
Getting the Library Job You Want

Tips for RUSA Members on Making the Next Career Move

Joseph Thompson, RUSA President, 2014–15

Joseph Thompson is Senior Administrator—Public Services, Harford County Public Library, Belcamp, Maryland; email: thompson@hcplonline.org.

I would like to use the opportunity of this pre-Midwinter Meeting 2015 column to reflect on the advice that many trusted colleagues have shared with me over recent years about something that all of us who work in reference, information, and all other library services have encountered at least once in our careers—the job application and interview process. This topic has been at the forefront of my mind for a number of reasons lately. I changed jobs in March of 2014, and several friends have made significant career changes over the past year as well, in some cases leaving jobs that they've held for over a decade. While there is a great deal of advice available in articles, books, and the Internet, I'd like to share with you advice that people close to me have shared and that continues to resonate. What if you are already quite happy in the job you have now? In that case I'll be asking for your help!

My interest also stems from my involvement in resurrecting the Maryland Library Association's Student Interest Group and serving as its chair from 2010 to 2012. There are many students across Maryland obtaining their degrees through online programs, but these students have few opportunities to interact with or learn from one another if they're in different programs. I wanted to find ways for these students to connect with each other and the library community located geographically around them. In this column I'll be reflecting on the sound advice offered by some of Maryland's library leaders that is sure to benefit our RUSA members as well.

I'm also choosing to focus on this topic for another reason. We are in the closing year of our current RUSA Strategic Plan for 2012–15. One objective that the plan prescribes is for us to provide leadership opportunities and ways for our members to develop leadership through professional development. I believe that leaders can come from anywhere if they're allowed opportunities to grow and develop. At the upcoming Midwinter Meeting in Chicago, our RUSA Leadership Development Task Force is planning an event that is intended to provide one opportunity of this kind that I expect will prove to be useful and quite a bit of fun!

ADVICE FROM OUR PANELISTS

During the period of time that I chaired the Maryland Library Association's Student Interest Group we were able to organize two programs at our state annual conference titled, *Getting the Library Job You Want! Secrets from Library Leaders*. An incredible number of fantastic ideas for job seekers were shared by our panelist during these two programs I facilitated

in 2011 and 2012. I've wanted to find an opportunity to more broadly communicate the panelists' ideas ever since then. I'll be sharing the recommendations that have stayed with me and continue to have relevance to job seekers today. We made sure to include panelists who represented the perspectives of middle and upper management, public and academic libraries, and librarians and human resources staff.

The questions asked during both programs covered the broadest scope of the job seeker's endeavor, beginning with how to develop the skills and experience that employers want. The panelists universally stressed the importance of internships, field studies, practicums, and volunteer positions. Develop yourself and get experience wherever you can. In addition to developing your experience and skills, you're also making connections with colleagues who may want to hire you at that library in the future, or at the very least will be happy to serve as references for you as you apply for positions elsewhere. If you aren't working, or have lost your job, take the opportunity to find ways to keep up with your skills, demonstrating that you care about the field, that you're passionate, and you're up to date on trends so that you can easily refer to these during your upcoming interviews.

If you're currently a student, take some courses outside of the realm of librarianship in areas like technology, marketing, public relations, programming, education, and student affairs. Having a second masters degree is a huge plus in academia because you can serve as liaison with faculty members and different specialties and departments. An MBA can be a useful degree for someone interested in becoming a public library director at a larger system. The reality is that employers are often looking for that outside experience that stands out from other MLS coursework. Many employers aren't aware of the nuances of how a degree from one ALA accredited school is different from another, so you need to make yourself stand out based on experiences beyond the MLS. Additionally, look for opportunities to engage with others in your local communities where you can develop and practice project management skills that can be translated to library work. You might organize a fundraiser for a local park, plan a family reunion, serve on a committee at your house of worship, or participate in a community association. People who can show they are engaged in improving their communities are very attractive candidates. Involvement in these kinds of clubs, interest groups, and outside organizations translates to a balanced and well-rounded employee and someone that the interviewers will find appealing, interesting, and memorable.

Join your regional or state association and attend their meetings and conferences. Get onto committees where you can participate and volunteer for tasks and projects. You never know who you'll end up working with and you'll be able to use the people you meet as professional references. Some state library communities are actually quite small. Participation outside of your everyday work environment may offer you connections and experiences that can be used to

your advantage. Most state and national associations provide steep discounts for student memberships, so money doesn't need to be a barrier to involvement by people just getting started in the profession.

The majority of the questions asked during our programs related to the application and interview process. Here the panelists again stressed the need for job candidates to focus on unique experiences, talents, and skills. Demonstrate how you are an individual and what skills and experiences you will bring to the organization that others are unlikely to offer. Do you have experience in marketing, public relations, technology, or something else that shows that you're not going to tread down the same path that others have tried before? Employers tend to look for people with a diversity of experiences who can be managers and marketers, while also handling public relations and day-to-day human resources tasks. Show that you can work a reference desk and provide a story hour if you have the experience. In public libraries, especially, it's important to highlight the skills that allow you to effectively communicate with elected officials and funders so that you can help the library develop the support it receives from the community.

Timing is incredibly important in the interview, so find out how much time you have and feel free to ask how many questions will be a part of the interview if you're not told directly. This allows you to estimate how long to spend on each question so that you don't come across as too brief in your response or run long and find yourself out of time.

One of the best tips I've personally ever received is to think ahead before the interview by anticipating questions and preparing answers. This allows you to practice 'elevator speeches' and gain additional comfort so that when you're in the interview you can default to your prepared responses. Of course make sure that these responses tie back to the question actually being asked. You will also want to make sure that for every question asked, you have an answer. Even if you don't have direct experience relating to the question, tie in another related experience. After you've left the room your interviewers will likely score each of your responses. A response of "I haven't done that" will earn zero points, but an answer that provides insight into a related experience will likely earn you valuable points that will make a difference when added up.

Your focus throughout the interview should be on how you are going to serve the library and be a part of their team. Tell them how you can make the organization better, how you fit into the organization's culture and mission, and how you will contribute a positive attitude.

I'm grateful to the panelists at the 2011 program (Darrell Batson, Lucy Holman, Terri Schell) and 2012 program (Denise Davis, John McGinty, Cindy Pol, Patty Sundberg), as well as the members of the MLA Student Interest Group (Paul Chasen, Amanda Bena, and Amanda Youngbar) for their help organizing and recording these programs. This column reflects just a small portion of the useful advice conveyed to our program attendees.

SOME MORE FRIENDLY ADVICE

As I was thinking about this topic I put a call out to library friends on Facebook, asking them what recent experiences they've had that they believe successfully put them "over the top" and allowed them to be selected for a position. These ideas all came from their past few months of experiences on both sides of the interview.

Do your research. Tailor your cover letter and resume to the specific position and to the needs of that particular library. Most libraries will make their strategic plans and annual reports available on their web site. Reading these documents is an excellent way to gain insight into the culture, values, and priorities of the organization. Take special note of where the library receives its funding. During the interview refer to projects and services that the library provides and describe how you will play an instrumental role in taking these forward.

Stand out. Show your passion, enthusiasm, and positive attitude about the job and for the library profession. Make sure to mention skills that it's likely other candidates won't have, but would be useful to the library such as fluency in a foreign language or technical skills. If you're interviewing for an academic library position it's likely that you'll be asked to offer a brief presentation or simulate teaching an information class. You'll not only want to present solid content, but do it with the latest presentation technology and make use of the bells and whistles. Though it might make a few in your room a little motion sick, a Prezi is still sure way to 'wow' the majority.

Practice making succinct statements ahead of time about experiences that you definitely want the interview panel to hear about. Use these as responses to questions at appropriate times during the interview.

Be positive throughout the entire application and interview experience. Remember to smile and show that you will bring positive energy to the workplace. Present yourself as someone who the panelists will be happy to work with on a daily basis, and who will provide an excellent customer service experience to the library's users. Pessimism has no place in the interview. Show them that you take initiative, bring great ideas, and care about what you do. Demonstrate to the panel that you are a person who delights in learning new things, that you're flexible, and that you enjoy taking on new challenges.

After the panel has asked you questions, you absolutely must have one or two questions for the panel. To not ask questions suggests a lack of curiosity on your part. Ask questions that will tell you more about the future of the position and how the people in the room perceive it. Great questions are, "How do you see this position changing over the next few years?" and "Can you describe a typical day for the person in this position?"

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HOW CAN YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

One of the programs we've now organized several times in Maryland is Speed Mentoring, sometimes partnering MLA's Student Interest Group with SLA's Maryland Chapter. It's a relatively easy and fun way to have a group of people who are new to the profession or looking for a change quickly meet and learn from others with experience. We have subtitled these sessions "Meet Your Professional Development Match." What exactly is speed mentoring? If you've heard of speed dating, that is in fact is the general format. The difference is that these sessions are geared to connecting each mentee to a future mentor who will serve as a valuable source of information to help that person make the most of their budding career as an information professional.

Here's how it has generally worked. Following a quick series of introductions we have a speaker begin the program with some inspirational words about how mentoring has helped him or her advance in his or her career, and the importance of networking with colleagues who share similar interests. We then provide an overview the process. We let people know how much time is allocated for each interaction and that only mentees do the moving. It can even be helpful to have the organizers present a short role play to set the stage for how to make introductions and what kind of questions can be asked.

Depending on the size of your group, 3–5 minutes for each one-on-one interaction is appropriate. This usually gives enough time for each pair to get to know each other, discuss professional strengths and challenges, exchange business cards, and then move on to another mentor and do the same. At the end of the program, we have our mentees identify potential mentors for further mentoring relationships beyond the workshop. If you're willing to commit additional time to the endeavor, you as the organizer can follow-up with each mentee a few weeks later to help facilitate any connections that might benefit from gentle mediation, but this part is up to you. Participants in these workshops have found them tremendously valuable and have given extremely positive reviews. I think often people appreciate that the structure is geared to immediately overcoming what could be an awkward introduction in another context. Though the intent is to allow people an opportunity to meet someone with whom they may develop an ongoing mentoring relationship, what we often see is that the one-on-one sessions serve as brief mentoring sessions in themselves.

Another way that you and your library or school can help job seekers is to host a resume review and mock interview workshop. I was able to participate in one of these at the iSchool at the University of Maryland College Park on a Saturday in early 2014. Like speed mentoring, the planning for a workshop of this type involves recruiting experienced library leaders and publicizing the event. The students I had the chance to talk to each commented about how much they valued the experience.

Earlier I mentioned the work of the RUSA Leadership Development Task Force, which is chaired by RUSA Past President Gary White. In addition to incorporating leadership development strategies into our member's RUSA experience, the task force is in the early planning stages of organizing a speed mentoring session during the 2015 ALA Midwinter Meeting in Chicago. The anticipated focus will be on connecting MLS students from the greater Chicago area with experienced RUSA members. If you'll be coming to ALA Midwinter, please consider participating in this event! If you won't be able to be there, then please consider organizing your own speed mentoring event during a conference in your area or at your school.

RESOURCES FOR JOB SEEKERS

I'd like to finish by offering a set of resources for library job seekers. All of the following are free to search for those interested in applying for jobs. Except for INALJ, all require employers to be a member or pay a fee to have jobs posted.

<http://inalj.com>

INALJ (I Need A Library Job)

Founded by Naomi House and now supported by a cohort of dedicated volunteer editors across the U.S. and Canada.

Vast lists of current available jobs searchable by location and by day posted; Interviews with people about their job search success stories.

joblist.ala.org

ALA JobList

www.arl.org/leadership-recruitment/job-listings

Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Job/Residency/Career Listings

www.sla.org/careers

Special Libraries Association's Career Center

www.mlanet.org/jobs

Medical Library Association's Career Development page

www.aallnet.org/main-menu/Careers/career-center

American Association of Law Libraries' Career Center

Good luck with your next application and your next interview!