Making the Good Hire

Updating Hiring Practices for the Contemporary Multigenerational Workforce, Part Two

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Reaching across generational barriers is vital to hiring library staffs of the future. Part 1 of "Making the Good Hire" explained how to broaden position descriptions to appeal to a larger audience than those traditional applicants who "have always loved to read" or "like the quiet, contemplative environment" of the library. Particularly, it is important to attract members of a diverse multigenerational workforce. In part 2, the authors provide strategies on how to gather and evaluate information using nontraditional models and how to apply it to the organizational needs.

The description of a position—its fundamental responsibilities, its role in an organization, and the perception of the organization itself—is critical in drawing a qualified pool of candidates. Once that is achieved, the interaction between the applicant and representatives of the organization is key. Whether reviewing an application, reading the application and the set of questions, setting up the details of the interview, or actually getting to know each other with the verbal and nonverbal exchanges during questioning, each interaction can have a profound impact. By this time it has been determined that the applicants meet the skills, knowledge, and experience sought by the employer. But the expectations of the applicant and employer come face to face at the interview, and any applicant's unique personality may harmonize or clash with the organization's culture. Traditionally (and superficially), the employer has been in a position of power in this relationship, but, with growing workplace demands and changes in the labor market, this is no longer always the case. The applicant is now often interviewing the employer as much as being interviewed. Because of this changing attitude among job seekers, it is critical for the employer to be well prepared and to consider the affect of each step of the process.

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Posting Specific Questions

Many automated job-posting systems allow for applicants to reply to position-specific questions so fundamental requirements or key issues can be addressed prior to the interview process. This can save time during the screening process and makes it less likely that the employer will bring in "bad-fit" applicants. Different types of questions can be used to address different concerns or situations.[1] For example, an open-ended question that requires an unpremeditated answer can provide valuable insights into the candidate's ability to compose, write, communicate, and respond quickly. Some effective open-ended questions might include any of the following:

- What most interests you about this position?
- Describe any past customer service experience you have had.
- Describe experience you have had using the Internet.
- Describe any experience you have had supervising, training, teaching, or coaching others.
- Describe experience you have had doing data entry or with online/computer records.
- Describe experience developing Web pages or writing for the Web.
- Describe experience you have had working in a team or in a team-based environment, including nonwork activities.
- Provide an example or describe your approach to troubleshooting problems or dealing with a crisis.

This kind of information can provide a different glimpse into an applicant's personality than can be provided from a cover letter (that might have been extensively edited).

Increasingly, job applications are placed online. Posting specific questions online is also a good method for confirming critical requirements for a particular position. For example, schedule flexibility may be a stated requirement in a night and weekend position. Most applicants will indicate that they are available for the specified hours because they want to be interviewed and recognize it as a "right/wrong" answer. But using a ranked scale, where applicants are asked to indicate specific levels of flexibility, will often yield a more honest answer and valuable information. For example:

The hours of this position are primarily to support night and weekend coverage. You will be required to work until midnight some nights and some Saturdays and Sundays. Are you able to meet this schedule expectation?

A. Yes, and can be flexible in working different schedules on short notice.
B. Yes, and can be flexible with prior notice (such as two weeks to plan ahead).
C. Yes, but can only commit to a specific schedule (night or weekend times).
D. Yes, but prefer any daytime position that comes available.
E. No, cannot work this schedule as posted and would need to negotiate.

The most acceptable answers are A or B; those answering with C or D may feel they are giving a "yes" answer, but employers may rank them lower in consideration because the statement also contains a qualifier.

Another circumstance where a question of this type might be used is if employees share their workspaces or maintain files that other employees must be able to access. In this case, organizational style may be an important issue. A descriptive question, such as "Describe how you keep your workspace organized," may yield a useful open-minded response. A ranking, such as the following, can provide some insight:

Which best describes your workspace organization style?

A. Clean desk every day when leaving
B. Organized stacks and folders
C. Contained clutter
D. "I know it is here somewhere"
E. Not very organized

In this case, the desired answer will depend on the position needs. If others will need to access the person's files, then answer A may actually be less desirable than B, because the "clean desk" individual is likely to have everything so completely put away that it is not readily accessible. Or the "clean desk" individual may find it unduly bothersome when materials are left out of place after use by other employees. But, for someone who is going to share a workspace with another employee on a different shift, a clean desk is more likely to contribute more effectively to a harmonious working environment.

One thing to keep in mind when posting specific questions is to avoid those that have easy or obvious answers. For example, asking the applicant to describe good customer service will often get cliché answers about "the customer is always right," or "keeping customers satisfied and happy." The point is to make the applicant think to elicit an honest response. A more thoughtful answer may be obtained with a question such as, "what can be done to continuously improve customer service?" Asking for examples forces applicants to be honest.

One final item that many feel is important to include in the application instructions is a directive to complete the *entire* application. Often applicants will partially complete contact and education information while attaching a prewritten resume in lieu of the fill-in-the-blank job history information. Unfortunately, a resume will often not give precisely the kind of information needed, such as whether a past job was full time or part time, or why the employee left a job. Including a clear directive to complete the application form not only gets all needed information, but also provides an invisible test of the applicant's thoroughness and ability to follow written instructions.

Establishing Review Criteria

By opening up preferred job criteria for a position more broadly than traditional library hiring practices have dictated, there arises a new challenge to identify and assess the relevance of the individual's variety of experiences related to the position. Many institutions have detailed processes and policies that must be followed in defining review criteria. Defining the criteria within a common framework for all applicants is a good approach for any institution because, if there are future challenges to the hire or legal action questioning the fairness of the search, the integrity of the process is documented and can be verified.

Figure 1 shows a model evaluation framework with review criteria, using a spreadsheet with formulas to total the scores for the various criteria to be weighted differently, with emphasis on particular position-critical areas. For example, there are several different ways to consider experience in customer service. The most precise way is to simply look at time of formal experience and apply a numerical rating. But this does not determine whether the experience is actually relevant or compatible with the organizational culture. For example, a person who worked as a supervisor in a big-box store might have a very different perspective on institutional cultures than one from a smaller, locally owned shop. Applying a quantitative score to a qualitative description, while challenging, opens the door to bringing in individuals with unique innovation and enthusiasm. It is also important to assess whether the person's work-culture experience is similar to the library.

Some criteria in figure 1 are less directly related to time spent in a position, considering instead the type of work and human skills required. "Relevant work history," for example, puts more emphasis on personal growth and development in moving from one position to another and gaining experiences in the process. By contrast, the word *experience* may imply time-based criteria. It may thus be more important to use more open-ended words such as *background, skills,* or *knowledge*. It is important to be aware that in some organizations, particularly larger ones, specific terms may have more formal or rigid interpretations. The idea is to find people who are open to change in the library environment and may have experienced operational change while working at a similar public or private organization. This aptitude is also consistent with Generation X and Millennial worker patterns of trying different things and changing jobs for personal growth opportunities.

When reviewing applications, be aware that certain cultural or stylistic indicators may not be representative of an employee's potential. These too may cross generational attitudes. For example, to a generation familiar with instant and text messaging, submitting an application that has been completely filled out in lower case and using phrases rather than complete sentences may not be uncommon. Supervisors accustomed to more rigorous grammatical standards may perceive this as an overly informal or audacious style, while it may merely mean that the applicant has a more casual style than the hiring supervisor. Stylistic patterns unique to any institution can be addressed through supervision and work on appropriate business communication.[2] On the other hand, this kind of communication style may indicate a lack of concern with communicating appropriately in certain forums. These distinctions may be subtle, but are important.

Relevant Work History	**Score**
No work history provided	0
Has held a job with a single employer for at least one year full time (cumulative)	+2
Provided reasonable reasons for leaving past positions	+2
Has moved into increasingly more responsible positions with opportunities to demonstrate leadership	+2
Has worked in a state/federal/or large corporate bureaucratic environment	+2
Has worked in an environment that is process driven or has gone through extensive changes	+2
Communication Skills	
No mention of knowledge or experience related to communication	0
Application completed with minimal errors in spelling/grammar	+2
Application contents and attachments information appropriate to position	+2
Responses to specific questions clearly crafted and written	+2
Makes reference to interpersonal-communication/people-interaction skills	+2
Mentions problem-resolution/conflict-management skills	+2
Teamwork Background	
No mention of team-based knowledge or experience	0
Mentions having been a part of a team or worked in a team environment	+2
Has been a part of one or two process/project-oriented teams or working in a team-based environment (can include personal, not just work related)	+2
Took a leadership role in a project or has been part of three to five teams on progressive change (workplace based)	+2
Gives appropriate, detailed, and relevant response to question describing teamwork experience	+0 to 4

Figure 1. Model Evaluation Framework

Another significant step in stating the review criteria of the hiring committee is to check for previous employment or professional references. Some organizations prefer to do this as an intermediate step to further refine the list of applicants, typically for professional librarian positions where the interviews may require expensive travel. Other organizations prefer it to be the last step after the interview, and will only check references on the final one or two candidates. References can offer confirmation of a promising candidate or help make distinctions of strengths and weaknesses between candidates. But it can be difficult to get certain kinds of information in today's litigious society, or even to get credible and detailed references. Many organizations hesitate to give out a performance-based reference for fear of being held legally responsible for the employee's success or failure in the new organization. Similarly, there is serious hesitancy about giving a negative reference for fear of lawsuits of slander or character assassination.[3]

A supervisor's reference may not be entirely accurate, in either a positive or negative sense. Some individuals that have real-world experience in a difficult work environment or with a problem supervisor may not receive glowing references, but can be more tolerant of eccentricities or minor disconnects in an organization, and may therefore be more appreciative of supportive management in a new work situation. It may not be possible to get a fair reference from an immediate supervisor in these cases. Therefore it may be appropriate to accept alternate references from peers or team members who can speak to the performance of the applicant. Just as the other aspects of the hiring process should be documented, reference checks should include a standard set of questions and responses, kept per the institution's records retention policies.

Conducting an Interview

After having identified the strongest candidates in a pool, the next and most important part of the process is the interview. Some managers use the interview as more of an affirmation process, to verify the results from the initial review. While it may be gratifying and save interview time, this approach will often lead to unsatisfactory results. The interview is the best opportunity to explore a multitude of performance, behavioral, and professional-conduct issues, and thereby clarifying the opportunity and its conditions for both parties.

There are different schools of thought on when to discuss specific expectations of the position. Some advocate giving the candidates a complete overview at the start of an interview, so they will understand the context of the questions. This is also a valid way to assess whether the applicant can pick up information on the fly, connect observations, and adjust accordingly. Others prefer to interview without providing extensive information about the position, so that the individual will answer more honestly.[4] A blend of both approaches may be best. It is important to give the applicants cues so, if they are observant, they will be able to answer with an understanding of context. But the main goal of the meeting is to get an honest response, so some specific elements of the job may be more directly discussed after the question-and-answer part of the interview. Applicants may prepare for an interview using many resources, so their answers can often be practiced or coached responses. Objective questions can facilitate getting beyond a candidate's surface charisma to obtain meaningful answers.

In the same way that it is important to establish criteria before reviewing applications, it is also important to establish questions and the desired nature of the responses before interviewing. To get deeper insights into applicants, library managers may adopt techniques from the corporate world's practice of behavioral interviewing. Behavioral interviewing has been employed since the 1980s, using questions that focus on different situations, tasks, actions, and results.[5] Behavioral methods also interweave different types of questions to provide a means to assess applicants' ability to adapt and multitask. For example, an interview might start with a question about the job in general, followed by a question about a specific aspect of the candidate's experience, then an inquiry about pertinent roles, behavior, or interpersonal skills before returning to another task-oriented question on the candidate's aptitudes. By asking questions that approach an issue from various angles—for example, asking applicants about their own supervising style and what characteristics they desire from their own supervisors—makes it easier to spot disconnects between their attitudes and the institution's expectations.

There are some solutions that may avoid prepared responses. For example, rather than asking applicants why they are interested in a position or why they think they would be the best candidate, ask them about their impression of the position. Questions should gauge their adaptability by asking them to anticipate what challenges they might expect from the position. The specifics of the queries will vary according to position. For a student supervisor, ask what they feel would be the greatest challenges in supervising this particular workforce. For an outreach or liaison librarian candidate, a question might address the challenges faced when connecting with a new or disenfranchised department. Avoidance of any question by being nonspecific may be an indicator of the applicant's unrealistic expectations or an inability to function within a complex organizational culture. This is not saying that everyone needs to conform, but they should show that they can work effectively within existing structures. This can be extremely difficult for Generation X and Millennial applicants because of their low tolerance for perceived hypocrisy. One way to address this is to ask, "Can you describe previous experience working in a bureaucratic environment? And what did you like and dislike about it?" The desired response would reflect an ability to tolerate or adapt to a bureaucratic environment while still striving to be effective and understanding when to choose one's battles. Where collaboration and cooperation are work expectations, it is critical to gain insights into how an applicant will work with others, including library users, different coworkers, and managers.

Situational questions are very effective in determining what candidates may do in specific circumstance or how they will react to certain stressful events in the workplace. These can also be employed to determine how a candidate will react: not just *what* a candidate says to answer a question, but *how* they say it. Some questions to ask, and their desired answers, that may be useful in assessing the nuances of an applicant's personality are in the following generic diary:

- *How would you respond if you hear a student employee giving out incorrect information to a library user? How would your response differ if it was a peer colleague, volunteer, or supervisor?* A correct answer would indicate diplomatic intervention that does not embarrass the other worker or initiate direct conflict, but gets the correct information to the user. Incorrect answers would be to let the person leave with inaccurate information; intercede in a heavy handed way, or to avoid interceding.
- *Can you provide an example of a time you stood your ground on an issue when someone disagreed with you and how you handled it? What about a time when you modified your position on an issue on the basis of something someone said or did?* The responses should indicate a willingness to stand firm behind strong beliefs, but also to listen to others and recognize when evidence is given that might lead one to change one's position.
- *How do you feel about being asked to make judgments about exceptions to normal procedures? What if that decision was overturned or reversed by a manager or administrator?* Desired answers indicate the applicant is comfortable with empowerment but recognizes that there may be boundaries. It also shows an understanding that every situation may be different and it is impossible to regulate every aspect of library interactions. The second part of the question seeks to identify the applicant's willingness to learn and change. Problematic applicants would be unwilling or unable to act independently, would fail to consider

alternatives, or would assume that being overridden by a manager was the norm.

- *What workplace or coworker characteristics or behaviors just drive you "up the wall"?* Minimize minor things that are not relevant to the work environment, such as people that sing under their breath, and so on. But the casualness of the question can also bring out answers that would be problematic, such as someone "not doing their job" or "not working as hard as I do." This is a red flag that the applicant may have a tendency to monitor others' performance or be insensitive to work–life balance.
- *When is "knowing you are right" the wrong position to adopt? When should you stand up for "being right"?* The purpose of this question is to look for someone willing to compromise or invest in the big picture, to set aside their own egos to cooperate for the greater good. The desired answers may be when it causes irreparable harm or unnecessary damage to a working relationship, or when it matters more to the other person than it does to you, compromise may be a better strategy. But when you know it is illegal or will harm someone else or the organization, being right is not negotiable. Answers here can suggest a person's ethical conduct.

In most contemporary library settings, it is important to assess the individual's support of diversity initiatives. One way to address this issue is by an upfront statement about supporting diversity at an institutional level, followed by a very open-ended question on the topic. State that diversity is important at this library, in all aspects, including race/ethnicity, economic background, education level, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, lifestyle, and so on. Then, having established this background, ask the applicants how they go about supporting this philosophy as an employee? Obviously, using racist or derogatory terms or expressing a patronizing attitude would be representative of poor hires.

An alternative strategy is to frame questions in scenarios. Scenario interview questions do not necessarily require lengthy lead-ins or background. Suppose one was hiring someone with student supervisor responsibilities. It is perfectly reasonable to lay out a brief problem-solving scenario that represents the types of challenges the position would face. Describing real-life situations or problems similar to those that the applicants have dealt with in the past is a very constructive way to determine how they would handle the same situation in the future. For example:

- *A student worker has shown up to work drunk. What would be your initial response and how would you follow up?* Here, one is looking for compassion mixed with a reasonable level of acknowledgement that it is not acceptable performance. Also, that colleges and universities are dealing with young people at-risk and that there may be a responsibility for "in loco parentis" intervention to get the student to appropriate college counseling services. Immediate termination, calling the police, or sending the student away to drive home drunk may be less effective responses.
- *Given this schedule:* It is flu season and Chris, Paul, and Molly have called in sick and won't be in. How would you recommend shifting staff and supervisors to improve desk coverage?

8 P.M.–midnight

Desk Supervisors:	Two on duty (of which you are one)
Circulation Desk:	Amy (new hire, two weeks experience)
	Chris (student worker with two years experience at all desks)
Information Desk:	Tracy (experienced student)
	Steve (student worker with three years of experience at all desks)
Periodicals Desk:	Paul (has worked for one full semester)
	Molly (new hire, has worked for one week)

Here, the individual is challenged to demonstrate troubleshooting and reasoning skills to reallocate staffing to maintain desk services. In all cases, how they answer the question and reason out a response is as important as what they answer.

Of course, keeping detailed and specific notes on what a person said and how they said it can be useful. After the interview, it is often advisable to wait a few hours to actually score it or formally submit feedback to a hiring committee. This deferral allows a manager to look beyond personality when scoring the answers and conduct a better assessment of the individual for the position and their fit within the organization.

Setting Expectations

Another key aspect of the interview process, especially with respect to dealing with applicants coming from different generations, is establishing the individual's own expectations and clarifying what the individual can get from the organization. Having been raised with family support that focused financial and emotional resources on their success, Millennials tend to expect some of the same support from the workplace. Without clarifying these expectations between the hiring manager and the applicant up front, there can be significant misunderstandings and disappointments later on.

In the past, matters about benefits were not discussed in detail during the interview. Traditionally, this level of detail was only addressed once an applicant was chosen. It was even sometimes considered taboo or an "interview killer." But that has changed. Generation Xers and Millennials are interviewing the organization as much as they themselves are being interviewed. Given their tendency toward open communications, informed decision making, and quality of work–life concerns, they may anticipate that benefits will be described earlier rather than later. For example, a hierarchically focused Boomer or Traditionalist employer might see it natural that the staff with the most seniority gets the newest equipment because it is a symbol of their status in the organization. But for the Millennial, a four-year-old computer on the desk with minimal multimedia capabilities or peripherals represents lack of organizational support. To them, the computer is an essential communication tool, as is a telephone to a Boomer. In this situation, when disappointed, the Millennial can visibly disengage and lose interest in the job.

It is thus important to discuss these issues specifically and not offer vague statements about the library providing "general training support" and the "necessary tools." Since the Millennial generation is centered on investing in themselves and an Internet-based social network, their idea of what they will need may be significantly different from what a manager might assume. Telling a Generation X or Millennial new librarian that they will be given support may seem like a good-faith statement by the hiring manager, and it may indeed imply in their mind an appropriate level of support consistent with what others in the organization receive, but highly recruited new Millennials coming into their first professional jobs might misinterpret "support" as meaning flexible scheduling, dedicated staff, travel funds, and top-of-the-line laptop and portable telecommunication devices. When confronted by unrealistic expectations, the hiring manager should focus on the positives, but still be clear about limits. The new hire is also going to have to work within the organizational structure in the future, and setting up expectations of entitlement will only cause trouble. This is especially important in academic institutions with faculty status and peer review.

Boomers and Traditionalist administrators should not be surprised when negotiations with Generation X or Millennial candidates are not about the salary exclusively. This may have less symbolic value for a Generation Xer or Millennial than developmental support or a technologically updated work environment. Another factor that may surprise a Boomer or Traditionalist administrator is the importance placed on work–life balance issues by the Generation Xers or Millennials: more vacation time, flexible schedules, telecommuting options, or an option to take nonpenalized unpaid leave may be significant initiatives. Additionally, because many Generation Xers learned to distrust big business from the experiences (downsizing, for example) of their parents, many may feel a need to address their expectations up front. Some of these, such as freedom to participate in professional associations, may seem less critical to the long-term manager than the new employees. Negotiation of this sort should not be taken as a personal insult and statement of distrust but recognized as an expression of a generational characteristic. The key is to think creatively and actually participate in a dialog about needs rather than making assumptions from one's own experience.

One final comment on interview expectations relates to etiquette. Generation X and Millennial applicants may view the interview as something they have earned. Similarly, since they may be more keyed to finding jobs with a uniquely good fit, they are interviewing the organization as rigorously as it is them. For this reason, the traditional practice of expressing gratitude to an organization for inviting one to interview and following up with thank you notes to the various parties is less likely to occur. Traditionalist and Boomer administrators must not personalize or overreact by thinking the absence of a formal thank you note is a slight, but instead a practice that may have its roots in generational differences.

Conclusion

To meet the changing needs of libraries and today's multigenerational workforce, hiring practices must adapt. The change must permeate all aspects of the recruitment and hiring process, from how the position is defined to the kinds of questions that are asked and how responses are scored and tabulated. Managers must be creative in casting questions and scenarios to get honest impressions of the applicant's appropriateness for the position and likeliness to be successful. Managers must not assume that their past interviewing practices remain sufficient for meeting the needs of today's applicants. Through effective listening and straight talking as part of the negotiating process with new hires, they will be challenged to interpret an applicant's responses and manners in a different light. By doing so, they may gain perspective on a different generational value system, and also on their own.

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