

Finding the Best People in a Tough Economy:

The Role of Knowledge, Skills, Abilities, Attributes, and the Challenges of the Talent Acquisition Process

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Introduction

Finding the best people in a robust economy is challenging. Hiring people who match a job description's responsibilities and who are also able to grow in a position in a tough economy is even more daunting. Institutions invest a significant amount of resources to hire the best person for the job. From conducting a work analysis and a job analysis, to the work of a search committee and human resources staff, to contacting references and background checks – the entire process of finding the right person for the position you are seeking to hire for can be expensive – especially if the search fails and needs to be repeated. Whether the individual does not interview well or the person does not accept the job offer, locating someone who not only fits, but exceeds and/or has the potential to succeed, is an endeavor that requires thoughtful planning. This article seeks to place the critical role that knowledge, skills, abilities, and attributes play in developing realistic position descriptions, as these are most apt to yield applicants who have the most potential for success in your organization.

Today's employment picture is anything but rosy. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics¹, the unemployment rate in the U.S. is 8.1% and is expected to remain at about 8% until after the Presidential election in November 2012. The unemployment rate combined with the outcome of the election, the European debt crisis, and a demand for high quality leadership that outstrips supply is a perfect storm for making competition for positions fierce.

The profession of library and information science faces additional challenges within the context of the U.S. and global economies. Baby boomers continue to exit their positions as the graying of the profession continues. Information technology continues to change rapidly as does the economics of information itself. Coupled with the fluctuating nature of how people search for, access, and use information effectively and the long-term pedantic perceptions of the profession, make the prospects of hiring the best people seem less than favorable.

Many pertinent questions arise. Do you hire for skill or potential to learn on-the-job? Is completion of specific tasks more important than having a familiarity with the broader concepts of library and information science? Is hiring for "fit" the primary goal? How do you separate the

“job seekers” from the “career seekers” from those who have found their “calling”? These commonly asked questions – although seemingly formidable – can be addressed, in part, by developing realistic descriptions of position responsibilities. Developing realistic job descriptions begins with performing a work analysis.

Work Analysis

Before diving head first into scrutinizing what you expect an employee to accomplish in a specific position, it is recommended that a “scope of work” analysis be completed first. The degree to which a scope of work analysis extends depends on the current and immediate past work analyzing endeavors. For example, if you have just completed a strategic plan, reviewed and adjusted all work flows as needed, and/or analyzed every or almost all positions in your organization or unit within the past year, you are ready to move forward into job analysis. If these activities have not been completed in the past 12 months, it is possible that changes that have occurred in the world may have impacted your libraries’ work significantly or at least to the point where revisiting how a task, role, and/or responsibility is conducted is in order. Open positions created when employees have left within the past year also provide you with the opportunity to revisit position descriptions to determine if changes in responsibilities need to occur.

There are numerous ways to approach the task of conducting a work analysis. As Rao (2011) notes², strategic work analysis arises when starting a new business or unit, when jobs are changing rapidly, or when a new position needs to be developed. Work analyses can be focused on a local task, such as interlibrary loan workflow; by unit, such as analyzing how reference service is provided; by library, where all work in all departments is reviewed; to the macro level of working within an institution, such as a college or school. Fiedel and Pejtersen (Oct. 2, 2004)³ propose the use of Cognitive Work Analysis whereby the system currently in use (a system being a service such as reference service or an entire library operation) is evaluated first, followed by suggestions for re-design. Other formal approaches to work analysis include Position Analysis Questionnaire, Competency Modeling, and job diagnostic survey, amongst others. The focus of this article is on identifying knowledge, skills, abilities, and attributes of a position. Completing some type of work analysis within a relatively reasonable amount of time before embarking on job analysis will result in more realistic job descriptions that should lead to hiring the best employees.

Job Analysis

According to McKillip (2001)⁴, conducting a job analysis means identifying “...the work behaviors and associated tasks that are required for successful job performance.” An easy way to approach analyzing a position is to list all the responsibilities associated with that specific job.

Be comprehensive. Your goal is to obtain a current understanding of job responsibilities. Successful strategies in obtaining accurate information about the job you are analyzing include:

- Talking to employees who a.) hold similar positions, b.) have worked in a similar capacity within the past year, and/or c.) interact frequently with the person in the position you are analyzing.
- Reviewing exit interview responses of employees who have recently left the position.
- Reading job postings of similar positions.
- Searching the O*NET OnLine databases for similar positions. O*NET identifies skills, knowledge, abilities, and other relevant information for jobs.⁵

Information gathered from this pre-job analysis work will provide you with a total picture of the type of work you are seeking to have an employee accomplish, including what job responsibilities are relevant today and into the immediate future, responsibilities and tasks that are no longer important, as well as how the position is perceived as being effective within the context of library operations by those who have held similar positions, those who interact with the person in that position on a regular basis, and those who recently left the job. At this point, you can begin to envision not only what specific job responsibilities will be, but also the characteristics that are required in a new hire to make him or her succeed within your organization.

General Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

Jobs available in today's market frequently require an employee to be able to multitask, manage several projects simultaneously, and possess the capability to continuously learn new skills, models, and ways of working. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers 2012 *Job Outlook* report ⁶, the following are the top 5 overall abilities employers are seeking in employees:

- The ability to work in a team structure;
- The ability to communicate effectively inside and outside of the organization;
- The ability to make decisions and solve problems;
- The ability to obtain and process information;
- And the ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work.

It is easy to see that these identified abilities fit within the scope of library- and information-related work.

Specific Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

Using the information gathered during the pre-analysis stage, start to map-out what knowledge, skills, and abilities you expect an individual to possess upon hire. For example, an entry-level reference librarian in today's world needs to be able to teach others how to search for, locate, and analyze information effectively (a responsibility); have successfully completed graduate coursework in information literacy (have the knowledge to achieve the responsibility); created an online tutorial for first-year students using computer-authoring software (skill); and participated in a semester-long practicum teaching undergraduates (demonstrating the ability to teach). See Appendix 1 below for an example.

The same approach can be used in developing a job description for a senior level position. For a more director- or executive-level position, such as a library administrator, one of the responsibilities is to manage complex budgets. The individual's knowledge base could be acquired from relevant coursework, with the ability to manage budgets being acquired from several years of experience managing finances. Appendix 2 shows an example of a job description for a library administrator.

These examples illustrate job-specific knowledge, skills, and abilities that are specific to the position within the context of a library. Other knowledge, skills, and abilities may be added that are local only to a unit, a library, and/or an institution. For example, the position requires that the individual have experience working with a particular integrated library management system – demonstrating the ability to use the system with little further training. In addition to attributes, developing realistic job responsibilities accompanied by what type of education and/or experience (knowledge) is needed, the type of skills required to do the job, as well as documentation demonstrating that the applicant has had experience doing the required tasks (abilities) provides the supervisor, co-workers, colleagues, and the applicant, themselves, with a good understanding of the scope of work encompassed in a position.

Attributes

Finding the “right” person for a job does not only include seeking someone with matching knowledge, skills, and abilities to successfully complete or exceed position responsibilities. Searching for the best employee also requires identifying the types of attributes an individual should possess to do well in a specific job. “Attribute” means “an inherent characteristic.”⁷ Examples of attributes include: being kind, caring, intelligent, reliable, and honest. Although the list of attributes can go on for pages, the goal is to identify a few that are significantly important to the position at hand. Specific attributes important to being a successful entry-level librarian might include: having a positive attitude, being flexible, and being proactive. Attributes that might not work so well in this position might include: being introverted, short-tempered, and inflexible. According to Brey-Casiano (2008)⁸, successful library administrators possess the attributes of being visionary, a risk taker, knows how to follow, mentors others, and has the ability to motivate employees. Identifying important attributes attached to positions provides a complete picture of successful people working in specific types of jobs. Merely determining the knowledge, skills, and abilities of a position ignores the human element of work. People who

possess certain attributes are frequently more successful than others in particular employment situations. Not to over generalize too much, but hiring the best person for the job is a bit like being able to insert a round peg into a round hole, as opposed to a square peg into a round hole.

Talent Acquisition: Today & Yesterday

The process of finding the best people to hire has changed dramatically in the past 6 years, especially following the U.S. economic crisis of 2008/2009. Pre-economic crisis, both seeking a position and looking to hire new people following a proscribed regimen: an organization advertised, individuals applied; an individual or group within the organization screened applications and selected people to interview; interviews were conducted; an offer was made and the person usually accepted. The process of hiring good people has been altered significantly post-economic crisis because a.) businesses, colleges, universities, libraries, etc. are fiscally strapped resulting in being quite cautious in hiring anyone new into the organization; b.) the number of applicants far outweighs the availability of position openings; and c.) technologies used in the talent acquisition process has become increasingly common as well as complex across all segments of society. In today's world, positions are advertised almost exclusively online; applicants are faced with completing online forms and answering questions, in addition to uploading cover letters and resumes; with an increase in the sheer number of applications per position, larger institutions rely on HRIS (human resources information systems) to pre-screen potential hires before minimally qualified applications are shared with a search committee; applicants are selected for interviewing – a process that may take place at the organization as well as via phone or distance technology, such as Skype, in order to save on the cost of travel, lodging, and meals. If all goes well, an individual is made an offer that they accept. This all sounds very straightforward and linear, but a closer look reveals factors that compound the process.

From the Applicant's Point of View

One of the challenges of finding the best people can be the hiring managers' and search committee members' view of the talent acquisition process. Often, those involved in the search process may fail to understand how the hiring process is perceived from the applicant's point of view. If you think about it, after all the work, discussion, interviewing, more discussion, and selection, one would think that the selected individual would eagerly accept the position. This might have been more common pre-economic crisis. Post-economic crisis has placed many hurdles for the applicant themselves to overcome and accepting an offer is more carefully thought over more so than ever before.

Today's applicants face what can be described as a marathon of hurdles. This is not to say that job hunting was not difficult in the past. It was. However, the U.S. economy is playing a major

role in people's work lives. An applicant's journey is just as challenging as those participating in the hiring process. Beginning with the decision to job hunt, an individual is then faced with:

- Searching a number of websites, listservs, email messages, e-publications, and sometimes print media;
- Reading through job ads and job descriptions (if available) to determine "fit" from their perspective;
- Customizing a cover letter and resume/c.v. for each position;
- Completing the online application process which is commonly very different from institution to institution;
- Waiting to hear back from the institution – something which too often takes months;
- Participating in a phone or online interview;
- If selected, participating in a day-long or multi-day interview process meeting many people and sometimes presenting to various audiences;
- And, if they are chosen, thinking about the job offer very carefully.

This final step can be the most challenging. In addition to the job responsibilities, applicants who are offered a position consider such factors as: impact on family and friends; moving to a new town or city; working in a new environment; salary and benefits in relation to their current employment situation as well as in the new geographic location; and, if a homeowner, the reality of selling their home in a timely manner. The inability to sell one's place of residence in today's economy is frequently one of *the* factors in an applicant having to turn down the job offer. The other is that the salary and benefits are not adequate or appealing enough for the individual to accept the job.

The point here is that applicants spend an extraordinary amount of time, effort, and energy in finding a new position as the hiring manager or search committee spends finding the "right" person for the job. Where once the process might have appeared a bit more streamlined and less time-consuming, there is no question that hiring the best person for the job in today's economy is fret with factors and challenges that play a much more significant role than in the past. With a broader understanding of the talent acquisition process from both the hiring and applicant point of views, one can see the importance of developing a realistic job description through the accurate selection of knowledge, skills, abilities, and attributes before the search begins.

Conclusion

Finding the best person for the job, although formidable pre-economic crisis, is now even more so given the limited resources available to have a job available, the cost of the entire job search process itself, and the large number of applicants needing to be screened, as well as other mitigating factors such as the inability for an applicant to sell their home in a reasonable amount of time. Completing a work analysis enables an employer to begin developing a realistic job description that includes thoughtful selection of knowledge, skills, abilities, and attributes that

indicate to potential hires what is required to succeed in a specific job situation. It is these knowledge, skills, abilities, and attributes that help in identifying the scope of work responsibilities for a given position in an organization and provide the applicant with a realistic understanding of the expectations to succeed in the position itself.

Selecting knowledge, skills, and abilities for a given position is an exercise in matching the expectations for the job with the intellectual and experiential package of a potential employee. In the *Job Outlook 2012 Report*⁹, the National Association of Colleges and Employers identified the top five overall abilities employers seek in hiring new employees. Starting with these top five abilities, employers can then determine what specific knowledge, skills, and abilities are the best ones for potential hires to have in order to achieve success in the open position. An applicant can demonstrate knowledge through the completion of formal coursework, show a skill level by working on a job-related project with an actual deliverable, and indicate an ability through time spent doing specific tasks in a relevant employment situation. Including knowledge, skills, and abilities in job descriptions tells potential applicants that your organization has spent time, effort, and energy to select important aspects needed to achieve success in the position itself.

Knowledge, skills, and abilities provide an applicant with only a part of the picture. Adding essential attributes to the job description gives job seekers a better rounded view of position expectations. Taking the time to select key attributes one needs to meet the job requirements (e.g., being flexible and honest) tells potential hires the type of characteristics that are most useful in a given work environment while also indirectly signifying non-useful attributes, such as inflexibility and dishonesty.

Careful crafting of a job description will likely increase the quality of the applicant pool in terms of matching knowledge, skills, abilities, and attributes, however, it does not guarantee a successful hire at the end of the talent acquisition process. Today's economic conditions have created a complex set of factors that, pre-economic crisis, might have been much less of an issue for job seekers. From the reality of being able to sell a house in the current real estate market to salary and benefits that are doable for the potential new hire, a once sure-hire process often results in one that becomes derailed at the end as the offered is considered. Becoming familiar with the challenges both the employers and potential employees face – essentially walking in the shoes of the other side – provides each with a more realistic perspective of the difficulties (some, like real estate prices, are through no fault of the individual) present when finding the best person for the job. Providing an accurate depiction of a specific job that includes knowledge, skills, abilities, and attributes, allows for the talent acquisition endeavor to be more streamlined, provides a realistic view of job expectations, and, hopefully, will increase the chances of the best person being hired for the job.

Appendix 1: Example Entry-Level Reference Library Job Description

Department: Reference & Research Services

Title/Rank: Reference & Research Librarian/Assistant Professor

Reports to: Head of Reference, Research & Instruction

Title: Reference Librarian with the rank of Assistant Professor

Purpose of position: To provide, facilitate, and instruct in the use of information resources and services, in support of the academic curriculum and faculty research.

Characteristic Duties:	Percent of Time Spent
1. Provide general reference assistance to library users, using diverse resources and formats.	(25%)
2. Participate in collection development in collaboration with other librarians and designated academic departments, programs, or other units.	(15%)
3. Information literacy/information discovery skills instruction	(45%)
a.) Act as liaison between Reference & Research Services and designated academic departments, programs, or other units.	
b.) Collaborate with faculty and librarians to design effective instructional strategies using teaching and learning pedagogies.	
c.) Develop instructional materials such as web resource guides and course management materials.	
d.) Participate in the Research Assistance Program (RAP).	
4. Engage in continuing learning to keep abreast of technologies and their use in libraries. Maintain proficiency in the use of relevant hardware and software for office applications, database searching, and internet developments.	(5%)
5. Maintain currency with developments in the library profession through active membership in library professional organizations, reading the professional literature, and attending educational programs and conferences.	(5%)
6. Provide service to the library, University, and profession through active participation on committee and in other capacities as need and opportunity arise.	(5%)

Minimum Qualifications:

- MLS from an ALA accredited institution, including coursework in information literacy;
- 1 year full-time equivalent experience in a library setting;
- Experience teaching information literacy to undergraduate students;
- Experience using online authoring software;
- The ability to work in a team structure;
- The ability to communicate effectively inside and outside of the organization;
- The ability to make decisions and solve problems;
- The ability to obtain and process information;
- The ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work.

Preferred Qualifications:

- Additional post-graduate coursework from an accredited higher education institution;
- Two years full-time equivalent experience in an academic library setting.

Success in this position requires the following attributes: open minded-ness, flexibility, collegiality, and integrity.

Physical Qualifications:

This position requires the ability to move light to moderate weight library materials. The physical environment is typical of an office environment with shared work spaces.

Appendix 2: Example of a Job Description for a Library Administrator

Department: University Libraries

Title/Rank: University Librarian/Professor

Reports to: Provost

Title: University Librarian

Purpose of the position: To support the mission and values of X University through the leadership and administration of information resources and library services.

Essential Functions:

1. Leads, manages, and administers the operations of the University Libraries.
 - a. Performs all relevant HR functions such as hiring, training, evaluating and supervising faculty librarians and staff;
 - b. Prepares, maintains, monitors, and assesses library budgets and other fiscal resources;
 - c. Negotiates contracts for library-related services and resources, such as access to online databases;
 - d. Develops, monitors, and continuously assesses strategic plans in cooperation with faculty and staff;
 - e. Prepares reports and other documents as needed for the University and outside agencies (e.g., accreditation agencies);
 2. Actively contributes to the academic life of the University
 - a. Serves on University-wide leadership teams, such as the Academic Deans and Provost's Council, and on other committees and task forces;
 - b. Communicates with faculty, staff, and students regarding information resources and library services;
 - c. Develops and enhances relationships with library donors;
 3. Promotes relationships with the external library community
 - a. Establishes and maintains formal and information agreements with other libraries and consortia;
 - b. Serves on committees, councils, and task forces;
 4. Stay current with new developments in librarianship and higher education
 - a. Participates in professional organizations;
 - b. Attends professional development opportunities (i.e., conferences, webinars, etc.);
 5. Performs other duties as assigned in support of the University's mission.
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Minimum qualifications:

- MLS from an ALA accredited institution;

- 5 years full-time equivalent experience at the unit head level or higher in an academic library;
- Experience supervising staff;
- Experience developing and monitoring budgets;
- Familiarity with integrated library management systems;
- The ability to lead and work in a team structure;
- The ability to communicate effectively inside and outside of the organization;
- The ability to make decisions and solve problems;
- The ability to obtain and process information;
- The ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work;
- The ability to maintain confidentiality.

Preferred qualifications:

- Additional post-graduate education from an accredited higher education institution;
- 7 years full-time experience at the unit head level or higher in an academic library;
- Demonstrated experience with grant writing and fund raising;

Success in this position requires the following attributes: open minded-ness, flexibility, compassion, integrity, energy, enthusiasm, dependability, and reliability.

Physical Qualifications:

This position requires the ability to move light to moderate weight library materials. The physical environment is typical of an office environment with shared work spaces.

Endnotes

- ¹ U.S. Dept. of Labor. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Unemployment rate*. Databases, Table, & Calculators by Subject, Available at: <http://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LN14000000>.
- ² N. Rao, "Work analysis and design," Human Resource Management Revision Article Series (2011), Available at: <http://nraomtr.blogspot.com/2011/12/work-analysis-and-design-bernarden-hrm>.
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