

Recruitment of Employees in Academic Libraries

Advice from the HR Perspective

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Recruiting for Top Performing Organizations

Recruitment of new employees is a critical element in any academic library's development into a top performing organization. Good hires do not just happen! Finding and selecting the right person takes hard work, planning and preparation to ensure a successful search, hire, and retention. It is critical for academic libraries to review and assess their processes and procedures, and thoroughly understand the world that they are in when it comes to recruitment and employment. The opportunity to bring someone into a high-performing organization or to look for a specific skill set to improve organizational effectiveness should be embraced and actively pursued. People within organizations are the most critical resource in any professional activity because the quality of the work depends on the qualities of those employed.¹ The wrong hiring decision can adversely impact an organization for years. However, done well, recruitment greatly enhances an organization's ability to select, hire and retain the most qualified candidate for any position. This column is designed to provide information and insight to both library and Human Resource administrators. It is also intended to assist search committee members, library hiring managers and anyone involved in the recruitment process in an academic library.

In most organizations, the abundance of effort and attention is given to the interview process, when the candidate is actually on campus and there is an effort to both get to know the qualifications of the candidate as well as give them a realistic preview of the job and the organization. However, there are other phases of the search process that are just as significant, if not as visible.

Academic libraries are dynamic and complicated organizations that are an integral part of the larger college or university that they serve. How dynamic and complicated depends on several factors: when it comes to complexity, size does matter. Libraries do not operate independently of the college or university where they are located. They must conform to standards and rules, align with strategic plans and priorities, and cope with institutional complexities. The more complex the college or university, the more complex the HR needs and requirements. The more complex the college or university, the more complex the library organization and the more complex their specific HR needs. This has direct implications for recruitment. For example, when comparing academic libraries at a research university to those at a regional comprehensive university or community college, it is evident that research libraries are physically large, have staff that may number in the several hundred, are generally open longer

hours, and may serve several sites on a campus or in the community. By contrast, while academic libraries in small community colleges may not have the numbers of employees compared to a large research university, they may still have the same difficulties in attracting and recruiting employees.

Because academic libraries are part of the larger college or university environment, it is necessary for those in library administration to know and understand the campus “culture,” and all that entails, in order to effectively recruit and hire talented individuals. It is also critical that the role of the central campus human resource (HR) function with regard to institutional recruitment is understood by library staff and that the library engage in all opportunities to have more control over library recruitment to ensure a successful outcome. The specific “cultural” issues of the campus create dynamic environments that directly impact the recruitment process for the institution, including the academic library. Academic libraries must comply with federal and state laws, university and college policies and procedures, institutional recruitment philosophy, market analysis, affirmative action and diversity guidelines and a myriad of campus-specific details. For example, the context is critical - private vs. public, secular vs. religious, civil services vs. non-civil service, union vs. non-union - all of these details can impact how and where an institution recruits its employees.² It is important to remember that although every academic library will recruit and hire employees, the processes used will vary greatly between institutions. In this aspect, as in many others, “all politics are local.”

Added to these issues of structure, academic libraries have the same problem extant throughout higher education; it takes too long to hire anyone! From the moment that library administrators know of a potential vacancy, the bureaucracy engages:

- Search committees need to be developed: members need to be identified and, in some cases, cajoled into participating. Care needs to be given to ensure that everyone in the library who needs to be represented, is represented. This process often results in search committees that are large and complex and unable to respond quickly to issues as they develop.
- Position descriptions need to be written and discussed by library staff and administration. Discussions take place regarding where the position should be posted, what journals, and message boards.
- Calendars must be reviewed for dates for potential search committee meetings, telephone interviews, on campus interviews, discussions about the candidates’ relative merits. The academic calendar should also be consulted to accommodate significant events that may interfere with search activities. In addition, professional activities, such as conferences, may also be considered in terms of preliminary interviews.

Fortunately for those institutions that have invested in electronic talent management systems (applicant-tracking), this technology has made the drudgery of posting, tracking and processing much simpler. This development has made making copies of resumes and applications and sitting through search committee meetings in order to review credentials as a group a thing of the past.³

Libraries need to think strategically about their staffing, before a position becomes vacant. This entails reviewing and assessing their internal requirements regarding recruitment and all the effort that goes into posting and interviewing for positions. Within the unique requirements of each institution, libraries need to determine if their process is as streamlined as possible. Investigate whether the current processes used are predicated upon current needs and requirements or if they are a holdover from some distant administrative mythology that required multiple “wet” signatures and “approval” at every step of the process. Often these outdated policies and procedures are based upon standards and practices that date back many years, if not decades. Once codified into a policy and procedures manual, it becomes an onerous, but necessary, task to rewrite them to reflect the realities of the recruitment needs of the 21st century. A critical step is to ensure policies are up to date and allow the flexibility to quickly get jobs posted and processed.

Thinking Strategically about Hiring

Effective recruitment begins with a strategic understanding of what the organization needs now and what direction it must take. The strategic planning/assessment of the organization are critical to moving the organization forward. As part of the planning process, the library needs to develop a staffing plan with decision trees. If we lose a professional position in cataloging do we replace the position or do we move the FTE to some other division? This is also true of other, non-Librarian positions. This staffing plan needs to be updated every year or as conditions change on campus. As part of this staffing plan, a list of potential search committee members should be created so when a position becomes available time is saved because it is clearly understood who is to be tasked with the duty. Obviously, this is a planning process and things change, but at least have the conversation so a committee can be gathered quickly. Time is truly of the essence and that begins the moment the vacancy is known.

Some organizations will require that search committee members go through Affirmative Action training before the committee meets. This type of training can be done at the beginning of each new academic year as part of a general “new year” kick off. Training can be good for two years and need not be repeated unless there is some campus “policy” that requires the training be done on an annual basis. It really does not matter how many people are on the search committee, there is no magic number. Too much attention has been given to how a search committee should be organized and how many people should be on it. The real issue is how the search committee is managed. Institutions have their reasons for having a specific demographic serve on search committees. Search committees should be given their charge and then a reasonable timeline should be developed. Benchmarks, with deliverables, need to be developed and the chair of the committee needs to hold everyone accountable. Time is critical; no delays can be tolerated unless issues completely out of the control of committee intercede. Earthquake and flood are acceptable, but after that the list of acceptable reasons to not keep to the time line gets very small. For purposes of this discussion the element to remember is that whatever the makeup of the search committee, the length of time it takes to

complete the search is usually self-inflicted. It is not outside pressures that slow the process down; it is the internal issues that need to be evaluated.

A general complaint will be that no one has time to develop a staffing plan: the fact is the strategic organization has no option if the desire is to improve their recruitment process. Who should do this? In large libraries that have the benefit of an in house HR professional, that office should take the lead. In smaller operations, or those without in house HR expertise this responsibility would lie with the Deans' or Directors' Council. If the argument is that the library cannot afford to engage in this type of planning, then the reality is the library cannot afford not to. If the choice is not to plan for staffing then the result will be failed searches that take too long and provide little success. This is truly an example of "failure to plan is planning to fail".

Being a strategic organization does not require that an expensively bound, visually appealing Strategic Plan be on the Deans' or Directors' bookshelf with an additional copy at the reserve desk. What it does require is serious conversation with the library stakeholders, students, faculty, staff and community as well as a known and articulated understanding of where the library should be positioned within the larger educational organization.

Preparation for Hiring

Preparation must begin long before a vacancy or a new position becomes available. Too often, the announcement of a retirement or resignation is unexpected and throws the organization into confusion. Even if there is advanced knowledge of a separation, often not much is done to prepare for it until just before the incumbent leaves. The impact is that the organization is unprepared and begins a game of catch-up. Search committees are hurriedly called together and many people in the organization must rearrange their schedules and duties to accommodate this unexpected responsibility. Becoming a member of a search committee to fill a vacancy is often seen as an onerous task to be avoided, if possible, instead of a true opportunity to change the institution and increase the organization's effectiveness.

Questions that need to be addressed are:

- Is the vacancy being recruited for one that is needed?
- Should the vacant position be moved or restructured to be of greater value to the library?
- Is the library just replacing someone who has recently separated without much review or thought going into the decision?

Vacancies, whether new positions or replacements, need to be considered within the organization's strategic plan. Bringing someone new into an organization provides the opportunity to change direction, develop subject-matter expertise in new areas, or maintain the current level of high performance. Engage in strategic planning and develop a staffing plan so when vacancies occur the library can respond quickly and have a recruitment process in place. Develop standing search committees so one knows who will be on search committees ahead of

time.⁴ When a search committee is needed the time it takes to organize and get started is eliminated. Recruitment provides the opportunity to staff strategically.

Advertising and Posting

Whenever the opportunity presents itself to bring a new employee on board, the decisions of what kind, type, or classification should have been made before the vacancy occurs. Often organizations without strategic forethought simply try and replace the person who left, the same skill set, job title and classification. While in some cases this approach will make perfect sense, in most instances, the organization is simply being reactive to an event that was not anticipated and not planned for. A vacant position provides an opportunity to change the organization and align it with future goals.

Drafting the vacancy notice is a subtle but critical element of the recruitment process. The vacancy notice allows potential applicants to know “who” you are and “what” you are looking for in an employee. The vacancy notice may also be the first impression a potential employee has of the library and the larger organization. Make sure it is well written, informative and not just a series of phrases that are “standard” posting language. The words must mean something, this is the organizations chance to introduce itself to people who know little or nothing about it, and initiate a curiosity that induces the reader to learn more about the vacant position.

As part of the preparation process a discussion needs to be held about how best to advertise the position. Depending upon the type of position being advertised, several issues must be taken into consideration. What is the labor market for the position: Local, regional, national? Once this is determined then a decision about where the position should be advertised and in what media – newspaper, journals, electronic, social networking, message boards, the options are many. The decision is given who you are, what works best for your institutions.

What is the labor market for the position? There are two ways to proceed: one is passive recruitment and the other is active recruitment. Passive recruitment, often referred to as “post and pray” by many in the HR field, is most common in higher education. Positions are posted in a journal, newspaper, or on a website, either at the library or campus HR, or both, and applications are processed when they are received. Even assuming the use of an electronic applicant tracking system, until applicants know about and are interested in applying for a position, this technology will not speed up the process. Past practice for recruiting faculty/professional librarians was to announce positions in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the *American Libraries* or some other specialized publication. While there is still value in advertising through these types of media, a number of other possibilities need to be considered.

While posting has usually been a passive activity (post the job and wait for people to apply), the need to be actively in pursuit of potential applicants is critical. Recent economic downturns aside, part of the demographic shift is that, as faculty or professional librarians retire, there will be fewer qualified applicants in the pipeline. Because salaries for individuals with Master’s degrees in library and information science are some of the lowest of anyone with a Master’s

degree there could be fewer people willing to go into the debt necessary to complete an advanced degree. Graduating with a large student loan for a degree that pays some of the lowest salaries may be a choice some are hesitant to make. Enrollments could slip in library schools with a potential there will be fewer qualified people looking for jobs in general⁵. As the “baby boom” generation begins leaving the work force, replacements are difficult to find and the competition between libraries requires that institutions move rapidly once they identify candidates. No longer will applicants wait for long periods of time because of the supply and demand issues; they now have options.

Assumptions are that people looking for positions will search out the web site or the journals to find the position. This is passive because organizations are waiting for applicants to find them. Organizations are at the whim of applicants who must learn about their position and go the effort of applying. This process relies on the fact that someone is actively searching for a job. However, it does not anticipate someone who is qualified and may not be looking for a position but may be ideal for the job. Often, it is the person not actively seeking a new position that turns out to be the best candidate for your position. First, however, these individuals need to know it is available. If they are attracted to some element of your organization that makes it appealing for them to move positions they will follow up because it is a place they wish to be, not because it is just a “job” they need. The challenge is to let these individuals know your position is available when they are not actively looking for a position. It is necessary to know and understand where the applicants you need are to be found. Be creative; submit to the standard journals and bulletin boards, but think of social networking and contacting professional colleagues in the field for recommendations. Options abound; younger applicants raised on computers and smart phones are tech savvy and accustomed to obtaining their information through a number of venues. Libraries should embrace the various information outlets available and better understand how to contact potential applicants. The use of technology in contacting potential employees for the library is very common. Libraries creating their own smart phone application that can be downloaded for free and provide relevant information about many library features including what type of positions are available are more common. Library employees, as part of the library and information technology field, are technical by their nature, however, many libraries rely on old and outmoded recruitment processes. Libraries tend to be one of the most technical operations on any campus, but, through outdated recruitment processes, many rely on the same processes to attract applicants as they did fifteen to twenty years ago.

The actual posting of the position may involve the partnership between the library and the HR department or in some instances the office of the Provost/Vice President for Academic Affairs. It is not unusual for the library to turn over the handling and processing of applications to operations outside the Library. Traditionally, the processing of applications has been rule bound and very closely overseen by Affirmative Action officers or bureaucratic HR rules that dictate when the hiring department can see the applications and what they could do with them. Fortunately, in many libraries, these strict interpretations are slowly giving way to a more realistic approach of partnership with the hiring departments and using their subject matter experts to be actively engaged in the posting and search process. Often libraries are held hostage by the rules and policies of campus HR which may have final say on what the posting will look like and how much autonomy the library may have in promoting and announcing their

vacancies. Libraries need to lobby to have more local control in how their positions are advertised. Insist that whatever posting process used by the college or university that library jobs are listed on some of the most popular social networking sites. Sites like LinkedIn provide an excellent format for recruiting professionals. People who sign up for the site complete profiles and as jobs become available individuals with an appropriate profile are notified of the vacancy. This approach matches jobs with individuals not actively seeking to change jobs but may be interested once they know about the position.⁶

Other, less high tech, options should also be employed. Again, depending upon the type of position being recruited for, telephone and personal contact can be very effective. The library should build relationships with the placement office of institutions that grant the Masters of Library Science degree. Develop a personal relationship with the Dean of the Library school so a personal interaction can take place when you have a faculty/professional position that is either available or anticipated. The goal is to have qualified applicants apply for the position. Give as much advanced notice as possible and engage with the placement office so they will direct applicants to your library. No special considerations need be offered; just letting people know you will have a position and that you are interested in having them apply is a great inducement.

Engage your faculty and professional librarians when searching for new faculty and professional employees. Recruitment in the library is not just the responsibility of the administration or the search committee; it belongs to everyone in the library. Often the best advertising comes from current employees. Recruitment is a shared responsibility with all members of the library organization so it is important for the individuals responsible for coordinating the job search to know and understand as much as they can about current employees. Know where they did graduate work, what schools they attended and where they come from if not from the immediate area. It is easier for applicants and new employees to make the transition if they know there are employees they have something in common with.

Onboarding

Once an applicant has accepted the offer to join the library, much of the work internal to the library begins. The library has invested money and time to recruit, select and offer someone a position that is important to the overall operation of the facility (all positions are important to the overall operation of the facility). It is precisely at this point that a concerted effort on the part of the library faculty and staff is needed to do everything they can to make the new employee feel like a valued member of the organization. They have been told how much they are wanted and will be appreciated if they choose to come. Then, when they arrive, they are given a folder of benefits papers, told to go to new employee orientation and left to fend for themselves. No high performing organization will let this scenario play out. Too often new employees are left on their own to muddle through the myriad of issues new employees must face.

New employees need to be integrated into the operation and culture of the organization; both the library and the institution-at-large. If you are to retain these new members of the organization, it is imperative that they feel welcomed and supported. Onboarding is an active

process, involving more than giving new employees a folder of information or directing them to a website. Ensuring these newest members of the library organization get to new employee benefit orientation, while important, is not what successful onboarding is about. People have uprooted themselves to come and work at the library; they have moved themselves and possibly, families or partners, because they committed to making new lives. If they do not feel appreciated, the ones who are able to will simply go someplace else.

Organizations that value employees, and the investment it takes to obtain them, see this moment in their relationship as a critical one. At this point, the new employee begins his/her integration to the library as well as the college or university. Having gone to the trouble and expense of recruiting a new member of the organization, it now becomes critical that the organization does all it can to retain them. While there are administrative issues that the new employee must address such as benefits, taxes, campus identification card, and a host of other things, the most important element of successful retention is making the new employee feel welcomed and assist with any issues they may have.

Develop an in-house mentoring function so new employees are “assigned” to current departmental members who assist in answering questions and getting the new hire acclimated to the library and the greater college or university community. Many libraries have an “informal” mentoring system that depends upon the “good will” of the employees in the organization to assist new staff members in this transition period. There is, however, a real value to formalizing this internal mentorship of new employees. By creating a formal internal mentoring system, library administration, and library staff demonstrate a commitment to new employees. These mentors must be of the same employee type to facilitate the initial integration; for example, professional librarians with faculty rank should have the benefit of another faculty member that can help them navigate the nuances of the promotion, retention and tenure process.

Conclusion

The most important element in the successful operation of any academic library is the people that work there. No matter what job they have, the employees are the most important element to ensure the overall success of the operation. The quality and dedication that these individuals bring to their position is directly related to the success of the organization. A vacant or new position provides the library with an opportunity to bring new talent and new perspective into the organization.

Good hires do not just happen. Every once in a while, a library will get lucky and, with little effort or intention, hire someone of truly exceptional skill and ability. More often, however, organizations attract a candidate based upon the quality of the search, the thought that went into the position description and the effort made to find candidates to apply; the intention and effort that goes into a search are borne out through the quality of candidates that are attracted to the position. Too often, the process of initiating a search is done at the last minute or after someone announces their departure. Too many employees see the opportunity to serve on a search committee as an onerous duty instead of an important commitment to bringing

excellence to the organization; being on a search committee has been something to be avoided instead of embraced.

Recruitment, done well, has three elements essential to the process. The first is preparation; have a staffing plan that provides an analysis of what the library needs for the future are. Know where the libraries' strengths and weaknesses are and work to support the weakness and improve the strengths. Be prepared internally to act quickly once a vacancy is announced. Have potential search committee members trained and ready. Ensure the members know they will be called upon so you do not have to conscript "volunteers".

The second is posting, advertising and interviewing for the position. As part of the preparation process, know and understand the labor markets for the various employee positions in the library. Know where the best resources are for contacting potential applicants. Professional/faculty librarians have a different labor market than administrative/professional or paraprofessional employees. Clerical and part-time employees will have yet a different labor market than all the other employee types. Post the positions as required by the campus Human Resource Office but go beyond the tradition journals and online sites. Use social networking sites like "LinkedIn" and engage in personal contact. Build relationships with library schools in your region and personally contact individuals in professional or community organizations. Often, the best applicant does not know he or she is even looking for a job. Do not depend upon the passive approach of waiting for someone looking for a position to find your vacancy notice. Be proactive, identify potential candidates and let them know of the employment opportunity.

The third is onboarding. Once the library goes to all the expense and time to find and hire someone, make them feel welcome and a part of the organization. Recruitment does not end when someone is offered and accepts the position. Onboarding is more than ensuring that the new member of the library is scheduled for new employee benefit orientation. These new employees are now part of your community and it is the community's responsibility to provide a welcoming and supporting beginning to what is hopefully a long relationship.

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References

¹ Terrence Mech, "Recruitment and Selection of College Librarians," *Operations Handbook for the Small Academic Library* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 63.

² For more information on the HR function in the Academic Library please see Dennis R. Defa, "Human Resource Administration in the Academic Library," *Library Administration & Management* 9, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 138-154.

³ Electronic applicant tracking systems have increased the efficiency and effectiveness of recruitments and have reduced the time involved. Web based and hosted off site, they allow applicants to apply online, upload documents and be able to review the status of their applications. HR departments are the site administrators but individuals on search committees are granted access for the search they represent and can review applications and supporting documents on line any time day or night. A variety of commercial products are available and some institutions have developed their own.

⁴ For a recent article that provides a description of standing search committees and these relative merits, please see Gilreath, C., Foster, C., Reynolds, L., & Tucker, S. Lessons Learned by a Standing Search Committee: Developing Better Practices, *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* (2009), doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2009.04.021

⁵ Forbes writer Jacquelyn Smith, in her June 8, 2012 article “The Best And Worst Master's Degrees For Jobs”, notes that Master degrees in library and information science pay some of the lowest salaries and could not be recommended. However, money is not the only reason people decided to pursue a graduate degree. Smith also notes and there are expected to be just 8.5% more librarian positions by 2020.

⁶ Fortunately many campus HR organizations have embraced the need to be partners with the campus. For too long HR missions included primarily transactional activities and they served to “audit” process instead of truly assisting the hiring authorities in finding the best candidates for their position. Many HR departments are still primarily “personnel” offices engaged in rule enforcement and transactions and are reactive to conditions around them. These offices have often been referred to as the “department that tells you want you can’t do and not what is possible.” Things are changing through the intervention of enlightened administration and the changing skill levels and expertise of HR professionals. A review of the College and University Professional Association – Human Resources (CUPA-HR) Journal dramatically demonstrates the changing role of HR in higher education.