2005

Leaving the Books Behind! -- Job Mania

Editor
I received my MLIS in May 2005 and began the job search in earnest. I had tried to apply for a number of positions before, but most institutions replied that they only looked at candidates who had totally completed their degrees. So I waited until I was eligible.

Advice is cheap and sometimes not at all helpful, but there are some tidbits of information that are pertinent and strategically correct. I would like to comment on job descriptions, the job application process and the interview. First and foremost, it is mandatory that the applicant not get excited, unrealistic and anxious. This is a process like any other in the business world. Sometimes you do well and sometimes you don’t, but you learn by the process.

To all those supervisors who post job advertisements, please be concise, but state the job fairly. It is nice to know where the job is located (institution, city, state), so that the applicant can decide what locale he/she wishes to live and work in. For instance, I was scanning jobs listed in the Deep South (as I am more familiar with the culture and appreciate it), preferably NC, SC, GA, AL, and FL. A short description of the institution that describes the venue is good information. This could include public, academic, special, school, medium, large, combination environments and anything else you might consider important. Next the job itself should have a recognizable title. If the title is unique or different from the regular reference, cataloging, circulation type jobs, please state what it is. Archivist has been used in a number of ways, so a short description could be very helpful. Likewise, statisticians or information managers need some more details. Nothing long and involved is necessary, but tidbits of information are required to make decisions about self-interest. Next, state the job fairly. Some jobs literally require people to “walk on water,” so many will pass over reading the details. Looking for someone with experience? Say what kind and how much. Say what you will consider and options for alternative acceptance. Be specific on time limits for application, a Website can check for information on the library/institution/HR benefits, and the supervisory characteristics of the job. Are you tenure track or contract or something else? Sometimes when people are geared more to the work than to publications and social interaction, they need to know the institution is capable of accepting that reality. Name a contact person so that the applicant can check the status of the application. Some institutions have never acknowledged the fact they received my application. I think it is common courtesy to acknowledge receipt. It also shows that you might be communicative in your transactions with others, and that might be better for further negotiations. Be prompt in reading and replying to candidates.

What is important in a résumé? I have tried a number of variations and styles, but I still like the straightforward way of addressing Education, Job Experience, Conference Publications, Preservations and Organizational Information. I also try to include a section on my achievements. Not just awards, but actual things I feel I have accomplished in my fields of study and experience. This gives a little better insight into who I am and what my life goals are. Advice from books and teachers has been to list the newest first and give dates for education. I was reluctant on this point because I have thirty years of experience in library work and I was afraid my age would be a negative factor in my selection. I was wrong. My age was not the factor, but the amount of professional participation, interest and passion in library work was definitely the key decision maker. It is important to tailor not only your cover letter, but your résumé to the application and specific job you are seeking. Emphasis on the specific subject area (science, rare books, etc.) is important to the hiring agency. Do you have familiarity with languages, computer skills, formats, unusual materials, etc.? It is important to state what skills you have, however numerous or odd, the coping skills you have for differences and changes, and the abilities you have to sustain your energy and focus on tasks.

The cover letter should start with an introduction of where you saw the advertisement, why you are interested in the job, and basically who you are. The succeeding paragraphs should address why you think you fill their needs. If you use the advertisement and address each factor they are seeking to fulfill as given in the description, you won’t leave out anything. There will always be items you are not qualified to do or have had no experience doing. Do not be afraid to address those points. For instance, the supervisory skills they were seeking in some jobs were lacking in my résumé. I stated that as my previous job opportunities did not afford me the chances to experience supervision on a permanent basis, I was allowed to spearhead projects and direct stated numbers of people in specific activities for short periods of time. I am also involved in teaching workshops on team management and crisis intervention, and have done some consulting jobs in major institutions helping them to find ways to motivate staff and improve coping with change. In other words, I know the theory, have some practical knowledge during brief periods of work, and am ready to accept the responsibility of the supervisory situation. The trickiest thing I have ever had to state is that even though I am a new graduate, I have this long career in library work, have been trained to do wonderful things in many different areas of the library and I am capable of “running with the ball.” I strive to be very direct about my passion for library work and how I believe I can bring energy and difference to the job.

The phone interview can be very tricky. It is best to find out who you are talking to (one individual, prospective supervisor, a committee, Director, etc.). Listen carefully to what they need to know. Answer those questions directly, precisely and concisely. Do not offer information that is unsubstantiated. Do not get cute or curt. Ask pertinent questions when allowed. I try to have a copy of the organizational chart in front of me along with the job description, staff directory with pertinent people highlighted and a list of questions developed from my research of the institution, library and job type. What things haven’t they said to you? What is important to you? Generally, I try to keep the time formal, but being who I am, I listen for the cues that allow me to be a little less formal. If I find that there is no flexibility in the formal attitude, I put the offer aside as less desirable for me, but that may be better for you. My last phone interview was wonderful. The supervisor and I related well and even established a joking relationship. I felt very comfortable and encouraged about the prospects of a job. I even suggested specific references of mine for her immediate needs. She wanted to verify who I was trained and my work continued on page 70.
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ethical, as well as the skills I knew. She also wanted to verify that this had not changed over the years. As a result, she found that I was even more impassioned about library work today than I was years ago, but perhaps with better direction.

The onsite interview is crucial to your being employed. Some institutions require you to do one day, others require two, or multiple visits. Generally, they start with a short tour of the institution, or at least the parts that interact with your prospective job placement. Then, you have combinations of sections/groups, individuals, and the direct supervisor of the job. When I applied for a Serials Librarian job, I met with the Technical Services staff, the Associate Directors, the Director, the Reference staff, the Staff involved with media and other services, and a critical time with the Technical Services head, where I was asked to talk about a specific journal title they had cataloged locally and comment on fields used, other fields that were possible to use and how I would change the emphasis of the cataloging. This last session was a little scary, but I decided to be direct and honest.

I think that is the only way to approach such a request. Right or wrong, I became very defensive of the local cataloging before OCLC radical upgrades and suggested we go into the record and change it back. It led to my discussion of strengths in consistent authority work and adherence to cataloging rules. I also elaborated on further access points we could use to help the patrons and reference staff. Whew! Had to take a deep breath and settle back in the chair, hoping she would agree. There are sometimes risks you must take, but I always feel secure in sticking to my ethics and the cataloging rules. You may want to watch for institutions which require you to present a subject to the staff in a twenty minute segment. Generally, they tell you about it when you are scheduled for the onsite interview and the preparation time can be two hours or less. If you haven’t done many presentations, this could be stressful, but they generally want to get an idea about your ways of teaching and leading. I think they’re fun, but that’s just me.

Remember, anything you write in your cover letter and résumé can be questioned! From the most significant to the least, they have the right to ask you about it. Be truthful, realistic and try to draw conclusions about your experiences that others can see easily. I was quizzed about preservation from a statement about a church library experience, asked to explain statements in an article I had written, identify an article where I discussed specific aspects of management and change, expound on the most important event of my thirty years of experience, explain how to gain conference experience without money or support from the library, and talk about staff development and motivation. I feel as if my interview turned into a family visit and I enjoyed it immensely.

On August 22, 2005, I will be gainfully employed as the Serials Librarian at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, FL: a product of long hours of study in the MLIS program, many years experience in the profession, preparation for presentations, writing for publication, and an active involvement in the library world. For whatever you wish in life, you must work to achieve it. I will always remember this time in my life: the people who have helped make this possible, the belief of professors, coworkers and family, and the providence of a life filled with trials and tribulations. I have enjoyed writing this column through my years as a student at USC and now pass the baton to a new generation of professionals in training.

Heidi Hoenman will be using this column to help her students understand the integral part publications play in their own professional development. Katrina has asked me to move to a different column, so I will remain with you as I search for my place in the professional world. I will also attend the Charleston Conference in November, so look me up. Say hi, and let me know what you would like me to explore in the new column. Thanks for continuing to read with us!

Lost in Austin

by Thomas W. Leonhardt (Director, Scarborough-Phillips Library, St. Edward’s University, 3001 South Congress Avenue, Austin, TX 78704-6499; Phone: 512-448-8470; Fax: 512-448-8737) <thomasl@admin.stedwards.edu>

“In literature as in love, we are astonished at what is chosen by others.” — Andre Maurois

In my last column, I mentioned that I had volunteered to read religious fiction for ForeWord: Reviews of Good Books Indepenently Published. When I wrote about the box of books that arrived one afternoon when I had come home early, I said that there were eight books in the carton but there were, in fact, a dozen. I still had them all read and rated by the end of March but by that time, another carton of books had arrived. The person in charge of the project confirmed that a Sci Fi reader had dropped out and asked if I could help. There were only eleven books in that box but before I could finish them, a small package of three books arrived, three works of translation. My job was to rank the three finalists for the translation award.

As I write this on a sunny, breezy, and cool Sunday afternoon in Austin (perfect weather anywhere), I have just finished ranking the three works of translation after finishing the reading last night. The winner, in my estimation, was a book called Alamut (Scalia House Press), by Vladimir Bartol (1903-1967), “one of Yugoslavia’s leading intellects and the author of plays, short stories and theater reviews” (jacket blurb) who wrote the book in 1938. He was criticized for not writing about his own country instead of Iran, the Iran of around 1092 C.E. If you read the book, in a smooth translation by Michael Biggin, you will understand why modern readers will find it interesting, even gripping at times, especially as you begin to realize why three young warriors are allowed to enter Paradise while still alive, the Paradise where heroes are greeted by virgins in a Garden of Eden.

The work of translation that I did not like had nothing, as far as I can tell, about the quality of the translation. The problem was the material. The book, Sebastian’s Arrows: Letters and Memorials of Salvador Dalí and Frederico Garcia Lorca (Swan Isle Press) contains some of Lorca’s poems and color plates of works by Dalí. Lorca and Dalí will be remembered for their art and not for their correspondence. How could such renowned artists write such boring, pedestrian letters?

My opinion of the religious fiction has not changed since I last wrote about that genre as represented by my carton of books. The good books were good reads. None of the books will be remembered as worthy literature but that applies to most of what we read, even for those of us who try to choose with care. What a loss if all we had to choose from were the novels listed on the syllabi of teachers of literature. Some of my favorite reading has, most likely, never even been mentioned in a formal class. I had some difficulty selecting the order of my four favorites from the religious fiction but I was finally successful. What separated those four books (only three got ranked) from the other eight was that it was the human condition of the characters and plot and not religion. But the religious angle was what drove the authors and although a couple of the endings were a little too pat, ending a novel satisfactorily, from the reader’s viewpoint, may be more difficult than the beginning.

The most recent work of science fiction that I read before agreeing to be a Sci Fi judge was William Gibson’s Neuromancer more than ten years ago when I was still enchanted by all things technological and BITNET seemed so necessary before it morphed into the Internet and became ubiquitous. The Internet and the Web are not passé but they are nothing more than work tools for me now, work tools that have probably made me more productive but I still miss those telephone calls and letters with interesting letterheads and stamps. The telephone is still used, thank goodness, so that there is still a personal element left in our business world.

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