New Perspectives in Leadership

No More Square Pegs for Square Jobs: A Proposal for a New Recruitment Mindset for the Future of Libraries

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Introduction

One of the most common required qualifications on a library job advertisement is the "x number of years of experience in y." I have always wondered how the hiring organization selects that number. Is it based on statistical data analysis of past hires? Or is it based on an unwritten rule that certain positions, e.g. a department head, must have this amount of experience to be successful? After participating in several searches for my library, I still do not understand the algorithm -- or whether there is indeed one -- to come up with that magic number.

When I look more closely into it, odd numbers of years of experience tend to be favored by employers much more so than even numbers. Are odd numbers "sexier" than even numbers as marketing professionals would have you believe? You rarely see a job requiring minimum of 4 years or 6 years of experience. People tend to prefer the numbers 3 or 5, or they would even say 3 to 5 years, just so they would not have to use that unsexy even number 4. Is anyone with 2 ½ years of excellent experience just out of luck? My point is that the determination of the required number of years of experience seems arbitrary.

But we have a larger problem. Demanding a certain length or type of experience is just one of the indicators that we, as library organizations, are not hiring for the future.

The Experience Based Recruitment Strategy

It is not difficult to see why we would ask for certain amount of experience when we are attempting to fill a position. It is appealing because it is designed to avoid risks. No matter how much we want to project an innovative or creative image, the majority of librarians are very risk averse. This is not intended as a slight on librarians, as risk aversion is an important evolutionary trait that has helped all of us humans survive. In an economic sense, we favor certainty over uncertainty, even if the payoff might possibly be lower.

In addition, experience is perceived to be the safer bet for various reasons, including:

- The experience of doing similar tasks as a positive indicator of certainty over the uncertainty of someone who does not have the experience.
- Experience is measurable in one albeit limited sense. The amount of time a candidate has spent on doing similar tasks as the job requires can be tallied based on the job application.

- An experienced candidate could "hit the ground running" once hired and thus saves the organization time and resources on training.
- An experienced candidate can add immediate value to the business by (in the short term at least) doing the job they were hired to do.
- Experience is important when the skill set required has a steep learning curve

The majority of organizations and industries use this traditional recruitment strategy. However, by placing an emphasis on experience, an organization is always hiring square pegs for square jobs. The companies that do not use this strategy, but rather de-emphasize similar work experience in exchange for potential or other attributes instead, are the disruptors that render the traditional ones obsolete. Examples of these include Google, Netflix, and Apple.

Another problem that arises when we place so much emphasis on experience is that we tend to focus only on past accomplishments. We look for a proven record of success. Randy Nelson, former Dean of Pixar University, talks about how NASA searched for the right person to be the first astronaut. How do you search for someone to do something that has never been done before? NASA added a filter to their screening. They looked for candidates "who had not simply avoided failure but rather those who had seen failure and figured out how to turn it into something."[1] Nelson further adds, "the core skill of innovators is error recovery, not error avoidance."[2] Our resume-based hiring naturally favors people who have clean records of accomplishment. Errors or failures are usually hidden away as we always ask for "demonstrated excellence" in their past experience. We might get good candidates, but do we want simply a good employee or do we need a game-changer? This is a question we must seriously ask ourselves as the hiring organizations. Librarianship, which is currently at the critical junction of trying to combat the onslaught of ever-changing technology while reimagining the future of the entire industry, must not rely on a cautious mindset of recruitment, but actively seek out talented people from all background to help create a bright future for our profession.

A New Mindset of Hiring

"Who's the better candidate: someone who can do all of the work with half the skills and experience, or someone with all of the skills and experience?"

Lou Alder asks this question in his article, which describes a story of a high performer who consistently achieves better results than people with much more experience. He argues that experience and skills are overrated, but "a continuous track record of exceptional performance in a variety of increasingly complex situations isn't."[3] In fact, the best people are those who accomplish the most with the least amount of skills and experience." It is the exact opposite approach to how most libraries look to populate their organizations.

Most libraries hire to fill positions. Whether that position is an existing one or a newly created one, libraries search for candidates to fill that specific position. The mindset is to focus on the present needs. We look for specific experience, skill sets, and education that we believe would be the most suitable for this specific job. However, I would argue that since the field of librarianship is in a constant state of flux, any specific job is very likely to change in the future. The organizational structure is also going to change. Positions that exist today may not exist

next year, and new jobs that require different skill sets will be created.   The candidate who has all the right skills, experience and/or education for one specific job is unlikely to still have the perfect profile for new jobs. Therefore, having the right skills, experience and education should not be the main criterion we use when we hire.

Instead, we should look to the long term. The hiring patterns you establish today will determine your organizational culture tomorrow. In addition to technical skills and experience, we should pay attention to the candidate's attitude and their core characteristics.

An Example of Hiring for Attitudes

Fishbowl is a private software company that has achieved record growth since they began in 2001. They are a comparatively small company that cannot compete with the industry giants to hire established superstars. Instead, they have created an innovative recruitment strategy that looks for "underqualified" candidates. However, these candidates must demonstrate the right core traits that they call the "Seven Non-Negotiables:" Respect, Belief, Loyalty, Commitment, Trust, Courage and Gratitude.[4] In the interview process, they ask potential candidates to tell them "about situations where they have exemplified each of the non-negotiable traits."[5] As each candidate is interviewed by multiple leaders, they could compare assessments on each of the traits. That is not to say Fishbowl does not pay attention to transferable skills, but these skills and experiences are broadly defined, allowing them to unearth the superstars of tomorrow.

Obviously different organizations would have their own "non-negotiables," but the lesson here is that there should be more than just skills and experience when it comes to evaluating the right candidate. One must however note that their entire company is built on this hiring philosophy, and they have developed the structure to support this kind of hiring. For example, they provide training to new hires, and they used paired leadership and paired teamwork to ease their new hires into their organization. For a library to adopt such a recruitment strategy, there must be a solid foundation to support these superstars of tomorrow.

My Call to Action - A Proposal for Library Recruitment

The leader of a library must have a clear vision.

The leader of a library must then articulate the vision so that every staff member knows what he/she is working towards.

The leader must establish an organizational culture that is conducive to achieving that vision.

The leader must identify the core characteristics and attitudes in people that would establish such culture.

Research predictors for such characteristics and attitudes, and develop metrics for such predictors.

Rigorously look for those core characteristics and attitudes in every single new hire by incorporating the metrics in the hiring process.

Continue to refine organizational structure to develop the new hires and utilize their strengths further enforce the culture of the organization in order to achieve the vision.

Final Thoughts

There is a call in the corporate world for Human Resources to be a strategic partner at the highest level in an organization. "Talent Management" is now the common term in regards to HR, and it is this mindset that we should adopt. We should be thinking about the big picture of how to build a team, instead of filling each position in an isolated manner. We should consider people with non-traditional background, skills, and experience. However, this will never work until library leaders believe in this vision of "attributes and attitude over experience", as this approach must begin at the top of organization. And only then that the library world could assemble the talents needed to meet the challenges we face today and in the future.

References

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