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Simple Guidelines for Job Seekers

Over the past few years I have had the opportunity to serve on a number of search committees for open positions at my library. It's always interesting to see the extreme variation in the quality of applications. In many instances seemingly qualified individuals have made some simple mistakes which had negatively affected their application, so I've decided to provide some simple guidelines to help those who are currently looking for a new job or their first library job.

Traditionally, the job search has a number of phases. First there is the application phase where you actually apply for the position you're interested in. The next step varies from employer to employer. Normally there is a phone interview followed by a reference interview, though sometimes these two steps are reversed. Finally, if you successfully sold yourself through the first three steps, there is the onsite interview. The order of these steps is not concrete, and not all steps will always be followed. Sometimes you may go straight from an application to an onsite interview, or you might go through a series of phone and onsite interviews. It all depends on the institution.

Applying

The first rule when applying for a position is to read the job announcement and make sure you actually meet the minimum qualifications. These qualifications are listed for a reason. If you don't qualify, please don't apply. Don't worry about the preferred qualifications. While it would be nice to have said qualifications, they aren't absolutely necessary. They are often a wish list and not all of these qualifications will exist in one person. How many trilingual Java programmers with seven years of supervisory experience and a second master's degree in European transportation economics are really out there?

The job search process is just as hard, if not harder on the employer. While you are able to submit an application and forget about it, the potential employer has to review

all applications sent to them. Often they have a search committee that reviews each application; this takes time. They must also contact potential interviewees, contact their references, and often hold meetings to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each applicant. When members on a review committee disagree on applicants, the ensuing discussions can be emotionally draining. For this reason it is important that you only apply to positions you're actually interested in. You may be desperate for work but you should still be selective in your applications. If there is an entry level cataloging position open but you have no interest in cataloging, don't apply. Even if you get the job you will probably be unhappy and will have to begin the job search process all over again. If you leave too many jobs too often, future employers will be turned off by the frequency of your position changes. They will worry that you will leave the position after a brief stint and they will have to go through the tedious process of hiring someone else.

Library position announcements are notoriously bad for not listing the salary for positions. Don't be afraid to ask for the expected salary range for a position before you apply. This way you will know if the salary is one you can actually accept or not and will save you a lot of time and frustration. You can typically contact the Human Resources Department to get salary information. If you are worried they might think you're more interested in the money than the job, use an anonymous email address. Yahoo mail and Gmail are great for this.

The Cover Letter

Be honest. Don't try to stretch the truth about the skills or experience you have to offer. If you're caught, you will most likely be removed from the list of potential candidates. Even if you do manage to sneak a lie past someone and get the position, it is something that can haunt you later on. If your employer finds out don't expect a positive reference from them when you're looking for a new job after they

let you go. It's not worth it. Now while it is important to be honest, there is such a thing as being too honest. You do not need to tell the interviewers everything about you or any life situations that may be perceived as a weak point by your employer. They don't necessarily need to know about any of your personal relationships, family issues, or career aspirations.

When writing your cover letter, make sure to tailor it to the position you're interested in. Generic cover letters are easy to spot and will usually put you on the bottom of the application pool. Read the position announcement you're applying for and state how your skills and experience meet these needs. The cover letter, more so than your resume, is the chance to sell yourself, but remember to keep it concise and on topic. This shows you have the requisite skills the employer is looking for and you are able to communicate clearly. Also, and I can't stress this enough, remember to PROOFREAD!

Another important point that should be obvious, but you'd be surprised how often it happens, is to make sure your cover letter is addressed to the correct person and/or institution. At least one cover letter in each search I have been on has either been addressed to someone who doesn't work at my library or has stated they always wanted to work at library x, which isn't our library. It doesn't matter how well written your cover letter is if you don't have the correct information.

A common problem with cover letters is the contact information people provide. If you're going to include your email address as method of contact, have a professional email address. Most employers will be put off by email addresses like PirateMovieGuy@email.com. First it shows poor judgment on your part and second it may give your employer the wrong idea. PirateMovieGuy might have this address because he likes movies about pirates, though one could also think he likes to illegally download movies. Also, use a daytime phone

number as a primary contact number and make sure you have a professional voicemail greeting in case you miss the call. You don't want the caller to have to listen to a 30 second song clip before they can leave a message.

The Resume or Curriculum Vitae (CV)

You should also tailor your resume or CV to the specific position you're applying for. When you are listing your past employment history, arrange your specific duties or skills in an order that show your obvious skills or experience to the reviewer. For instance, if you are applying for a Web librarian position with management duties and you have Web design and management experience in your current position, list this at the beginning of your employment history.

Rather than this:

- Provided reference services
- Managed monograph budget for the social sciences
- Maintained the library's Web page
- Supervised three full-time staff and one librarian

Rather change the order of the bullets:

- Maintained the library's Web page
- Supervised three full-time staff and one librarian
- Managed monograph budget for the social sciences
- Provided reference services

This allows the reviewer to clearly see that you have the appropriate experience for the position without having to sift through a bulleted list of unrelated skills or experience. Do the same with any listing of professional memberships, but keep your publications in chronological order.

Finally, make sure you provide the employer with all the information they are asking for. If they ask for a cover letter, resume, and three references, send them a cover letter, resume, and three references. Incomplete applications are the easiest to justify not going further in the interview process.

Choosing Your References

Before listing someone as a reference, it is always a good idea to ask that person two questions. First, are they willing to be a reference, and second, will they provide you with a positive reference? It's always interesting when you do a reference check and the person

on the other end of the phone is caught completely off guard or doesn't have anything positive to say. If someone is willing to be your reference, make sure you provide them with a copy of your cover letter and CV or resume as well as the position announcement you are applying for. Don't forget you can also tailor your references to a specific position. If you're applying to a technical position, you might want to include references that can speak to your technical ability. Just because someone will give you a good reference, it doesn't mean they can speak to your abilities pertaining to the position you're applying for.

The Phone Interview

If you have followed the advice above and meet the minimum qualifications for the position, you're likely to be invited to participate in a telephone interview. Phone interviews come in many formats. Some may be a series of standardized questions, or they may be free flowing and open, while others are a combination of the two. One thing is for certain. If you don't prepare for a phone interview, it will show.

If you're contacted for a phone interview, it is time to do some specific research. First, you will want to know more about the institution you're applying to. Look at their website. Find their mission statement. Do your research. All of these things could be useful in the interview. It shows you've taken the time to get to know your future employer. Also, make sure you are up to date on the literature in your field. This is something that should be ongoing, but it is especially important when you're trying to find a new job.

Choose a time and place where you will not be interrupted and can remain focused, preferably on a land line. If you only have a cell phone that is ok, just make sure your coverage is strong. DO NOT make the call from your car or while you are on the go. You will not be as focused as you need to be and the interviewer might be distracted if they suddenly hear a car horn or your radio comes on.

You should also review the cover letter and the resume or CV you submitted for the application and be prepared to answer any questions related to the information you provided. If the reviewer asks you a question about your resume and you can't answer it, they will not be impressed.

The Onsite Interview

If you've had a strong phone interview and your references checked out, then you're likely to be brought in for an onsite interview. These interviews can vary from a few hours to all day or even multiple days. It is important to not relax just yet. Remember to show up to your interview on time, preferably a little early, maybe fifteen minutes or so. Also, dress appropriately. It doesn't matter that the current employees are dressed in jeans and t-shirts; you should dress in proper business attire. This means suits for men and women.

Many interviews require you to do a 10-30 minute or more presentation. If a specific topic isn't given, ask the search committee if there is a suggested topic. If you're using some sort of presentation software or special technology, make sure the location you will be presenting in is capable of supporting it. Always have a backup ready in case there is a technical glitch of some sort. If your PowerPoint freezes half way through your presentation, be prepared to move forward without it. If you choose to use technology to aid your presentation, use something you're comfortable with.

Use the onsite interview to get to know the people you will be working with if you are chosen for the position. These are the people you will be working with for the foreseeable future so you probably want to make sure there are no major personality clashes.

Final Thoughts

It's important to remember finding a job is not only about making enough money to live on or performing a job you're interested in. You will probably be with your co-workers and employer more hours a week than you will be with your family and friends. It is important to find a place that suits your social needs as well as your career needs. There is nothing wrong with declining a position if you feel the fit isn't right or the position doesn't meet your expectations. An employer would rather you decline a position than become a disgruntled employee.

Happy hunting.