University of Iowa Libraries Staff Publications

4-1-2015

HR Confidential: Tips from library human resource directors on getting that next job

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Tips from library human resources directors on getting that next job

Whether you are a newly minted librarian or a seasoned professional, navigating the road to your next librarian position can be a challenging experience. While academic libraries have resumed professional recruitments at a robust pace after the national economic downturn, the job market for academic librarians remains very competitive. Librarian searches often net large pools of candidates who meet the basic advertised qualifications. Search committees then review the applicant pool and cull out those candidates who excel in the posted requirements to create a shortlist. This select group will be evaluated more closely. Phone interviews may be conducted and references may be consulted. Finally a small group of candidates will be invited to interview, and ultimately only one finalist will be hired.

So, in this competitive market, what can you do to make your application rise to the top for serious consideration? As academic library human resources specialists who administer librarian recruitments, we would like to share some insider tips to help make your job search successful.

Customize your application

An application that thoughtfully addresses the job at hand will get noticed. Read the job announcement carefully and speak to the responsibilities and qualifications of the position. It is important to highlight your experience, education, skills, and talents. However, keep in mind that the search committee is looking for a person who meets their organizational needs. No matter how stellar your background, if your strengths don't match the job, your application may not move forward. Keep that in mind as you choose what to highlight in your resume and cover letter.

Your resume or CV should be well-organized and formatted in a style that is easy to understand.

This document will be used to determine if you meet the posted qualifications for things like educational degrees, years of experience, and record of professional activity. Don't make it difficult for the search committee to find and understand important information. Provide a few bullets describing key aspects of each position listed in your resume so the search committee is not left to guess what you actually did in that role.

A well-written cover letter can make your application stand out. Use your cover letter to convey how you meet and excel in the qualifications and expectations for the position. Show how your education and experience have prepared you for the advertised position, and provide evidence that you have the potential to succeed in this job with examples from your past achievements.

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Rather than simply stating "I have excellent project management skills," briefly describe a project you led successfully. If you are a new MLIS graduate and have not held a professional position yet, refer to your school or volunteer projects, teams, internships, or nonlibrarian jobs.

Explore the website of the library where you want to work, and show that you are excited by the opportunities offered by *that* position in *that* organization. A generic, cookie-cutter letter used for multiple jobs is easy to spot and will not impress the search committee. Customize your application for each position that you apply for.

By all means, carefully proofread your application, removing typos and grammatical errors. Your application will be evaluated by the search committee as a reflection of your communication skills, so make sure it is a good example.

Prepare for the interview

If your application does rise to the top and you are invited to interview, it is important to be well-prepared before you go. Do some homework on the campus and library you will be visiting. Become familiar with the initiatives, services, or people making news there by exploring the library and campus web pages and publications. Not only will this help you understand the culture and organization of the institution you are seeking to join, but it will definitely be noticed by the search committee as a sign that you are interested in becoming part of their organization.

Most academic libraries ask candidates to deliver a presentation or job talk as part of the interview. You might ask, Why must they put candidates through this stress test? The goal is not to see if you will crumble under pressure. Rather, a presentation provides your future colleagues a chance to get to know you, to experience your communication style, and to hear your thoughts on a topic related to the position. Therefore, you want to appear as natural, relaxed, and authentic as possible.

Thoroughly prepare and organize what you want to say before you go to the in-terview. If you use presentation software, make sure you understand the technology completely, and have a backup plan in case you lose your thumb drive or the Internet connection goes down. Incorporate interesting visuals, but don't overwhelm your audience with too much detail. Keep text and bulleted lists to a minimum, and talk to your audience, not the screen. Avoid reading your presentation word for word from a script because this limits your ability to engage with the audience, and you may appear remote and stiff. Practice your presentation several times. Try giving it in front of a mirror, or ask a trusted friend or colleague to listen to you and provide constructive feedback. Good preparation will allow you to be more relaxed and confident so you will make a positive impression on your audience.

Interview questions

Anticipate the questions you will be asked by the search committee and others throughout the day and prepare responses in advance. For example, you will probably be asked to explain why you are an excellent candidate for the job. Don't be caught off-guard. Be sure you are able to respond with a succinct description of your experience, training, and skills and be able to make a case for how your strengths are a good match for the position. Think of other questions that you may be asked, and practice your responses.

Also, bring your own list of questions that you can refer to when asked, "What questions do you have for us?" Think of what more you want to know about the job, your future colleagues, the work environment, and the library. In addition, you should try to learn as much as possible about the job expectations, the conditions of employment, and the potential salary range so that you can determine whether accepting this job will be a good move for you.

Find out about professional development support, the performance review process, and the potential for growth. Ask to see the salary scale that applies to this position, if there is one. Find out where you can review

descriptions of the health insurance plans and other benefit options.

Does the position come with faculty status, and what does that mean? Is the position represented by a union? What are the terms for advancement? Remember, the interview is both an opportunity for your future employer to learn about you and an opportunity for you to learn about the position and your future work environment.

Negotiating an offer

Congratulations! You mastered the interview, and you are the successful candidate. Now, how should you respond when offered the job? Most commonly you will be contacted by an administrator who has authority to work with you on the terms of an appointment. A specific starting salary and some additional benefits may be proposed. It is very important that you listen carefully and make note of the details of the offer.

Is it appropriate to negotiate this offer? Many librarians, especially those who are offered their first professional job, are hesitant to bargain for fear they will seem pushy or will be rejected. However, in almost all cases it is expected that you will engage in a conversation about the terms of the offer. Feel free to ask what factors led to the proposed salary or rank. Is it based on a prescribed salary scale, years of experience, educational degrees, or equity issues within the organization? You may want to reiterate aspects of your experience, education, or skills to be sure they were credited appropriately in the offer. You might ask what aspects of the offer are negotiable. If there is little room to negotiate salary, are there other things that could be explored.

For example, could all or part of your moving expenses be covered? Could you be assured a certain level of professional development funding in your first year or two of employment? Will the organization fund a trip to look for housing prior to your start date? These are a few of the questions you might pose in the conversation about the offer.

You do not have to accept or reject an offer on the spot when first contacted. Making a career move is a big decision, and you should take some time to weigh your options and be sure you have addressed all your concerns. Ask for a couple of days to consider the offer and call back on an agreed upon date. When you reply, propose the changes you would like in the salary or other conditions. If you are obstinate and insist on things which are far beyond the original offer, you run the risk of seeming hard to work with and you may be turned down. There may be an alternate candidate waiting in the wings. So, try to work with the administrator and settle on mutually acceptable terms. You want to start this new working relationship on friendly terms, so be respectful of the limits available to the administrator.

Getting connected once hired

Once hired, it is important to continue your personal and professional development. Develop an annual work plan to outline your goals for the coming year. Be sure to explore funding opportunities from your library or national, state, or local library associations. Connect your professional development proposal to department goals as a way to show your library the added value it will receive by investing in your development.

Professional development serves at least three purposes: 1) it will keep you in tune with emerging trends, 2) allow you to network with other professionals; and 3) build your resume for the next promotion opportunity.

Multiple avenues exist for professional development and these include getting involved in committee work at your library, on campus, and within the profession; attending regional or national conferences and workshops; exploring training and development opportunities through the home institution; finding an informal mentor; and volunteering to serve on search committees.

Personal development is just as important. By this we mean investing time learning

of Academic Libraries initiative. The question of how aware our users are of new library service programs and models is also an important one, and one that comes up again in a study that we have just accepted on the perception of library contributions to undergraduate research programs by Merinda Hensley (University of Illinois), Sarah Shreeves (University of Miami), and Stephanie Davis-Kahl (Illinois Wesleyan University). That preprint should be available on our website by the time this issue of the *News* has reached you, and I encourage you to take an early look at http://crl.acrl.org /content/early/recent.

Also new with our May issue are altmetrics. *Altmetrics,* according to an ACRL primer on the subject, "is an emerging category of impact measurement premised upon the value of 'alternative metrics,' or metrics based distinctly on the opportunities offered by the 21st century digital environment."[1]

Following suggestions made by *C&RL* readers during focus groups, ACRL staff members have been working with our publishing platform at Highwire Press to add altmetrics to the "article usage statistics" available for review on the pages for individual articles. The image reproduced on the previous page comes from the altmetrics report showing reader engagement with the editorial from our January 2015 issue across a number of platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, and Mendeley.

If you follow *C&RL* on Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/collegeandresearchlibraries) or Twitter (@CRL_ACRL), you might have already seen the announcement of the addition to altmetrics to our site, and you may already know that the next *C&RL* Online Forum is scheduled for late April. The date and time for the forum have not been finalized as this goes to press, but please go to the *C&RL* Online Fora homepage (http://crl.acrl.org/site/misc/fora.xhtml) for information about how to join us for our next online event.

Past *C&RL* Online Fora have included discussions of instructional collaboration with faculty, library contributions to international programs, the culture of assessment, and mentoring programs in academic libraries. If you see a recent *C&RL* preprint that you think would make a great topic for an upcoming online forum, please contact *C&RL* Social Media Editor Sarah Steiner at (sksteiner@email.wcu.edu).

Notes

1. Robin Chin Roemer and Rachel Borchardt, "Keeping Up with . . . Altmetrics," accessed March 4, 2015, www.ala.org /acrl/publications/keeping_up_with /altmetrics. ℘

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about work/personality styles; attending classes on organizational behavior/culture; reading evidence-based books on supervision, team building, etc. The information gained via these activities benefits you both at work and in your personal life as they provide insight into human behavior—yours and others.

Conclusion

Our goal in writing this article is to unveil some of the mystery surrounding the application process in order to help new, as well as experienced, librarians better advocate for themselves. No doubt about it, the job search process is an exercise in perseverance —from submitting applications through the onboarding process. This may seem like an overwhelming list of items to keep in mind when applying for jobs and negotiating one's first (or next) professional librarian job. Our hope is that you find, at least, one or two additional items to add to your to-do list as you navigate your career path. ℘