

# Inspired Hiring

## Tools for Success in Interviewing and Hiring Library Staff

Richard McKay

If you're a director or other library administrator, one of your most important jobs is hiring librarians. You have one broad and simple goal for the employee selection process: to pick a good worker from a pool of interviewees. Once you've established the candidates' baseline competence, such important considerations as "Will they fit in with our patrons?" and "Will they be able to work effectively with the other staff, or with me?" are every bit as pertinent as questions of their experience with search engines or with a particular subject area. They're also more difficult questions to answer. Using the information in this article will put you in a good position to select people likely to evoke "yes" answers to the above questions.

### Winnowing

Early in the selection process you will find yourself in front of a stack of job applications, your purpose being to select from the bunch a short list of people that you and the search committee will interview. At this point you're interested in collecting at least three applicants, any one of which could conceivably make a contribution to your library. If you interview much more than a half-dozen or so applicants you risk not only alienating members of the search committee, upon whose good will you depend for similar service in the future, but you also risk the possibility that individuals will be difficult to tell one from another among a large group of candidates. Try to keep the interview list to perhaps no more than you can see in a day, if not a morning or afternoon. How to weed? Of course you'll remove applicants that don't meet your minimum qualifications. Other pro forma reasons for dismissing an application include errors or conflicting information in the written documentation supporting the candidate's cause. Irrelevant or marginally relevant work experience, or a lack of recent experience, may also invalidate a candidate. Be careful that you apply the same standards consistently to each applicant.

There's always a chance that your applicant pool will include a close friend or relative of one of your professional peers or superiors in the parent institution's administration. You probably won't regret finding a plausible reason not to interview them. Where aggressive political relationships characterize your institution's hierarchy, it becomes

that much more important to you that such candidates look for professional fulfillment somewhere else. Otherwise, you may find yourself explaining to the administrator why their friend or relative, whom you interviewed, wasn't at least as good as the candidate the committee finally accepted. Also, as members of the library staff, they would certainly take direction from the library director, but they'd just as certainly also be reporting to the administrator with whom they have a personal or family relationship. It's worth adding that this condition also holds true when the applicant is a friend or relative of one of the library's administrators, not the least of good reasons for this being that, even when the new work situation doesn't impair or destroy the relationship, it will ruin the new hire's credibility with their peers on the library staff.

It may also be your responsibility to arrange for your institution's upper administration to meet and perhaps also interview the best two or three candidates, in addition to your making a hiring recommendation to them. If this is so, be prepared to present to your administrators a short list of attributes for each candidate, and be prepared to show that you're making your hiring recommendation for the candidate having what is arguably the strongest array of qualifications. If you find your administration steering your decision toward a candidate other than your first choice, and you think it worth the trouble to press your search committee's decision, don't base your objection solely on the candidate's drawbacks. It's possible that the administrator will have either dismissed the weakness or is prepared to argue around it. You'll be on safer ground if you acknowledge the good qualities of the administrator's choice, and base your objection on your concern that the candidate may be difficult to manage. This objection is nearly impossible to argue against on its own merits, as it's based on a subjective appreciation. Also, most upper administrators with any experience will have already had at least one unpleasant encounter with a problem employee, and would just as soon avoid new ones.

### Interview Questions

Although there's a broad gestalt involved in the interview process, your experience of the candidates will be, in large, your experience of the way they handled the committee's questions. Choose questions carefully. You might start by looking at Web sites or books that offer jobseekers hints on responding to typical interview questions. Find out

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what those questions are, and try to have as few of the classics on your list as you can. The standard interview questions and their equally standardized answers have by now entered popular consciousness as icons as stable as the stories of Puss in Boots or Johnny Appleseed. Consider that off-the-shelf questions are too likely to evoke rehearsed responses to be much use to you as qualifying tools. If you cannot avoid using one or two, change them in some important way so that they apply specifically to librarianship or the job opening in question. There are others, but the list of chestnuts certainly includes:

- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- How do you handle pressure?
- What do you see as (or what was) your greatest professional challenge?
- Describe a problem that you solved at a previous job.

If you do decide to use one of these questions, the way they're answered will tell you if the response has been prepared in advance. Also, don't neglect asking a simple question, to ensure that the candidates' knowledge of librarianship isn't limited to theory. Ask for a short explanation of why a library might want to have closed-stacks periodicals, or ask if there's such a thing as an unanswerable reference question. Of course their verbal answers are important, but you're also interested in their nonverbal responses. Squirming, dramatic throat clearing, rubbing at the eyes or nose during an answer—you may accept each as indicators of the respondents' discomfort. A convincing candidate shouldn't be bested by a simple question requiring core professional knowledge to answer.

It's worth your while to know in advance of a hiring decision a candidate's attitude toward patrons and co-workers. Remember that for fear of legal repercussions, whether or not the fear is well grounded, a person listed by the candidate as a work reference may be reluctant to denounce a worker with a lackluster attitude. This may be true even when job performance problems are supported with documentation. One way to get the candidate to answer this question for you is to start a sidebar conversation during the interview about eccentric patrons or co-workers you've dealt with over the years, and then turn the topic over to the interviewee. It sometimes happens that a candidate welcomes an opportunity to step out of character for a moment and back into a more familiar psychological posture. Listen carefully for any indication that the speaker finds catharsis in representing colleagues or patrons as troublesome.

## Interview Day

Evaluate the candidate's general appearance. Does it reinforce the role a librarian will play in your library? Part of a librarian's effectiveness lies in the ability to establish a

speedy rapport with library users, so the applicant should look like someone people might be comfortable approaching at a service desk. The applicant should seem at ease in the sort of casual business dress you expect your staff to wear at work. Applicants should also give you the impression that they know in advance if the job is likely to challenge them in ways in which they want to grow.

Studies support the folk wisdom that tall candidates will tend to seem more favorable to you than ones of average height.<sup>1</sup> If you find that the candidate you like best also happens to be obviously taller than the other candidates, make sure you haven't unconsciously factored height into the decision.

When conducting the job search to replace an employee with whom you had either a very favorable or a very unfavorable work relationship, be aware that you'll be apt to at least unconsciously compare the candidates to that person's abilities or lack of them, instead of comparing them to the requirements of the job. Stop and examine your motives if you catch yourself thinking that the candidate "is just like (or nothing like) N," or you hear someone on the search committee say this.

Within reasonable bounds, of course, give the interviewee ample latitude to talk. Also understand that it's easy for an interviewer to mistake a disappointing verbal exchange, or a series of them, for a flagging social interaction and resort to social skills to rescue the situation. An interviewer is not a host, and should resist urges to prompt the interviewee's responses, or smooth over what may seem an awkward gap in the conversation. Your verbal contributions to the situation shouldn't stray far beyond the yesses and I sees that are the normal fabric of polite attention, unless it's to ask a new question or for clarification of a reply.

If the hiring process can be said to have dangers at all, the following situations are certainly freighted with them, and all the more so because they can be misinterpreted easily as benign conditions by even an alert observer. With one or two exceptions, no single one of them, appearing once in a candidate who otherwise gives an untroubling performance, is necessarily toxic to the candidate's chances. Noticing them during your dealings with a candidate, though, you'd be prudent to be alert to other conditions that may indeed affect their candidacy.

Notice your candidates' verbal presentation. Do they talk either too much or too little? Do they dwell on irrelevant topics during the interview? Notice if they mention on their own initiative, and not related to a question asked of them during the interview, that they'll be easy to manage, or that they "really need this job." Beware when the applicant interrupts you or finishes your sentences for you, and especially if the applicant ignores or misinterprets a question or instructions from you. If they don't listen to you while they're in effect asking you for a job, they're surely not going to listen to you any time afterwards. It's a warning sign if the candidate mentions personal problems

during the interview, in whatever context, except to tell you of a medical or family condition that may need some reasonable accommodation from you as an employer.

A candidate may rework one of your questions into something only tangentially related to your original question, and then answer the question they just made up. This manipulation draws on levels of experience and skill that make it hard to dismiss the dodge as a simple attempt to finesse a challenging question. If the candidate does this with any aplomb at all, and certainly if it happens more than once during the interview, you're talking with someone who uses this technique as a normal negotiating skill in stressful situations. Expect it to inform his or her relationship with a future employer, whoever that may be.

Fidgeting, playing with jewelry or pen or pencil, loud or theatrical handling of minor hygienic rituals such as throat clearing, or the stifling (or not stifling) of sneezes and coughs can be troubling sign of carelessness when they form the majority of a candidate's personal presentation. Beware also if the candidate mishandles any ordinary social interaction with you or members of the search committee in ways that can't be explained away as nervous reactions to the interview; for instance, sending the committee members an inappropriately lengthy or personal follow-up note after the interview.

It will be hard for you not to notice if your interviewee consistently answers questions with brief and polished-sounding responses that connote decisiveness, initiative, reliability, willingness to accept responsibility, ability to handle stress, or any of a number of other desirable qualities. Not that rehearsing answers is necessarily a bad idea, but if this thought occurs to you, you must also ask yourself under what condition would it look like a good idea to memorize a script that reinforces stereotyped job strengths? You may also want to consider keeping questions likely to summon forth a canned response to a minimum, as we saw earlier.

If you're having trouble formulating your overall evaluation of a candidate, try presenting your impressions to yourself in the form of a joke. This powerful technique allows you relatively direct and unhindered access to reactions you may otherwise have difficulty putting into words; they can be uncannily accurate. Trust yourself to see substance in an applicant through a case of interview jitters or less-than-stellar presentation skills if there's something there at all on which to build a good working relationship.

Before you dismiss the search committee, poll them for their impressions of the candidates, with the goal of agreeing upon a hiring choice. At the end of this meeting you should have a single candidate upon whom most, if not all, the interviewers agree. It is this person whose work history you will examine in detail. You'll certainly subject each of your interviewees to a cursory initial application check, but consider saving the detailed reference check for the candidate to whom you'd like to make a job offer.

Thorough checking takes time and energy, and you don't want to take the chance that you might neglect some aspect of the process through impatience with an en masse check. This is also one task that you probably shouldn't delegate. The reference check is a high-stakes game for you as a library director or first-line supervisor; it's less so for a subordinate, and certainly less so for someone on the search committee who may not work in the library at all. A reference check, by the way, is different from a background check. It's unlikely that candidates for employment in the library will be subject to this level of vetting, which may be within the purview of the human resources department and include a credit history check and a check for past legal mishaps.

## Checking, with Interest

At this stage of the selection you're ready to call your strongest candidate with news that you're considering him or her carefully for the job, and that you'll expect to be able to speak with past supervisors and colleagues, and, if possible, with present ones also. These reference interviews will almost certainly take place over the telephone. Don't expect a conscientious referee to entrust sensitive information to e-mail.

You'll increase your chances of starting a productive conversation with the candidate's references if you can find something you have in common with them professionally, such as a school or friends or acquaintances in the field or in regional library associations. Make sure you call the person by name, too, and use his or her name a few times during the call. Good telemarketers use this technique, as it's very effective for establishing a working relationship with a stranger. Be sure to begin the conversation with the sort of unfocused question about the candidate's qualifications that will prompt your contact to speak at some length, which you should encourage. Be careful not to interrupt or lead the conversation in a particular direction unless the referee wanders.

If the referee isn't answering your question with useful information, go directly to the more linear queries, such as (in the case of a former employer), "Why did this person leave the job?" For the present employer, ask what kind of annual review the candidate got the last time they were reviewed. Also ask if the candidate has ever been written up for a disciplinary reason, especially recently, and, if so, why. It's a commonplace of popular psychology that over time people tend to be consistent in their behavior. Expect this to be true for your job applicant. When you've completed your searching you will have a very good idea of your candidate's work habits and attitude. The hiring decision you make that's based on the information you've gathered stands every chance of being a happy and effective one.

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The importance of the poster design cannot be stressed enough. It needs to be a strong graphical image and symbolic of the lecture topic. Several times our posters have become a sought after commodity and decorate multiple offices around campus. This helps keep the lecture present in the community consciousness and serves as continuing publicity long after the particular event. If the speakers are well known, then having their images on the poster is advised. Most of the time, despite the excellence of their scholarship, speakers do not have the name recognition with the community that warrants taking up valuable publicity space with their image. The appropriate place for their photo usually is the inside of the program with their biography. The poster needs to catch the public's eye and convey an image to engage instant interest in the topic. For the Shakespeare lecture an outline image suggesting the Bard's head was used. For the Japanese history lecture the poster had a large red dot, symbolic of the Japanese flag. For the women's history lecture a woman in turn-of-the-twentieth-century clothing looking at a book of blank pages was the evocative image presented. This year's poster for the filmmaker has a sprocket of unreeled film across the top, drawing the eye strongly to the text and image below.

## Unexpected Pleasures

With every speaker there have been unforeseen moments. One year, unannounced, the lecturer brought his partner with him. We were serving a catered sit-down meal. Quickly

one of the library staff found himself uninvited, and I handed him cash to get a meal at the dining commons so there would be a place setting for the additional guest. His delightful partner turned out to have been an alumnus of our institution and was a booster of our campus. The woman historian, who was so generous of her time while on campus meeting with students, encouraged me to send her the abstract of my thesis for a soon-to-be completed history degree. She e-mailed back very encouraging comments on the abstract. These are just two examples of unforgettable and unanticipated results from sponsoring the lectures.

## Conclusion

While there are many details and considerations in planning a lecture event, the benefits are worthwhile to the library. The more integrated the lecture's theme to campus interests, the better attended the lecture will be. The lecture on medicine and social justice was a theme from the summer reading program and resulted in an overflow crowd. Providing a scholarly lecture series enhances the library's reputation as a partner in support of the classroom curriculum. Our experience with the Mason Library Annual Lecture is that the library is now placed squarely in the heart of the learning environment and perceived as an active contributor to the intellectual life of the campus, which is a wonderful place to be.

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## Reference and Note

1. Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2005). This book is a recent contribution to the popular literature on the psychology behind what seem to be our rational decisions. *Blink's* third chapter, "The Warren Harding Error: Why We

Fall for Tall, Dark and Handsome Men," probes in engaging detail the favoritism enjoyed by tall persons, and especially tall males. Gladwell shows that this favoritism extends to hiring decisions. His bibliography for that chapter references recent scholarly and popular literature.