

“I know that’s what it said, but it’s not what we want”

The difficulty of really describing a job

by Scott R. DiMarco

Putting the “right” person into the “right” position is the dream of every library director/personnel librarian, but this dream is not realized as often as it may. Unfortunately, employee and employer must often accept at least equal responsibility when the fit is “less than ideal.” Many of these mismatches could have been avoided if the position description had been detailed and more in line with the library’s expectations. Clarity and detail at this early stage might save everyone in the future.

All too often an applicant finds what might just be the “perfect” job for them while leafing through a professional journal. It seems to have been written with them in mind, or so they think. The interview goes well, they are offered the position and they start a new life. It is not long before the honeymoon ends with the realization that this was not a match made in heaven. The director and management have different expectations for this position than the librarian does and vice versa. Unfortunately, this situation hurts productivity, leads to bad feelings, dismissal, or even a lawsuit.

Does the perfect professional library position ad exist? Far too often the only difference in position announcements is the name and address of the institution. The recent Goldberg and Womack, two-part

survey focused on applicants’ perceptions of resumé content and then on specific application practices. It suggested that the majority of applicants had at one time or another either applied for a position for which they did not meet the qualifications, or applied after the deadline had passed.¹ While this implies that the time of a busy search committee will be wasted more than it should, it may be alleviated by detailed and clear position announcements.

Rita Broadway authored the workshop report from the 1991 NASIG Conference, where McIver and Upham made an excellent point when they stated that misunderstandings in terminology often are at the root of many problems.² Confusion is a two-way street in these announcements. Having several members of your staff read it and explain it back to the author may alleviate miscommunications on the part of potential candidates.

Problems with job announcements

Some of the most frustrating problems for job seekers could be easily avoided. Descriptions of overall problems in announcements include being:

- **Too short.** Saving money with a short ad is a sure way not to attract the best candidates.

About the author

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• **Too vague.** Same problem as being too short, plus it contributes to misunderstandings.

• **Too general.** If you want a generalist say so; if not, specifics and details are very much appreciated by candidates.

• **Used for any and all position openings.** This indicates a lack of creativity on the part of management.

The following phrases frequently find their way into advertisements, as such; they have become the common currency of the trade. A number of the following examples have been seen recently on some popular professional electronic lists and journals.

• **Use of the terms “competitive salary” and “generous benefits package.”** These are subjective terms at best. Not many hiring librarians would state their benefits package was subpar, even if it were true. Additionally, it proves very difficult to pay bills with the outstanding reputation of any school.

• **“Demonstrate strong organizational skills.”** This is difficult to display unless the applicant has held a supervisory position.

• **“Demonstrate strong commitment to excellence.”** It would be the rare candidate who would willingly admit their aspirations of mediocrity.

• **“Ability to flourish.”** While trying to get the best candidates available for your position, this term may not be as magnetic as it initially appears. It is doubtful that this phrase would scare off the “dead wood” of the profession.

• **“Seek creative and energetic individual.”** Few individuals actively searching for a position would describe themselves as not possessing these admirable qualities.

• **“An understanding of user behavior.”** Unless the applicant is strictly a systems specialist with no contact with the end user they will have, at a minimum, some personal experience with the behavior of patrons.

• **“A rapport with faculty, students, and staff.”** How can one demonstrate this ability to the interviewing institution?

• **“Provide leadership and vision in team environment.”** Balancing the leadership issue with a team environment can

be tenuous for any individual to demonstrate and this line may be read as potentially difficult to achieve.

• **“Strong and positive commitment to public service.”** The underlining concepts of being a librarian demand public service. Also, why would a person apply for a public service position if they did not possess this quality?

• **“Awareness of current academic trends that effect library operations.”** A general assertion at best. Which trends? Are they still current? Awareness versus actually understanding and being able to incorporate these trends?

Characteristics of well written job ads

“Good” ads have the following features:

• **A salary range.** Weeds out several potential candidates who may require a certain range.

• **A more detailed position description on a Web site.** It is understandable that many libraries must be brief with advertisements in trade journals, but a link to a detailed Web site is a viable and inexpensive alternative.

• **The chain of command in which the position will be reporting.** Describes the management style or structure that the library operates within.

• **A Web site to both the library and the institution.** Provides a description of the library, including the working environment, the institution, and the general geographic area surrounding the institution.

• **Will a presentation be necessary at the interview?** The candidate realizes one of the expectations during the interview process.

• **Anticipated starting date.** Allows for a better understanding of when the position will be open and the time frame of the search.

• **Deadline for review of applications.** If the deadline has passed applications cannot legally be accepted.

• **The size of the organization.** Include both professionals and staff.

• **Tenure track.** Clearly defines professional expectations and the possible “rewards.”

• **A sense of humor.** Shows the library to be a place where you may actually enjoy going every morning.

Attracting the best candidates

We must all acknowledge that it is almost impossible to write an original advertisement. There are certain constraints that most libraries must follow in writing ads, such as, pressures from university administration or a limited recruitment budget.

The authors of these ads are busy people with other more pressing responsibilities, so often they must copy from ads run in the past to save time. They must balance being truthful while showing the institution in an extremely positive light. It is beneficial in the long run to be thoughtful while writing the advertisement.

The administration must be aware that a highly qualified candidate may see dozens of position announcements before finding one "interesting." Clichés alone are not going to attract candidates—what will attract them is a challenging position, a living wage, and the reputation of the library and school.

The reality is that it is difficult to really describe a job. Often job descriptions are only the rough outline of hope that the administration has when they send out

their desire in writing—the real job lies in the attitude, creativity, and initiative that the selected individual brings to the position. These intrinsic qualities can't easily be put into words or even taught. The entire process is hard for those on both sides.

We must look at job ads from both points of view. Hirers: what is it in your position advertisement that will attract the kind of people you really want to be part of your organization? Candidates: be selective and honest, not just for the interview, but in every day being that person you portrayed yourself as in the interview.

Notes

1. Kay Womack and Tyler Miller Goldberg, "Resumé Content: Applicants' Perceptions," *College & Research Libraries* 58 (November 1997): 540–49.

2. Rita Broadway, Carole McIver and Lois N. Upham, "Job Descriptions Vis-à-vis Job Applications: A Match Often Not Made in Heaven," *The Serials Librarian* 21:2–3 (1991): 197–200. ■

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