

Thinking Outside the Hiring “Box”

By Julie Todaro

Getting a job in today's market – in the vast majority of situations - involves an application and interview process. Although most institutions have designed processes bound by guidelines and rules based primarily on federal and state law, there are a wide variety of differences in specific areas of the hiring process. Two major differences include the pre-interview and the interview process. In these hiring areas, institutions and organizations have the opportunity to gather more and, often, specific data on applicants, assess a match of candidates to the open position, and match the organizations needs to the best candidate. Often, interviews can have very unusual aspects and candidates need to be ready for what comes!

Pre-interview Issues

When discussing these issues in the global rather than local sense those reading this article and possibly taking some advice should realize that there are a number of “givens.” It's a given that application forms are up to date; ask only legal questions; and, conform to state and federal guidelines. It's a given that applicants must complete the application form in its entirety prior to being considered an applicant.

Application Forms

Application forms are typically required of all candidates seeking all levels of positions, but are often too long, provide too little space for sharing information and ask for personal references rather than professional references. Candidates can't fit their experience in, can't decide whether they should begin with their newest or their oldest job, don't know how to explain gaps in employment, aren't sure which competencies to include and are often unclear on whether or not – if they have issues relating to current or previous employment– they should check “yes” for contacting supervisors. In addition, many applicants are not sure whether or not it is politic or even acceptable to leave gaps in the application form and attach a resume.

Cover Memos

Applicants are seldom *required* to submit cover memos but may be asked to specifically identify an applicant packet with information that conforms to a standard for easier sorting of applications. Cover memos are often generic and merely provide the identification needed to distinguish packets. Many applicants wish to insert information into the cover letter that gives them an edge and/or sets them apart from other applicants. Cover memos are an opportunity to include information that is not appropriate to place on the application form or is not requested in any part of the hiring process.

Portfolios/Ancillary Documents/Documentation

Although most organizations don't require or even suggest submission of portfolios, ancillary documents or documentation (exclusive of educational transcripts) many applicants use this information to set them apart from other applicants and illustrate their specific match to the organizations needs. What's in a portfolio? Examples that demonstrate competency such as web pages, pathfinders, information literacy assignments, plans, service plans or designs, publicity, books, chapters, or articles written, newspaper articles or columns, grants (without budgets,) videos, CDs, photo albums, database printouts (Excel or Access,) Microsoft PowerPoint presentations (library public relations, budget presentations), annual reports and, if an applicant is new to the field, journal, field experience reports, research papers or assignments that illustrate knowledge or ability.

Ancillary documents and documentation can include certificates of accomplishments, curriculum summaries from coursework, awards notices, and general letters of support. Other documentation – in addition to transcripts – could include test results.

Questions and Answers

Organizations can require applicants to complete answers to questions in advance of interviewing and in various stages within the process and submit the answers as part of the application process. Sample questions - typically sent, answered, and returned prior to a finalized applicant pool - could include simple questions to answer (similar to interview questions) as well as cases or scenarios for applicants to discuss such as:

- Discuss the contemporary mission of the public library in society today.
- What role does the academic library play in the life of the higher education environment?
- What role does the school library play at the building level ...at the district level?
- Why should the special library and information center participate in the client billing process within the business environment?
- Name and briefly discuss three great challenges librarians face in today's (insert one: school, public, academic, special) library.
- How does a community college library differ from a college or university setting?
- What are the various information literacy modes and methods in libraries today?
- Discuss current Patriot Act legislation and its impact on (all types or pick one) libraries.
- Imagine that two kids are causing trouble in the children's area of the library and their parents are not around/elsewhere in the library. How do you handle the trouble?
- A patron asks to meet with you regarding a book they want removed from the (pick one type of library) collection. What do you do?

Organizations can use these answers to determine initial applicant pools, finalists and the final successful applicant. Although a more stressful approach may include final applicant pool members receiving these on site and answering them under a pre or post interview timeline, these questions provide great insight to organizations. Most questions don't have a right or wrong answer, instead answers often weed out those who don't want to go to these lengths to apply as well as those that can't write, they offer organizations a demonstration of knowledge of the field, they provide some background to an employee's breadth of knowledge as well as critical thinking and problem solving skills.

Interview Types

As with other parts of the hiring process, there are a number of "givens" with interview issues. It's a given that interview questions conform to legal federal and state guidelines; that interview schedules be established; that interview committee members are provided with forms to complete for consistency with questions, order, and timing for all applicants; that questions are designed to elicit answers to assess the best applicant match to the organization; and, that questions are current. In addition, any testing done conforms to legal standards including standardized testing for all applicants as well as standardized environments for any testing (exact same amount of time, exact resources such as hardware and software).

While most applicants expect "standard" interviews, that is, one or more employees interviewing individual candidates - interviews can be very diverse. Examples of interviews include:

- One applicant ...one employee/employer from Human Resources rather than the library environment
- One applicant...one employee/employer from the library
- One applicant...individual interviews with individual members within the library organization
- One applicant...an interview with a hiring committee
- One applicant...an interview with any of the combinations mentioned above with a demonstration or documentation such as giving a teaching presentation, giving a storytime, delivering a booktalk, giving a

speech, and/or problem solving.

- More than one applicant interviewed by a panel of HR employees
- More than one applicant interviewed by a panel of library employees
- All finalist applicants interviewed by a panel of HR employees
- All finalist applicants interviewed by a panel of library employees
- A phone interview of a single applicant with one or more HR employees
- A phone interview of a single applicant with one or more library employees
- A video one way/audio back with one applicant and one or more HR employees
- A video one way/audio back with one applicant and one or more library employees
- Interviews where applicants demonstrate competencies or are “tested” including personality or learning style testing; knowledge and application of hardware and software testing (library and non-library specific); resource and skills testing such as reference tests, cataloging materials, performing storytimes, delivering reviews, customer service, presenting a budget, or information literacy instruction to individuals and large and small groups.
- Interviews where applicants are placed in a simulation environment; that is, they are actually placed on a busy reference desk or on a busy circulation desk and observed (obviously used less!).

And, of course, an interview may include a combination of the elements above.

Getting Ready for the (More Standard and Unusual) Interviews

How should candidates prepare for the job hunt? What do managers look for in the most successful candidates? Any absolute *don'ts*? How *should* candidates prepare for the job hunt?

- Candidates should take every opportunity to ascertain what the organization wants and how the organization will handle the process.
- Read the job ad carefully
- Ask for an expanded job description if the job ad is brief or doesn't answer all of your questions (few do these days!)
- Review the organization's website to see where the library fits within the umbrella organization – if there is one – and then review the library's website. Review the staffing area. Seek any other content on the jobs. Look for an organization chart. Check the list of responsibilities under individual staff pages.
- Applicants should review their resume to see if their resume matches the job and revise if *they* match but their resume doesn't clearly indicate this.
- Applicants should craft an individual and position-specific cover letter.
- Applicants should – if they rise to candidacy status – ask questions such as:
 - What is the interview schedule for the day?
 - Can I bring a portfolio of information with me? In order to bring enough copies, how many people are involved in the process?
 - You have mentioned I will be “making a presentation.” How long will it be? Who is the audience? Can I bring additional handouts? Is it possible to have specific equipment? Shall I bring it? Will I have an opportunity to test it out? *And* “I am bringing my content on a jump drive. Does the computer available to me have a port for

this?”

If the applicant is able to, they should visit the library prior to the interview to estimate time for driving, arriving and parking and to take a personal, self-guided tour of the facility and pick up library print materials.

The Interview

If an applicant is able to prepare based on the recommendations above, they should be ready *but* there are additional things to consider for the typical and unusual interviews.

If any aspect of the interview is “remote” or “virtual, and primarily an audio situation,” applicants should have paper and pencil ready and should create a visual picture of an interview environment with graphics representing each interview committee member with their names. As the applicant answers each question, clarify who is asking the question and focus on the individual mentally or as if they are in the room. This technique of focusing on interviewers, mentioning their names, asking “Did that answer your question, Richard?” will assist applicants in appearing organized and thoughtful.

If applicants find themselves one on a panel of people all interviewing at the same time, they should:

- *Not* be the first to answer always, but be sure to be included
- Be verbally respectful of other panelists by saying things like, “That’s a good idea and I would add ...”
- Be an active listener while others are speaking, even though you may be taking notes to assist you in answering.
- Use standard interview techniques such as asking, “Did that answer your question?”
- Watch the time and don’t hog the time. You might segue by saying, “I’d like to add to what Geoff said by saying...”
- If applicants find themselves in a video setting, find someone who has experience and can help you with these issues:
 - What you colors and prints should wear since some patters and colors are not complimentary on camera.
 - How to wear your hair so it does not obstruct your expressions or mouth as many watch as well as listen.
 - A reminder to sit up straight and firmly on your jacket or dress.
 - Practice positive body language and avoid crossed arms, waving hands.
 - Rehearse mindful that the camera image is flat and normal pictures are distorted.
- If applicants find themselves in a testing, demonstrating or assessment situation:
 - Make sure all questions you have are answered before the testing and ideally, before you attend the interview/testing portion, so that you can “study” or “refresh” yourself.
 - Ask any clarification questions before the test begins.
 - Be honest in your levels of expertise (as in all aspects of job hunting) so you are not caught testing low on something in which you indicated “you were an expert.”
- Keep track of time - ask for your time limit and adhere to it.

What Do Managers Look for in the Most Successful Candidates?

Obviously, managers are seeking the perfect person for their position. Ideally this sounds great, and there are *many* other things individual managers may say are their critical needs but, at the very least, you need to match yourself to general expectations. Managers are looking for:

- A specific match of your experience and education to the job responsibilities, which can be evidenced in the cover letter, application and resume.
- A reason why you stand out in a field of people who may have similar credentials
- An honest and clear reference check if references are queried
- A “fit” to the existing team
- Evidence of an ability to – in the vast majority of cases – be self-directed once the position is clarified and you are trained for the specific environment

Any Absolute *Don'ts*?

- Don't tell people in the cover letter reasons for applying that have nothing to do with the job such as your spouse or family member is relocating; your parents are sick; you've heard they pay well; you have always wanted to live in their town; you want to retire there, etc.
- Don't speak for others in situations. Don't say in a panel something like “I think all people here would agree...”
- Don't be late for the interview.
- Don't expand or exaggerate what you do or when you did it.
- Don't send a generic cover letter.
- Don't submit an incomplete application and attach a resume and then put “see resume” on sections of the application.
- Don't send a cover letter or any documentation that isn't free of spelling and grammar errors.
- Don't bring just one copy of your documents with you. Do the copying work for them.
- Don't forget – even though it sounds trite – to send a follow up thank you if you have made it to the candidate stage and get an interview!
- Don't forget to be as specific as possible *using their words* from the job ad and job description. Often Human Resources departments screen and they don't know *libraryspeak* (initialisms and acronyms, educational terms, etc.). Be specific and spell things out for the cover letter, application and resume process. They need to clearly see the match between you and the job.

Good luck job hunting and let us know if you make it through the typical and unusual pre-interview and interview process and – using these techniques – you get the job you want!

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We would love to have your **feedback on this article!**

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