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Megan Hodge

Virginia Commonwealth University, mlhodge@gmail.com

Nicole Spoor

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

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Congratulations! You've Landed an Interview: What Do Hiring Committees Really Want?

¹Megan Hodge and ²Nicole Spoor

¹Chesterfield County Public Library, Richmond, Virginia, USA

²William R. and Norma B. Harvey Library, Hampton University, Hampton, Virginia, USA

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Introduction

In light of recent economic trends, finding a librarian job has become more difficult. Both public libraries and academic institutions are facing budgetary restraints that lead to workforce reductions. Experienced librarians are finding themselves without jobs and the decrease in open positions leads them to apply for any available librarian positions, even entry-level ones. As new MLS graduates enter the job market in competition with more seasoned librarians, there are more qualified applicants than before.

Can a new library school graduate compete with those who have so much more experience? What traits are hiring committees looking for in an entry-level librarian? While the literature does give some indication of best practices for hiring committees in libraries, the researchers of this study wanted to delve into what hiring committees really seek in entry-level librarians now that the competition is more intense. The researchers surveyed public and academic librarians who have served on hiring committees since the start of the recession to find out what those who actually do the hiring want in a new librarian.

The researchers hope the results of the survey will give entry-level job candidates an edge when interviewing for librarian positions. Since the recession has made it more difficult to find an entry-level librarian position, small details can make a big difference in completing a successful job search (Cannady & Newton, 2010).

Literature Review

Often the first step to getting an interview for a librarian position is to present oneself well on a resume and cover letter. A study by Philip Howze (2008) determined that this might be more difficult than it seems due to the myriad human factors that can get in the way. For example, when the criteria for evaluating the applicant were objective the process was almost perfect, but as selection rounds continued and the process became more subjective, some qualified applicants were dropped from consideration. In general, the hiring committee did a good job, but possibly missed some very well-qualified applicants due to the subjective nature of the selection process.

The process of putting together an excellent resume and cover letter can be difficult, but is not impossible. A single generic resume will not do. The resume should be tailored to the job description and does not have to include the details of every position ever held. If the information is not pertinent to that particular position it should be left out (Newlen, 2006). Cover letters deserve the same treatment as resumes, according to Wheeler, Johnson and Manion (2008): a cover letter should address each specific duty listed in the job description, explaining how the applicant's skills, experience and knowledge are related.

Once the applicant is selected for an interview the real work begins. Robert Newlen (2006) was shocked to find out that some candidates often spend much time crafting a resume, but do not put any effort into preparing for an interview. Candidates should seek out as much information as possible about the institutions where they have been invited to interview. Certainly candidates should become very familiar with the institution's website and its resources. When a candidate lives near the library at which s/he will be interviewing, it is a good idea to visit the library beforehand (Duran, Garcia, & Houdyshell, 2009). It is also beneficial to look for

articles published by librarians on the hiring committee as well as conduct a search of local newspapers for current information about the library and the surrounding community (Barkley, 2011).

One repeatedly suggested tip for preparing for an interview is to practice answering questions that might be asked. Look for websites or books that list questions often asked at librarian interviews (Cannaday & Newton, 2010). Steven Bell (2010) and Cathleen Towey (2004) suggest some much-loved (by hiring committees) questions that every applicant should be able to answer in their respective articles. Robert Newlen (2006) also has an extensive list of possible interview questions. Newlen (2006) includes various types of questions with suggestions on ways to best answer them and also has a section of questions specifically for entry-level librarians.

Steven Bell (2010) writes that "one of the most important parts of the interview process are the questions. Hiring committees almost always ask some form of the question, 'Why do you want to be a librarian?' You should have a good message prepared that communicates your passion for the position in a sticky way – so what you have to say is remembered." It is also important to monitor the way in which you as a candidate answer questions. Daniel Barkley (2011) has many suggestions on how to best answer questions during an interview. Barkley's "don'ts" list includes "Don't be lazy in your speech" and "Don't disregard your body language." A candidate must also be prepared to answer difficult questions about his or her past employment history. Karl Bridges (2005) suggests how to overcome obstacles such as a firing or being denied tenure. He advises being fully honest about what happened and explain in detail how the applicant has made sure that it will never happen again.

During the interview candidates are evaluated on many different criteria. For example, “there is nothing more important in the hiring process than uncovering an applicant’s attitudes towards helping the public” (Towey, 2004). Redrup-May (2010) agrees in her article, “Growing a Young Adult Librarian: Recruitment, Selection and Retention of an Important Asset for Your Community”: skills and knowledge of the nature of libraries are something that can be taught, but “it is the attitude that defines the person and the success of the organization.”

Wright (2006) agrees that qualities are more important than skill sets. He asserts that ideas are much more important than the candidate’s skills. A candidate should have ideas about what it means to be a librarian and how they will succeed in the position for which they applied. Ideas show that the candidate has a “sense of philosophical engagement with the field” (Wright, 2006).

Some of the other qualities that hiring committees look for in a librarian candidate are enthusiasm, flexibility, the ability to read people, and adaptability (Redrup-May, 2010). While Wheeler et al. (2008) agree with the importance of some of these qualities, they compiled an alternate list of factors that they consider critical in candidates: service orientation, post-MLS work experience, personality/demeanor, personal/professional appearance, internships or work-study experience and the MLS program attended. LeDoux (2006) asked fellow law librarians what they looked for in future librarians. She created an extensive list from the responses, which include such skills desirable in all librarians as good reference techniques, strong work ethic and customer service skills. Candidates for librarian positions need to make it clear that they are innovators, risk takers and problem solvers, according to Michael Stephens (2010).

It is important to develop an interview style, according to Robert Newlen (2006). Libraries “want someone dynamic and enthusiastic, who displays a positive attitude.” Newlen

(2006) suggests many ways that a candidate can cultivate this image, including looking relaxed but alert and speaking slowly and clearly with a smile at all times.

Candidates should not forget that they are interviewing the library at the same time they are being interviewed (Stambough, 2004) and should ask questions that will help them decide if the library is a good fit for them. "As the job candidate, you should demonstrate the ability to ask thoughtful questions that reveal your intellectual curiosity" (Bell, 2010). Questions can be asked about how the service desks are staffed and how the budgets are allocated, according to Daniel Barkley (2011). It is also an opportune time to clarify information that was provided in the interview such as job duties and work hours (Barkley, 2011). Asking questions of the interviewers "is a great opportunity for you to learn more about the library and demonstrate your curiosity and enthusiasm for the position" (Newlen, 2006).

When the interview has concluded, it is important to thank each person on the hiring committee and to follow up with a handwritten thank-you to each of the members of the hiring committee according to Bridges (2005). Whether the candidate interviewed at an academic institution or a public library, the hiring process can be long and patience is truly a virtue. It can often take more than a month for the next step in the hiring process to begin, whether it is a second interview or a job offer (Duran, Garcia, & Houdyshell, 2009). Libraries are ultimately trying to hire "individuals whose personalities and attitudes will have customers and coworkers looking forward to spending time at the library" and this takes time (Towey, 2004).

Methodology

This is an exploratory study designed to give librarians with hiring committee experience an opportunity to speak honestly about their preferences, explain how the interview process works at their institutions, and provide advice to job-seekers.

Survey Instrument

A paid SurveyMonkey Select survey instrument was chosen over other paid and free options such as Google Docs and Zoomerang because the researchers were familiar with it and pre-testing revealed that respondents preferred the presentation and aesthetics of SurveyMonkey. Twenty-three questions were developed and then assessed by the researchers' colleagues for clarity, relevancy, and bias and was subsequently approved by the Institutional Review Board of Hampton University. The final survey was made up of both quantitative and qualitative questions; quantitative questions were created in order to be able to analyze trends (e.g., whether interviewing practices had changed due to the recession) and qualitative questions were created because the researchers felt the study would be most useful to job-seekers if respondents could speak anecdotally, outside the confines of a Likert scale. In order to decrease respondent frustration and increase survey completion rates, no questions required answers; respondents could skip any question(s) they chose.

Data Collection

The target population for this survey was academic and public librarians who had served on at least one hiring committee for an entry-level professional position since the start of the recession (which was set as January 1, 2008). An invitation to take the survey was disseminated to general listservs (NMRT-L, COLLIB-L, ULS-L, NEWLIB-L, and PUBLIB-L) as well as ones geared towards those in management positions (LAMA-MMDG, LIBADMIN, CENTRALHEADS, SENIORADMINDG, and NEWDIRMENTOR-L) as administrators were deemed most likely to have met the researchers' eligibility requirements. Additionally, David Connolly, the ALA JobLIST administrator, contacted the researchers and offered to post a link to

the survey through the JobLIST Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn accounts, which was gratefully accepted. The survey was available from March 9 to April 5, 2011.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data was converted automatically into frequency counts, percentages, and graphs by the SurveyMonkey software. The qualitative questions - and text response parts of questions four, five, seven, eleven, twelve, sixteen, seventeen, and twenty-one - were transferred to an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. Even though hundreds of responses were received for some questions, all responses were examined because the order in which the responses was received was not sufficiently random (e.g., the invitation sent to PUBLIB-L was delayed by a couple days) to take a sample. The topic(s) in each response were identified and tallied, with particularly enlightening responses saved for quotation in this paper. Responses could be tallied under multiple topics.

Findings

1. In what type of institution are you employed?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Public library		29.1%	125
Academic library		70.9%	305

Fig 1: Respondent demographics

Out of 430 respondents, 305 (70.9%) work in an academic libraries, while 125 (29.1%) work in public libraries

2. Have you participated on hiring committees for entry-level librarian positions as part of your professional duties?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		94.4%	406
No		5.6%	24

Fig 2: Respondent hiring committee experience

Just over 94% (406) of the respondents had previously participated on hiring committees. The high percentage is a reflection of the researchers’ request that the survey only be completed by those who had experience in hiring. Twenty-four (5.6%) respondents answered that they did not have experience on hiring committees and were not allowed to proceed with the survey, although it is possible that some respondents may have answered “yes” untruthfully and therefore been allowed to proceed with the survey.

3. For how many years have you served on hiring committees for entry-level librarian positions as part of your professional duties?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Less than 1 year		16.7%	72
1-5 years		33.0%	142
6-10 years		16.5%	71
11 or more years		33.7%	145

Fig 3: Years of hiring committee experience

Seventy-two respondents (16.7%) had served on hiring committees for less than one year, while 142 respondents (33%) have been on hiring committees for between one and five years. Just over 50% of the respondents have served on hiring committees for at least six years, with 71 respondents (16.5%) having served between six and ten years and 145 respondents (33.7%) having served on hiring committees for over eleven years.

4. Is a candidate's current geographic location ever a determining factor in deciding whether to invite him/her for an interview?

		Response Percent	Response Count
No		61.8%	231
Yes		38.2%	143

Fig 4: Applicant Location

Of those who answered that a candidate’s current geographic location can be a determining factor in deciding whether to invite him/her for an interview, an overwhelming number of respondents (61) stated that travel costs are simply too high, especially in this economy and era of reduced hiring budgets, to consider distant candidates on an equal footing with local candidates. Some clarified their responses, saying that this is only an issue with entry-level positions and that “Applicants who wish to pay for their own travel are welcome, but few really do that.” Several people were of the mindset noted by one respondent, who said, “If we have a lot of good local candidates, it does tend to raise the bar for candidates whose long-distance travel expenses we would have to cover.” Many librarians noted that they will conduct telephone interviews either in addition to or in lieu of face-to-face interviews in order to defray travel costs.

Other factors cited were the logistics of asking someone to move for a part-time or temporary position (9), a need to hire quickly or concerns about a delayed start date (5), concerns about the likelihood of the candidate actually accepting or staying in the position, especially for a low salary (4), concerns about whether a non-local would want to move someplace isolated or

with harsh weather (3), a desire for local knowledge (3), the library’s location in either a metropolitan area or one with at least one library school – and, therefore, a preponderance of qualified local candidates (3), and civil service mandates (2).

Several respondents advised candidates to state their desire to move to the library’s location in their cover letters; otherwise “I figure they are applying for any job anywhere.”

5. Do you ever invite candidates to interview who do not meet the required qualifications for the position?

		Response Percent	Response Count
No		86.4%	323
Yes		13.6%	51

Fig 5: Underqualified Applicants

While most respondents indicated that all minimum requirements listed in the job advertisement must be met in order for candidates to be invited to an interview, 51 (13.6%) noted that there was some flexibility in this regard. Ten people stated that experience/education that fell short of the minimum requirements could be overlooked if the candidate would bring diversity to the library or had other strengths/skills, unmentioned in the job ad, that would enhance the library: “If they have the qualifications in the hardest areas to locate candidates or in the hardest areas to teach, we might consider them.” If the candidate seemed to fit the institution very well, two respondents noted that they would offer an interview. As one person said, “I hired for fit in the organization and a personality I could work with. You cannot train for those. Other requirements can be trained.”

Similarly, eight people said related experience, and three people said related education, could be viewed as satisfying the minimum requirements. Five respondents indicated that library school students who are near completion of their degrees or are otherwise promising would be considered: "Sometimes related experience and an eagerness to learn can overcome a lack of actual experience or qualifications." Two respondents indicated that a lack of experience could be overlooked if the hiring committee felt the candidate could be trained quickly.

Other respondents noted that their relaxed views on job requirements were of necessity, not by choice. Nine people said that flexibility about job requirements depended entirely on the job pool; if all candidates were weak, even people without all the requirements would be considered. Three respondents said that due to their remote locations, the hiring committees they had served on had had to take what candidates they could get. Employer guidelines could also come into play: "At times we're required to interview x# of candidates, but perhaps we only have two fewer than x who are really qualified. We'd invite the next two just to comply with rules, even though we know they have no chance." Six respondents said that interviews were sometimes given to internal candidates or others for purely political reasons, even if there was no intention to hire them.

6. What should applicants know about your institution before coming to the interview?

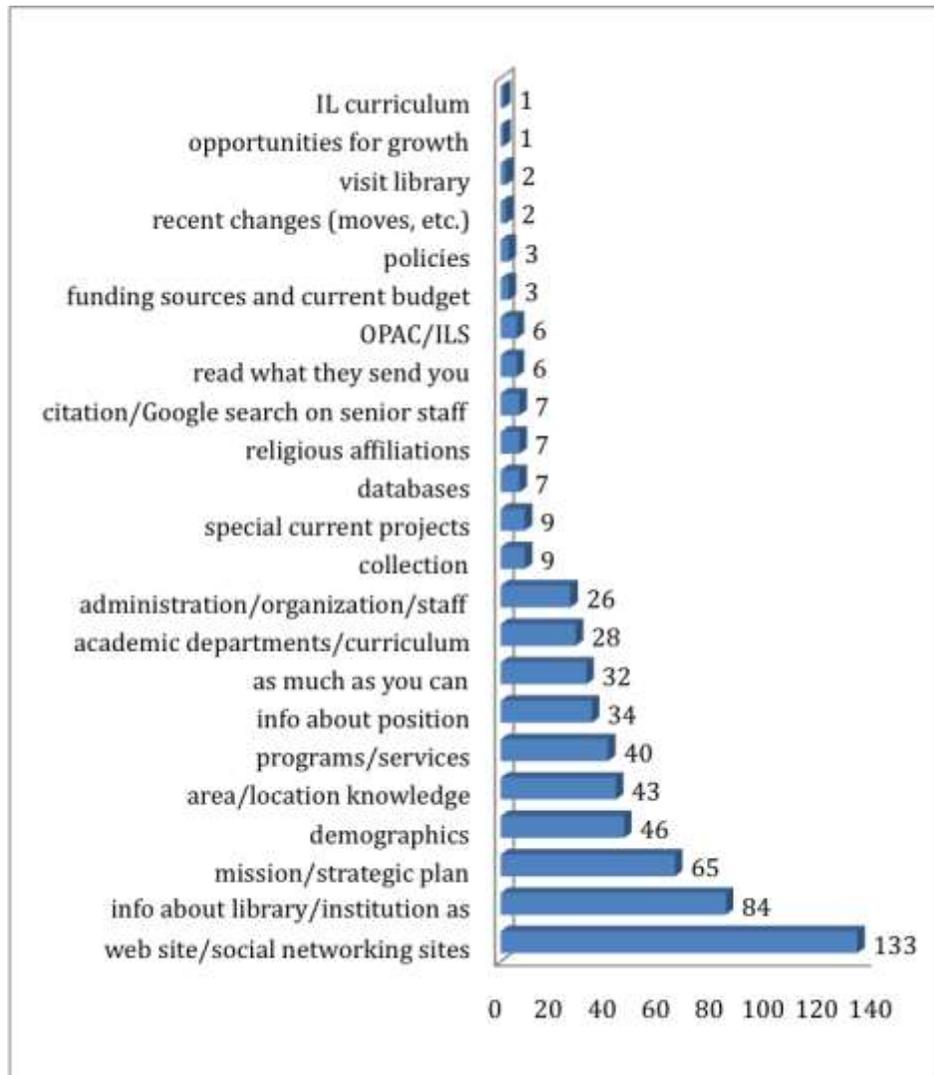


Fig 6: What to Know Before Interview

Of the 324 people who responded to this question, many wanted candidates to know basic, standard knowledge about the library. One hundred thirty-three - over a third - stated specifically that candidates should take a thorough look at the library’s Web site (and social networking accounts, where available). Eighty-four wanted candidates to find out basic information about the library or institution as a whole (in the case of academic libraries), while 34 noted candidates should research the responsibilities and description of the position itself.

Thirty-two stated simply that candidates should find out “as much as they can” and to “do their homework”; on the other end of the expectation spectrum, six asked that candidates at least read the informational materials sent to them upon the submission of their applications. Several respondents remarked that it was not uncommon for candidates to not have done even this basic research.

Others wanted information that could be harder to come by; as one put it, “I hire reference librarians--they should indicate that they're researched us beyond out [sic] web page.” Two stated that applicants should have visited the library before the interview (“Local applicants really should have a library card in good standing,” while another thought that candidates should have looked at the student newspaper) and seven wanted candidates to do a citation search on the senior staff. Some respondents had very high expectations; one respondent mentioned that they “have been very old-fashioned in the past but we are trying to modernize. If you enthuse about how we never weed, we will not hire you. We want you to CHANGE our culture, not to fit in with a culture even we know is outdated” and another said that “It's pretty laid-back. You're going to have to pursue your own professional development unless you want it to devolve into a boring-but-easy, clock-punching job.”

Other respondents wanted applicants to not just research the library, but to use the knowledge they had gleaned in some way. Several respondents mentioned the need to not only know what special projects the library was currently working on (9), but to have ideas about how the candidate would fit into the institution and have ideas about the projects. Many respondents said their libraries desired constructive criticism: “Applicants who can identify our strengths/weaknesses (and solutions) pull ahead of the pack.” Another respondent gave specific advice as to how to use the knowledge gleaned from research: “I would find out as much as

possible, and find a way to casually drop that knowledge into the interview. I am impressed when people can discuss recent news articles about the library, for example.”

Several respondents urged candidates to remember the real reason for pre-interview research: “They should be able to answer the question ‘Why do you want to work at my school?’ not just why do you want a job.”

7. What are the degree requirements for entry-level librarians at your institution? (Choose all that apply.)

		Response Percent	Response Count
Bachelor's degree		19.8%	72
Master's degree		10.4%	38
Master in Library/Information Science from ALA accredited institution		86.5%	315
Other		13.2%	48

Fig 7: Degree Requirements

The overwhelming majority of respondents listed a Master’s degree in library or information science as the educational minimum for entry-level librarians at their institutions; about one-fifth of respondents said a bachelor’s degree was sufficient, while another 10 percent required a master’s degree of some sort. This data may be unreliable, however, as the researchers allowed for multiple selections instead of specifying the minimum degree required.

Of the 48 respondents who listed other educational requirements, ten indicated that experience could be accepted in lieu of educational requirements, and seven that an MLS-in-progress is acceptable. The rest of the responses ran the gamut of educational attainment: a few

people said that a high school degree would suffice, while others said that a terminal degree in a field outside library and information science was required.

8. How important are the following in terms of choosing a candidate for an entry-level librarian position?

	Unimportant	Of Little Importance	Moderately Important	Important	Very Important	Response Count
Any experience in same type of library as your institution	1.4% (5)	9.9% (36)	37.1% (135)	36.3% (132)	15.4% (56)	364
More than 2 years of experience in same type of library as your institution	10.4% (38)	32.1% (117)	33.5% (122)	17.6% (64)	6.3% (23)	364
Any experience in any type of library	1.1% (4)	9.6% (35)	41.8% (152)	24.7% (90)	22.8% (83)	364
More than 2 years experience in any type of library	8.2% (30)	32.7% (119)	35.4% (129)	19.5% (71)	4.1% (15)	364
Experience specifically related to position (e.g., reference position must be filled by those with reference experience)	2.7% (10)	12.1% (44)	33.8% (123)	26.1% (95)	25.3% (92)	364

Fig 8: Applicant Experience

The experiences most likely to be considered very important by respondents were experience related to the position (25.3%) and any experience in any type of library (22.8%). Conversely, the experiences most likely to be considered unimportant by respondents were more than two years of experience in the same type of library as the respondent's (10.4%) and more than two years of experience in any type of library (8.2%). More than two years of experience in any type of library was most often rated of little importance (32.7%) or only moderately important (35.4%).

9. How important are the following criteria when hiring an entry-level librarian at your institution?

	Unimportant	Of Little Importance	Moderately Important	Important	Very Important	Response Count
Education	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	10.5% (38)	37.1% (134)	52.4% (189)	361
Experience	0.6% (2)	3.6% (13)	31.3% (113)	41.3% (149)	23.3% (84)	361
Personality/Attitude	0.3% (1)	0.3% (1)	1.4% (5)	26.0% (94)	72.0% (260)	361
Fit for your institution	0.3% (1)	0.3% (1)	4.2% (15)	24.1% (87)	71.2% (257)	361
Personal Appearance	5.5% (20)	19.1% (69)	36.6% (132)	31.9% (115)	6.9% (25)	361

Fig 9: Applicant Criteria

Large majorities of respondents (over 70% in each case) found personality/attitude and institutional fit to be very important criteria in making hiring decisions for entry-level librarian positions. Education was also considered very important, though to a lesser extent (52.4%, with another 37.1% rating it “important”).

Experience is considered important by a plurality of respondents (41.3%), while sizeable minorities considered it moderately important or very important (31.3% and 23.3%, respectively).

Respondents were more divided when it came to a candidate’s personal appearance. A small plurality (36.6%) considered it moderately important, while 31.9% considered it important and 19.1% considered it of little importance. This data may not be accurate due to little explanation in the question itself of what was meant by “personal appearance,” however.

10. How important are the following competencies when hiring an entry-level librarian at your institution?

	Unimportant	Of Little Importance	Moderately Important	Important	Very Important	Response Count
Communication skills	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	2.5% (9)	23.8% (86)	73.7% (266)	361
Customer service skills	0.0% (0)	0.8% (3)	2.5% (9)	19.9% (72)	76.7% (277)	361
Familiarity with technologies used in the library	0.0% (0)	1.1% (4)	18.3% (66)	48.2% (174)	32.4% (117)	361
Expertise with technologies used in the library	0.6% (2)	6.9% (25)	41.6% (150)	36.0% (130)	15.0% (54)	361
Demonstrated commitment to the profession (through interest in continuing education, professional organizations, committee appointments, etc.)	1.4% (5)	11.6% (42)	30.2% (109)	34.6% (125)	22.2% (80)	361

Fig 10: Applicant Competencies

Respondents were offered the following competencies and asked to rate the importance of each, from “not important” to “very important”: communication skills, customer service skills, familiarity with technologies used in the library, expertise with technologies used in the library and demonstrated commitment to the profession. Among the 360 respondents to this question, communication skills and customer service skills were listed as very important by most. Customer service skills were categorized as very important by 76.7% (277) of respondents, while communication skills were categorized the same by 73.7% (266). Almost 100% of respondents listed these skills as at least moderately important.

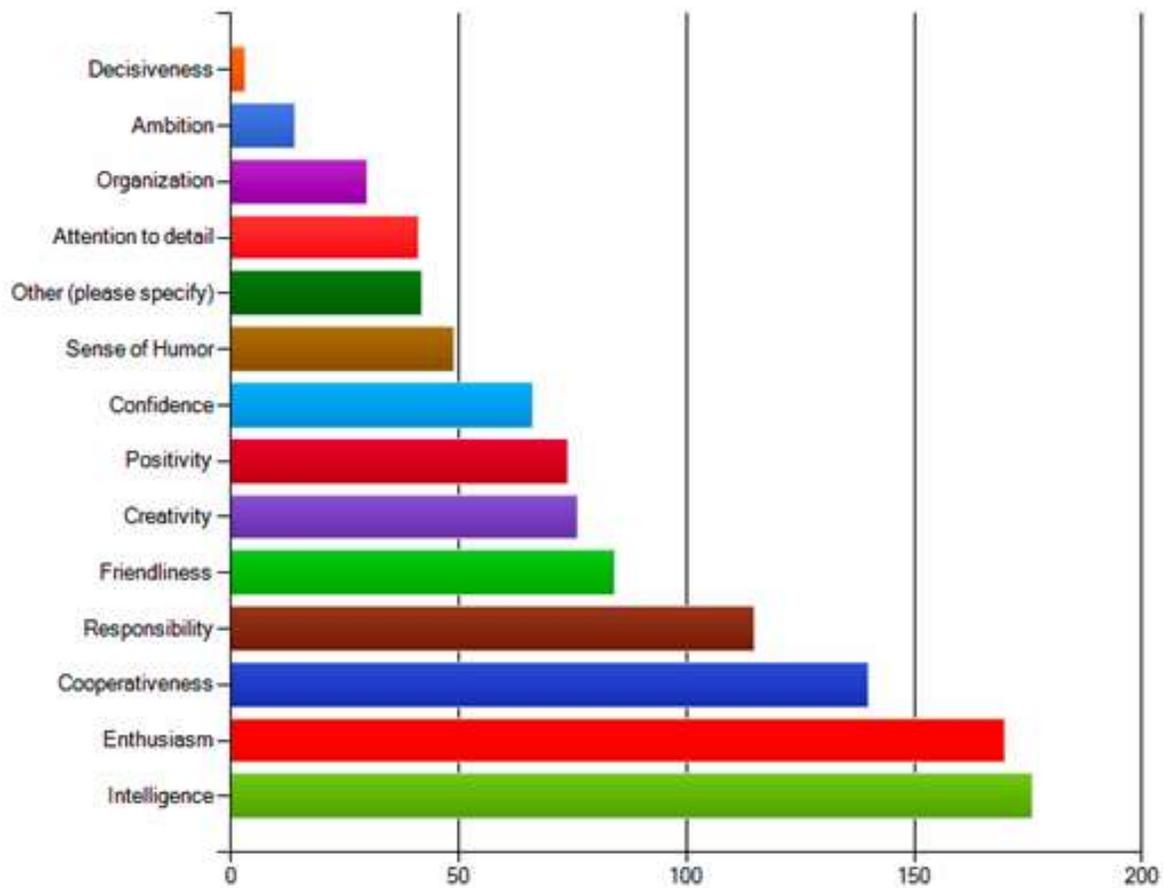
Familiarity with technology used in the library was also deemed very desirable, with over 80% of respondent ranking it either important or very important. Expertise with the same technology was not ranked quite as highly; two hundred eighty respondents (77.6%) categorized

it as moderately important or important, but only 15% (54) felt that technology expertise was very important.

Eighty-seven percent (314) of respondents said that a demonstrated commitment to the profession was at least moderately important with 22.2% (80) stating that is was a very important competency when hiring an entry-level librarian.

11. Please choose the three (3) most important character traits for your ideal candidate for and entry-level librarian position to have.

Fig 11: Applicant Character Traits



Intelligence was the top choice of respondents on the most important character traits, with 176 out of 360 choosing it as one of their top three. Enthusiasm closely followed intelligence with 170 responses. The third most important character trait according to respondents is cooperativeness (140). Responsibility and friendliness were also deemed important traits by respondents with 115 and 84 responses, respectively. Decisiveness (3) and ambition (14) were chosen as the least important qualities in an ideal candidate.

Respondents who chose “other” as one of their top three traits could write in their own responses. The most popular additions to the list were flexibility and initiative, but neither was chosen by many respondents. There were a few that pointed out that they felt that the traits would differ depending upon what type of entry-level librarian was being hired. For example, traits that might be important in a public services librarian could be very different from traits that are helpful for a cataloging librarian to possess.

12. How are interviews with entry-level librarian candidates structured?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Structured interview (same questions asked to each candidates)		60.0%	216
Unstructured interview (hiring committee members formulate their own questions)		1.7%	6
Combination of structured and unstructured		32.8%	118
Other		5.6%	20

Fig 12: Interview Structure

Sixty percent (216) of all respondents conduct structured interviews during which all candidates are asked the same questions. One hundred eighteen respondents (32.8%) stated that

they use a combination of structured and unstructured interviews. Only six respondents (1.7%) noted that they exclusively use unstructured interviews during which the hiring committee asks various questions that may not be the same as those asked of other candidates. Out of the 20 respondents (5.6%) that chose “other,” six use a structured format for the initial interview, with follow-up interviews being much less structured, and five noted that the interview also included a presentation.

13. If questions differ between candidates, what is the process you use to evaluate candidates?

Eleven out of 102 respondents stated that they use rubrics to evaluate candidates during the interview. Of those 102 respondents, 33.3% said that many of the same questions are used in each interview, but there are differences because of the uniqueness of each candidate. For example, one respondent noted that “We try to use the same questions, but conversation may lead into different directions.”

Many respondents noted that there really was not a process, but more of an informal discussion among the members of the hiring committee. There were also many responses that stated that the evaluation process was about fit and it was not something that could really be measured in any objective way. As one respondent said, “It is more about the feeling I have about the candidate’s personality.”

14. Have you seen an increase in the number of applicants over the last couple of years due to the decline in the economy?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		77.5%	276
No		22.5%	80

Fig 13: Number of Applications

A large majority (over 75%) of respondents indicated that they had seen an increase in the number of job applicants due to the decline in the economy, while only 80 of 356 responded that they had not seen an increase in the number of applicants.

15. Do you invite more or fewer candidates to interview, as a result of this increase?

		Response Percent	Response Count
More		14.5%	40
Fewer		4.7%	13
No change		80.8%	223

Fig 14: Number of Interviews Given

Only respondents who answered “yes” to question 14 (“Have you seen an increase in the number of applicants over the last couple of years due to the decline in the economy?”) were directed to this question; all others skipped ahead to question 17. A large majority (over 80%) of those who did answer “yes” to question 14 indicated that the hiring committees they served on were not asking either more or fewer candidates to interview. Fourteen-and-a-half percent of respondents indicated that they asked more candidates to interviews, and 4.7% indicated that they asked fewer candidates to interview now than before the recession.

Of those who took the opportunity to explain their answers, 36 stated that they always interview the same number of candidates, regardless of the economy. Several said it was a waste of staff time to interview more than that, and others said that they had strict guidelines to follow by dint of being public institutions. Another ten respondents stated that they had increased use of telephone interviews to screen candidates, but the number of people invited to interview in person remained the same.

Others (7) said that while their applicant pools had increased, the number of qualified candidates had necessarily seen a similar increase; as one respondent put it, “We have a stronger base from which to choose, but only interview the best of the best.” A few other people stated that while their applicant pool had increased, their institutional hiring budget had decreased, so the number of candidates offered interviews had decreased for them.

16. Do you ask different questions during an interview now than you asked before the decline in the economy?

		Response Percent	Response Count
No		94.1%	334
Yes		5.9%	21

Fig 15: Change in Questions

Of the respondents who answered “yes” to question 14 (“Have you seen an increase in the number of applicants over the last couple of years due to the decline in the economy?”), almost all (94.1%) said that they do not ask different questions in interviews now than they did before the economy.

Several respondents indicated that the economy was definitely affecting the questions they asked of applicants. One now asks about the ability to adapt as “position fluidity” and “workload creep” are now common, while another now wants experience in teaching job skills classes, two want to know how applicants would deal with minimal resources, and another wants to know if candidates have done research on the local economy. Two admitted that they ask more detailed questions now because the deeper candidate pool means they can be pickier. Others said they would try to ascertain the candidate’s true interest in the position if s/he were overqualified (3) or ask what the candidate’s commitment to the position was because vacated positions are often going unfilled (1).

The economy was not always the reason for a change in questions, however. Of those who indicated that they are asking different questions, many stated that the change in questions was attributable to factors other than the economy, such as wanting more scenario-based questions (2), new hiring structures (1), new library technology (1), and a greater focus on soft skills (1).

Two commenters responded with false positives in order to indicate that they had not served on a hiring committee since the recession started.

17. Do you require presentations during interviews of entry-level librarian candidates?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		55.5%	197
No		23.1%	82
Only of candidates for positions with instructional responsibilities		15.5%	55
Other		5.9%	21

Fig 16: Presentations in Interviews

Over half (55.5%) of all respondents stated that they do require presentations of entry-level librarian candidates, while 23.1% (82) do not require presentations. Fifty-five respondents (15.5%) only require presentations if the responsibilities of the job require instructional services. Twenty-one (5.9%) people responded “other,” with 10 of those specifying that they required presentations of those candidates interviewing for children’s librarian positions when story times will be a mandatory part of the job.

18. How are presentations evaluated?

According to comments made by 241 respondents, rubrics and other survey instruments are tools widely used to evaluate presentations. Seventy-one respondents (29.5%) stated that they use evaluation tools to make evaluating presentations less subjective. Most of the 71 respondents use a survey to collect evaluation information from those in attendance, but 11 respondents specifically stated that they use a rubric to evaluate presenters. Twenty of the respondents declared that solely the hiring committee attends the presentations, while 83 respondents (34.4%) stated that any staff, professional or paraprofessional, are invited to attend presentations and give feedback.

As for important criteria that are used to judge presentations, two stood out. Sixty-nine respondents (28.6%) affirmed the importance of communication skills, while 43 (17.8%) stated the importance of organization. Some of the respondents stated that there was no official evaluation procedure, but that all who attended the presentation were encouraged to provide feedback.

19. What is the most impressive thing a candidate has ever done or said in an interview?

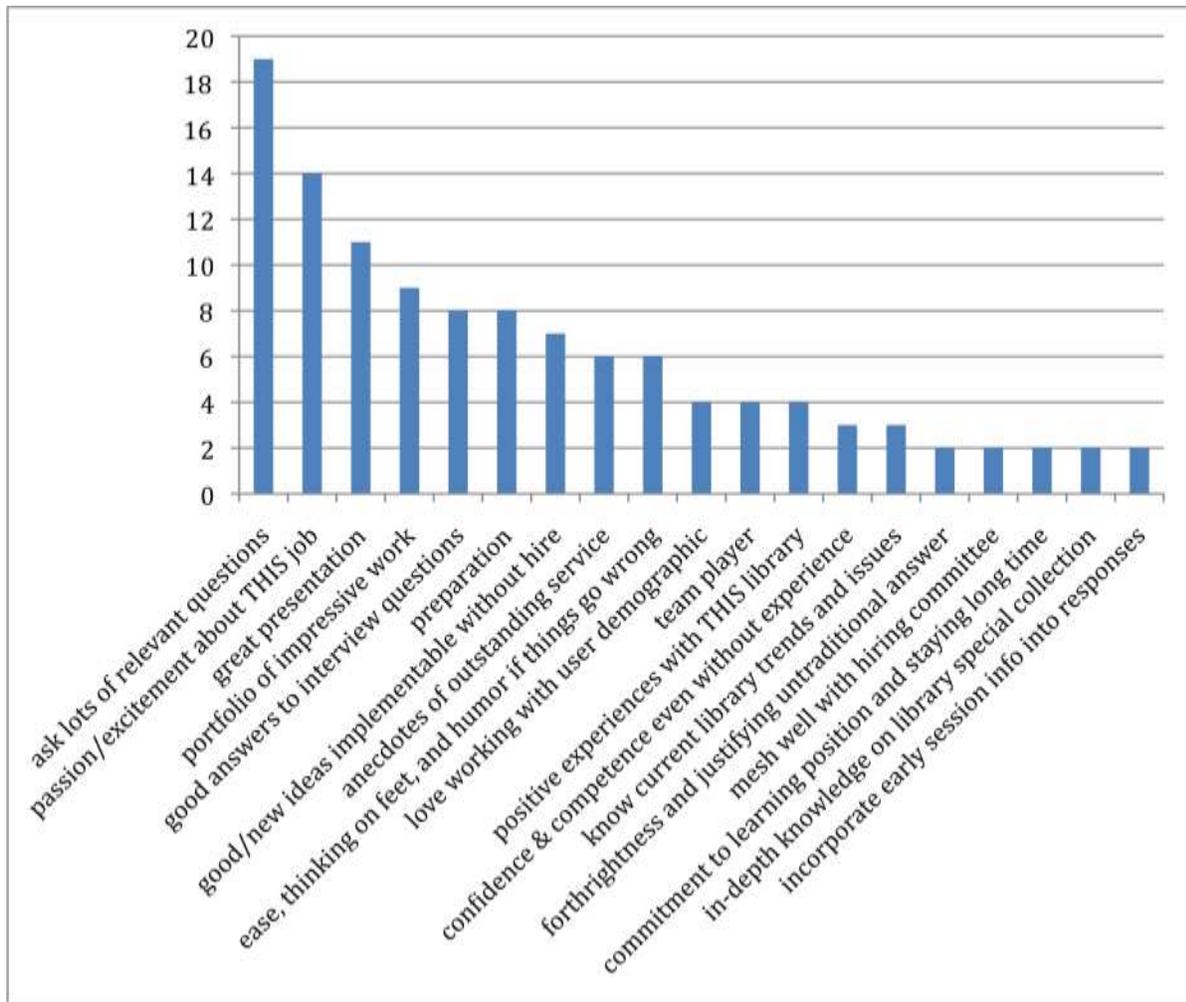


Fig 17: How to Be Impressive

Two hundred thirty-three respondents answered this question. A number of people responded only to say that no candidates have ever done something impressive in an interview - or to talk about negatively impressive things (“Exposed remarkable cleavage,” “Some have brought in portfolios of their programs or work they've done; most like this but I don't think necessary for entry level and kind of cheesy”).

Of those who responded with truly positive accounts of things candidates had done, all emphasized the over-the-top nature of the acts. While all candidates should be alert and thinking about how they would fit in the workflow of the library during their interviews, for example, what impressed one respondent was when “at the end of the day, the candidate summed up her impressions of the library and then gave several strategies about where and how her skills would fit in and be of benefit to the library.”

The actions that were most likely to leave a favorable impression were variations on proving that the candidate was interested not just in a position, but in *this* position specifically. Fourteen respondents stated this explicitly, one of whom quoted a candidate who said, “I have other offers, but I want thjis [sic] job.” Going the extra mile to research the library, its user demographic and its services is one way that candidates showed their enthusiasm for a particular position. One respondent recalled a candidate who was able to recite the library's mission by heart, while three mentioned candidates who took the time to do some undercover research on the library by asking questions of its patrons before the interview. Another respondent was impressed by a candidate who made a mock-up blog for the library, and another remembered “a candidate for a part-time circulation assistant [who] knew that our children's librarian was trying to increase program [sic] and came into the interview with three programs prepped.” Candidates who were willing to share their innovative, helpful ideas before (and regardless of whether) they

were hired also impressed: seven respondents mentioned this, and advised candidates to “[bring] samples even if [they] have zero experience, make a bib of our library resources on a topic, do a flier or send us a sample ppt. Show some initiative with[out] being overly-assertive.”

A candidate who asks lots of (relevant) question was also looked upon favorably by the respondents. Examples of questions that stuck out include:

- “Where do you see the library in 5 years?”
- “Are there any departments that I will not get a chance to be involved with?”
- “Describe your ideal employee.”
- “Asked what we were doing that we were excited about”
- “Asked very specific questions about a building project based on articles that had just been published”
- “One candidate thoroughly did her homework and was able to ask each of the committee members something specific to their work or to a presentation or paper they had written.”
- “Turned the tables on the librarians and asked why we continue to stay at this institution.”

Another way to impress a hiring committee is to give an outstanding presentation.

Respondents were impressed both with presentations that used hardly any technology at all, as well as those that utilized new, little-used (in the interviewing library) technology, such as asking the audience to use their mobile phones as clickers in order to vote. Being extraordinarily prepared, whether by remaining calm and having a backup plan if technology failed or doing the whole presentation without notes and without looking at the screen, was also mentioned. Making sure to follow through all the way to the end earned high points as well: presenters who assigned homework or passed out evaluations afterwards were especially memorable.

Other examples respondents gave that are particularly heartening for new library school graduates included answers to questions for which the candidates did not know the answer ("I don't have experience doing X or Y, but here's how I would approach this concern/project/technology") and the proper way to address weaknesses (the candidate "acknowledged directly in what areas they felt they still needed to develop and why"). Because entry-level candidates can be flight risks, hopping from job to job every few years, those who demonstrated commitment to the library also stood out. One respondent described a candidate who "had a detailed plan for how they hoped to grow in the job, solve our current problems with our catalog, etc.," while another recalled one who had "prepared a two-page handout with plan for approaching the job, broken down by time."

While the respondents' answers to what questions they'd like candidates to ask in interviews (but didn't) covered many topics, several (12) answered simply that candidates *should* ask questions—since many don't. Others responded with general advice rather than specific questions they'd like to hear, such as being willing to ask negative questions (e.g., “What do you not like here?”), showing interest in the position, and demonstrating that some research has been done already on the library and local area. One respondent simply said, “I don't care what kind of question [sic] they ask. I am expecting that they listened to us as we explained the job and they come prepared with basic knowledge [sic] about the organization. Sometimes the questions that candidates [sic] ask seem forced or over prepared, not genuinely asked out of a desire to learn something.”

The largest number of comparable responses (out of the 227 received) was for candidates to ask questions about what it was like to work in the library/at the institution, and to ask questions regarding the day-to-day activities and responsibilities of the position. A related question that many respondents wanted to hear was about the library/institutional culture; as one person put it, “What is the culture like? What is expected of the librarians in terms of a work schedule/balance?” Another respondent suggested a similar question for academic librarians: “I wish candidates would ask more questions about the classroom environment - class sizes, teaching styles and philosophies. Applicants are too focused on the library, and not enough on why our institution has a library.” Other related suggested questions included asking about inter-staff relations and what the ideal colleague/candidate for this position would look like.

21. Do outside parties (administrators such as provosts, human resource managers, etc.) have a role in the final hiring decision?

		Response Percent	Response Count
No		48.8%	165
Yes		51.2%	173

Fig 19: Role of Outside Parties

Almost half (48.8%) of the 338 respondents to this question said that outside parties such as provosts or HR departments do not have any role in the final hiring decision. One hundred seventy-three respondents (51.2%) said that there are decision makers outside the library who have final authority on hiring decisions.

Of those that do have outside parties involved in the decision making process, 38 said that the hiring committee can pick a final candidate, but the provost must approve it. One respondent seems to sum up the statements of those who require provost approval: “The library’s recommendation goes to the Provost’s office, so they could have a role, but this is usually a formality.” Forty of the respondents (11.8%) stated that a president, vice-president, dean or governmental official has a role, but it is, again, more of a formality than a frequently used veto power. Thirty-six respondents (10.7%) stated that human resources had the final say when it comes to hiring, but that usually human resources’ role is to verify eligibility for employment rather than to evaluate how effectively someone will do his or her job.

22. What interviewing advice do you have for new library school graduates competing with more seasoned librarians for entry-level positions?

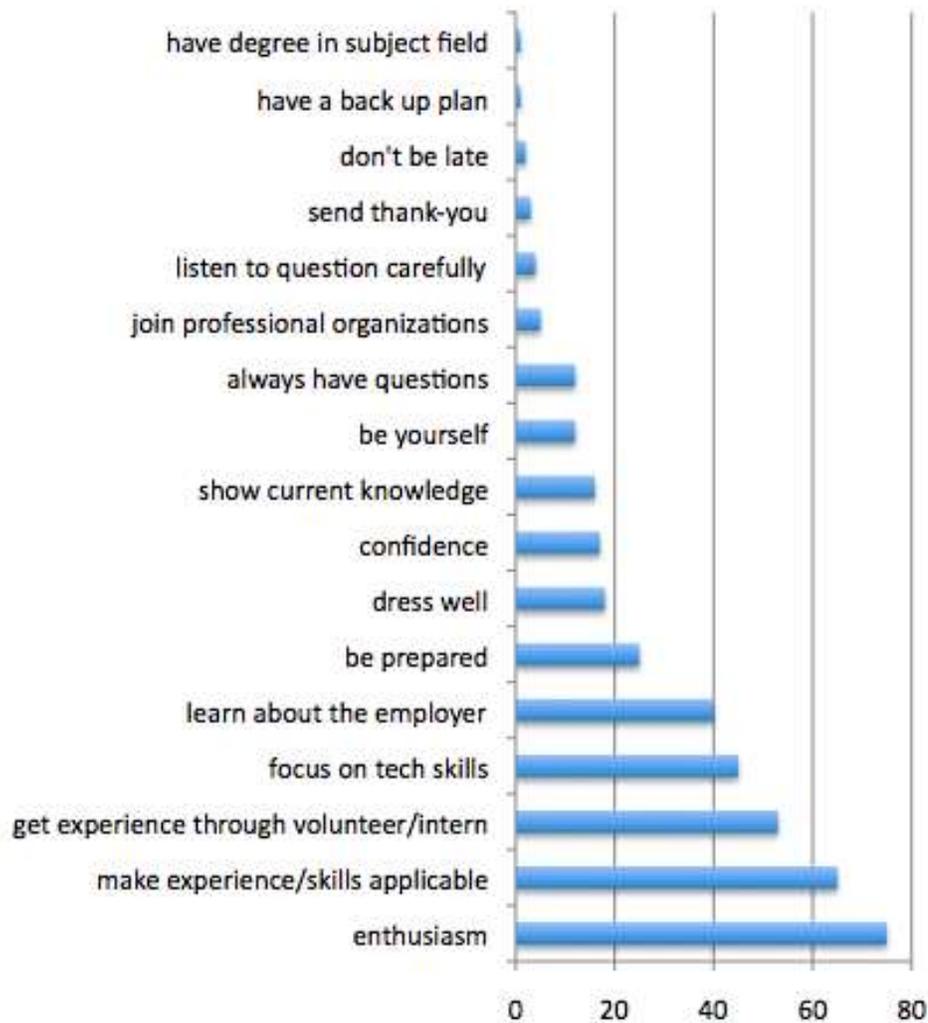


Fig 20: Competing with Experienced Librarians

With over 300 responses full of tips for entry-level librarian candidates, this question provided much insight into how applicants can improve their odds of being chosen for a position. The most important quality for candidates to exude during an interview, according to the responses, is enthusiasm, with 75 respondents asserting its importance. The second most popular piece of advice from hiring committee members (65) is for candidates to work hard to make a connection between their experience and/or skills to the position for which they are interviewing. As one respondent said, “...connect the dots for us.”

There were many general reminders to applicants such as being prepared (25), dressing appropriately (18), having confidence (17), and being oneself (12), but two other responses stood out. Forty-five respondents suggested that those who have little experience in libraries, but who have recently graduated, probably have more sophisticated technology skills and should showcase those skills during the interview process. Forty respondents felt that it was extremely important for candidates to take time to learn about the employer prior to the interview. It was suggested that candidates pore over the employer's Web site, Google members of the hiring committee, and visit the hiring library prior to the interview.

While it does not specifically relate to the interview process, it is clear that many respondents (65) feel it is important for candidates to know that they should find internships, part-time jobs or volunteer work in the library while still in school or in the interim before finding a full-time professional position, as any form of experience is better than having none.

23. Do you have any questions or comments you would like to share?

Many of the comments received in response to this question were about the construction of the survey, rather than the interview process. Also, many of the comments dealt with aspects of finding a job other than the interview process. However, some respondents provided some wonderful suggestions about interviewing for entry-level librarian positions. One person commented that it is important to "put your best foot forward," because "personality plays a bigger role than most people think." Another respondent said, "We are trying to find somebody who is a good fit for our library," reinforcing the idea that personality plays a large role in the interviewing process.

Many other comments focused on why the respondents felt that an entry-level librarian candidate had an advantage over a more seasoned applicant. For example, one person said, “I think that brand new librarians can be the person to beat. They bring a fresh energy and viewpoint.” Another commented, “Many of the hires I have been involved in during the past 12 years have been new grads, who brought energy and new ideas to the library. I cannot imagine not hiring new grads!”

One respondent summed up various comments by saying, “I feel lucky to already have a job, because some of the candidates we get are so smart and creative I don’t think I would be able to compete against them!” It is clear that it can be challenging to interview for a new position, but those just entering the field should not give up hope. They just need to find the position that is the right fit.

Discussion

While the distribution of academic to public librarian respondents was not equal (a 7:3 ratio), a large enough number of public librarians (125) responded as to make their answers reliable rather than outliers. Librarians with vastly differing years of experience on hiring committees took the survey as well, guaranteeing a variety of perspectives from new librarians to seasoned mid- to late-career professionals—in other words, a fairly representative cross-section of the population likely to make up the hiring committees our readers will face.

The majority of respondents indicated that geography was not a factor in their decision to invite candidates to interview, but those who said it was a factor gave unwitting advice to job-seekers by clarifying their responses: indicating that concerns about location may be waived if the candidate offers to pay his or her own travel expenses, reiterating a strong interest in the position to allay fears about candidates who apply to every position they find, and indicating that

a start date soon after hire is doable. While not all candidates may find it feasible to say such things - especially for all positions they apply for - it could be useful if a job seeker is very interested in one or two particular positions that are far away.

Applying for positions that one is not qualified for is not generally a successful strategy in an economy where experienced professionals are vying for the same positions as recent library school graduates, but a few respondents offered hope to job-seekers who are extremely interested in positions they are not fully qualified for. Possessing rare and highly desirable skills (as noted on one's resume) and showing a good fit for the institution in the cover letter/resume are sometimes enough to net under-qualified applicants an interview. While the respondents who said as much were clearly in the minority and their advice should be regarded accordingly, it may be useful to job seekers who are extremely interested in one or two particular jobs that may seem just out of reach.

Anecdotal evidence about the competitiveness of the job market since the recession started was confirmed by a large majority of respondents who indicated that they had seen increases in the number of applicants since January 2008. It would be interesting, for a future study, to find out by what percent applications had increased at those institutions that had seen increases, and to follow up with the respondents who answered "no" to find out why they had not seen an increase in applicants.

Respondents were given the opportunity to speak more directly about what they want from candidates in questions 18, 19, 21 and 23. Many offered advice of the type found in any job-seeker's manual (e.g., do your homework, dress conservatively and well for the interview, etc.), but many also offered rare insight into the library hiring process and offered specific examples of how to wow a hiring committee.

Conclusion

New graduates interviewing for entry-level librarian positions should not worry about their lack of experience, according to many of the survey responses. There are many ways that those trying to land their first librarian position can have an advantage over more seasoned librarians. The results of this survey provide guidance on what candidates can do to make the most of their abilities, knowledge and skills during the interview process. Hiring committees understand that they are not just trying to fill an open position when they interview. They are “launching a new citizen into our professional world,” and do not take the task lightly (Wright, 2007). Hiring committees are looking for the best fit for their organization, but incorporating some of the suggestions provided by this survey could help a candidate obtain a position with just the right fit.

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