work

A common trap, especially for junior designers, is presenting university projects or self-initiated redesigns as if they were client briefs.

Let's be clear: personal and academic work is absolutely fine to include. In fact, it's often the only way to demonstrate early capability. But label it honestly. Trying to make a course project look like client work is transparent, and not in a good way.

Instead, own it:

*"This was a self-initiated project to redesign a mobile banking app. I focused on applying usability heuristics and improving accessibility."*

You're not expected to have a CV full of commercial work on day one. But you are expected to know the difference and be transparent about it.

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## Trade-Offs Are a Strength, Not a Weakness

The best designers aren't the ones with flawless portfolios, they're the ones who can explain why things turned out the way they did, and what they'd do differently.

Talk about:

- Design decisions made under time pressure
- Ideas that got cut (and why)
- Feedback that challenged your thinking
- How business goals shaped the final product

This isn't "airing your dirty laundry", it's showing maturity. Every real-world project involves compromise. Show us you know how to navigate it.

## Frame the Role and the Impact Clearly

One of the quickest ways to lose a hiring manager's interest is to be vague. If you say you "collaborated on a design system," that could mean anything from leading it to nudging a few colours around.

Instead, be specific:

*"Led the component audit and documentation process for a new design system, working with 2 engineers and 1 PM."*

Own your contribution, explain your impact, and keep the language clear and grounded. No jargon. No fluff.

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## Design Your Portfolio Like a Product

Your portfolio is a user experience. If the layout is confusing, the navigation is buried, or you're sending people on a password-protected scavenger hunt, you're making things difficult.

## Well-Presented, Easy to Navigate

This shouldn't need saying, but it's shocking how many portfolios make basic usability mistakes.

- **Clear sections.** If we can't find your work in under 30 seconds, we're already closing the tab.
- **Legible fonts.** No 9pt grey-on-white. You're not designing for ants.
- **Mobile-friendly.** Yes, we sometimes check portfolios on our phones!
- **Avoid endless scroll.** A long, linear dump of images with no breaks or navigation? No thanks.
- **No mystery navigation.** If I have to hover over a random icon to figure out what it does, you've overdesigned it.

Think like a designer. Respect your user's time.

## Curate, Don't Dump

More is not better.

We don't want to see 9 projects that each barely scratch the surface. We want 2–3 deep case studies that show how you think, how you work, and how you solve real problems.

If you can't explain your role, your rationale, and your results in a given project, cut it, or at least demote it to a footnote. Treat your portfolio like a design challenge: what's the minimal set of content that creates maximum impact?

## Skip the Fluff, Keep the Substance

There's a weird trend where portfolios open with copy that reads like a dating profile:

"I'm passionate about creating intuitive, human-centric design that delights users and solves real-world problems."

That tells us absolutely nothing.

We don't need passion statements. We need proof.





Show us a problem, show us your thought process, and show us the outcome.

If you can explain why you picked one button style over another, or how you balanced competing user needs, you've already done more than 90% of other applicants.

## What Not to Do

Some common pitfalls that will quietly kill your chances:

- **Don't just post a Figma playground of nice UI screens with no context.**

It's not a Dribbble contest. We need process, not just polish.

- **Don't password-lock everything unless you want recruiters to close the tab.**

If we have to chase you for access, we probably won't.

- **Avoid buzzword salad.**

"Synergizing empathy maps to ideate frictionless flow paradigms" sounds like a parody of LinkedIn. Talk like a human.

- **Don't pretend coursework was paid client work.**

You're not fooling anyone. Experienced recruiters and hiring managers will spot that immediately. Be upfront about what's self-initiated.

If we have to  
chase you for  
access, we  
probably won't.



- **Don't overcomplicate the site.**

The goal isn't to show how many animations you can code, it's to make your work understandable in under five minutes.

## **Make It Easy for Us to Say “Yes”**

Hiring managers aren't looking for pixel-perfect robots. They're looking for people who:

- Can think critically
- Can work collaboratively
- Can communicate clearly
- Can navigate ambiguity

Your portfolio should highlight exactly those traits.

Because at the end of the day, a great portfolio isn't just a catalogue of past work, it's a preview of how you'll approach future challenges.

Tell the story. Show the thinking. Be honest. Make it easy for someone to look at your work and say:

**“This one gets it.”**



## About Us

Carson Harris Associates was founded by Simon Carson in 2004 as an executive search firm specialising in UX/UI, software engineering and app development.

Simon has over 30 years of experience in the industry, having served previously as the Sales Director of US based, Management Search International. As Managing Director of Carson Harris, Simon oversees our business development and client relationship management, and is on hand to provide one to one guidance on all aspects of the hiring process.

Our delivery teams are based in London, Dublin, and Nairobi, and our consultants have hands-on experience in their specialist fields.

With collaboration always at the heart of what we do, our partner companies now range from startups to globally recognised brands.

At Carson Harris, we've got a proven track record of consistently securing desired outcomes for the companies we work with.

Generating CVs and portfolios is the easy part of recruitment. Understanding the talent behind them is where Carson Harris excels. We give our partners solutions rather than options.

**Carson Harris Associates Ltd,**

**[www.carsonharris.co.uk](http://www.carsonharris.co.uk)**

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## Testimonials

“We’ve been using Carson Harris for over five years now, since our early startup days, and they’ve been an integral part of our journey. From the outset, they became our first choice for product and UX roles—two areas that are absolutely crucial to the success of our company. Their deep understanding of our needs and ability to deliver top-tier talent has been key to our team’s growth”

**Hemal Vaghela**

“Carson Harris have been on our PSL for many years and always one of our first go to’s for software devs and UX designers. They build proper relationships and the calibre of candidate they provide is always top notch. I’ve dealt with dozens of agencies over the years and Carson Harris will always be one of my favourites for the professionalism they provide as well as the relationships I’ve built with them. Could not recommend them more highly!”

**Sarah Lamontagne**

“ I have used Carson Harris for both perm and contract placements and wholeheartedly recommend them. I always feel incredibly well taken care of and like I am their number one priority. The quality and speed of the short-listing is unmatched and the way they understand how to pitch my company and to manage the candidate flow is great. No-nonsense, refreshingly honest recruiters.”

**Adina Kuse**