

Résumé Essentials for the Academic Librarian

The purpose of this study is to identify those elements in a résumé that are of greatest importance and interest to academic libraries seeking to fill vacant positions. Through a questionnaire, members of the ACRL Discussion Group of Personnel Officers of Research Libraries rated the relative importance of forty-three items commonly found on résumés. From the data collected a model résumé is suggested.

THE FRUSTRATIONS attendant to securing employment in librarianship in the 1970s have been well documented. Story used an Alice in Wonderland motif to point out the difficulties, complexities, and absurdities of the job-seeking process.¹ Whittier and Wolf more directly expressed the anger felt by many job seekers at what they feel is outrageously cavalier treatment by libraries attempting to fill positions.^{2,3} It is certainly true that the process has become complex, difficult, and time-consuming for job seekers. It is also true that the process has become increasingly difficult for libraries. Federal laws regarding hiring and employment, increasing numbers of applicants for vacant positions, and the growing use of search-and-screening committees have made this so.

The importance of a thoughtfully and carefully prepared résumé in securing employment has similarly increased. As the first contact between applicant and potential employer, it is generally the basis for a decision to invite or not to invite a candidate to interview for a position.

The recognition of this importance has created a substantial body of literature about résumé construction.⁴ It has also manifested itself in seminars conducted by placement

specialists and by library school faculties.⁵ Despite the attention the subject has received, résumé construction is a remarkably inexact activity.

Indeed, the existence of countless publications on résumés and other matters related to securing employment is a clear indicator of a lack of applicable, general agreement. Study of the literature of résumé construction reveals that consensus is limited to the need for completeness, conciseness, and brevity. As advice, this is reminiscent of the traditional admonition to ministers about the length of sermons: "A sermon ought to be like a woman's skirt: long enough to cover the subject but short enough to be interesting."

Résumés should be brief, concise, and complete; however, such advice begs the question of how to construct such a device. The crux of this problem is a lack of knowledge about what data will be most important to a potential employer and what data should be omitted in the interest of brevity.

A second problem exists. The literature concerning résumé construction does not deal effectively with the fact that résumés must be tailored to fit the type of institution in which the applicant wishes to work. The résumé of a person seeking work as a physical therapist in a hospital should not be modeled after the résumé of a professional salesperson. Nor should the résumé of an academic librarian be patterned after the ré-

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sumé of an advertising executive. "You can also ignore the advice of those books on résumés you found so helpful. . . . Almost all resume books recommend a Madison Avenue prose style appropriate for letters an aspiring salesman would send snake oil manufacturers. . . . Keep your audience in mind."⁶

This study seeks to identify the elements of information in a résumé that are of greatest importance and interest to academic libraries seeking to fill vacant positions.

METHODOLOGY

A literature search revealed one article of similar intent that was aimed at identifying the important elements of résumés in business and industry.⁷ It was felt that academic librarianship is sufficiently different from business and industry in hiring practices and in perceptions of what is important in a résumé to warrant separate study. Public, special, and school libraries were not included in the present study because selection processes and criteria were thought to be sufficiently diverse to diminish the utility of the data gathered.

The survey population consisted of the membership of the ACRL Discussion Group of Personnel Officers of Research Libraries. At the time this group was surveyed, it numbered fifty-four members representing forty-eight academic libraries, the Library of Congress, ALA's Office of Library Personnel Resources, and OCLC, Inc.

The discussion group is an informal body that meets regularly at the ALA Midwinter Meeting and Annual Conference to discuss matters of mutual interest. Membership in the discussion group is not limited to individuals serving as library personnel officers. At the time this survey was conducted the group's mailing list included one person not then working in library personnel. This person declined to respond for that reason.

A three-part questionnaire was developed. The first section asked respondents to rate the relative importance (4, very important; 1, not at all important) of items found on résumés. A list of forty-three items was compiled from an examination of 100 résumés received by the library personnel

office at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign during a two-month period. The résumés examined were submitted for entry-level positions, for positions requiring experience, and for purposes of general inquiry into employment opportunities.

All items found, including some that by law cannot be asked of applicants and, if known, cannot be used in making hiring decisions, were included in order to avoid biasing the survey. (Items that cannot be asked are: age and/or date of birth, marital status, number of dependents, photograph, physical limitations, sex, spouse's occupation, height and weight, race, religion, and citizenship.)

The second section surveyed respondents' perceptions about résumé length and methods of reproduction. The final section questioned respondents about their experience and activities in personnel librarianship in order to validate the credibility of their responses.

RESULTS

Thirty-eight responses were received for a response rate of 70.4 percent. Data compiled from the final section of the questionnaire revealed that the average respondent has six years' experience in personnel work in libraries, is employed in a library with seventy-seven librarians on the staff, and reviews 460 résumés per year. The ranges revealed are of interest. Respondents worked in libraries with from 20 to 230 librarians. They had, at the time of the survey, from six months to twenty-six years of experience in personnel work in libraries and reported reviewing from 35 to 2,000 résumés per year. These data suggest that the respondents are highly credible survey subjects. The mean experience level also suggests that many respondents have witnessed the changes (federal regulations, increasing numbers of candidates, increasing use of search-and-screening committees) that make résumé construction so important today.

Table 1 lists résumé items in the order of importance as rated by respondents. A mean importance rating is shown for each item (4, very important; 1, not at all important).

TABLE 1

ITEMS IN THE ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN'S
RÉSUMÉ AND MEAN IMPORTANCE RATING
(4, VERY IMPORTANT;
1, NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT)

	Mean Importance Rating
1. Previous experience in librarianship	4.00
2. Current address	3.97
3. Telephone number	3.97
4. Dates of employment in previous positions	3.92
5. Brief description of duties in previous positions	3.82
6. Colleges and universities attended	3.70
7. Years degrees awarded	3.69
8. Foreign language skills	3.69
9. Full chronological accounting for time after completion of education	3.66
10. List of references (names and addresses)	3.62
11. Previous experience in other occupations	3.53
12. Offices held in professional organizations	3.38
13. Complete list of applicant's publications	3.27
14. Awards, honors, and scholarships received	3.16
15. Salary requirements	3.14
16. Permanent address	3.08
17. Membership in professional organizations	3.03
18. Career objectives	2.97
19. Citizenship	2.93
20. Research interests	2.92
21. Names of previous supervisors	2.76
22. Tenure in previous positions	2.72
23. Specialization in library school	2.69
24. Memberships in honorary societies	2.61
25. Physical limitations	2.54
26. Transcript from library school	2.33
27. State of health	2.29
28. Grade point average	2.19
29. Transcripts from other institutions	2.14
30. Social Security number	2.05
31. Military experience	1.97
32. Memberships in social organizations	1.73
33. Race	1.61
34. Hobbies, leisure interests	1.61
35. Sex	1.48
36. Class standing	1.38
37. Age and/or date of birth	1.36
38. Height and weight	1.30
39. Marital status	1.21
40. Number of dependents	1.17
41. Photograph	1.12
42. Spouse's occupation	1.03
43. Religion	1.00

Data gathered concerning the optimal length of a résumé are inconclusive. Clearly, the personnel officers surveyed are as divided on this subject as the job seekers. Comments were solicited from respondents in all sections of the survey instrument. Comments concerning résumé length were extensive, indicating the inability of the respondents to make categorical statements about appropriate length. Eighteen respondents stated that résumés should be two pages or less while sixteen said that résumés should be as long as necessary.

The following are representative comments from respondents on the appropriate length of résumés:

For entry-level and recent professionals, a two-page résumé is suitable in the vast majority of cases. For higher level positions a candidate's résumé should be of sufficient length to adequately delineate his/her qualifications.

Whatever is necessary to make it concise, yet thorough.

Several respondents commented at length on matters related to résumé length:

While I approve of any candidate trying to give the best impression he/she can, I resent "padding." I fear that I may discount a factual item because it is overloaded with presumed importance. Explanation of an accomplished project is useful, but becomes highly questionable when the inflation shows.

We are talking about a résumé (i.e., summary). There are at least two other generic categories: data sheets (i.e., a "bare bones" outline—nothing but the briefest facts) and vitas (the "life"). Normally I am looking for a resume and so state in recruiting. For some senior positions . . . a vita may be what is needed instead of a résumé. A résumé is harder to do well than either of the other types because it calls for more judgment. . . . Neither words nor space should be wasted. I make judgments about organization ability, analytical ability, communication skill, and creativity based on how the résumé is constructed.

Respondents were asked to rate methods of reproduction of résumés. Typed résumés, photocopies, and commercially printed copies of typed résumés were nearly universally acceptable. Mimeographed and handwritten résumés were viewed as unacceptable. Comments on methods of reproduction were limited and concerned legibility. One respondent, however, commented,

"It's amazing how many 'dirty' ones we get," referring to sloppily prepared résumés.

DISCUSSION

As has been noted, respondents were invited to comment on all parts of the survey. It seems apparent from the response rate of more than 70 percent and the extensive comments that the uncertainties of résumé construction cause difficulties for job seekers and personnel officers alike. A number of those surveyed added multipage comments about specific items and the broader questions involved in résumé construction. One respondent stated that the effectiveness of a résumé could be judged only when considered with the accompanying cover letter and in light of the vacancy being applied for. For the investigator, these observations serve to reinforce the need for further systematic study of résumé construction.

Federal Regulations

The area of greatest concern for those surveyed involved those items of personal information that are affected by federal regulations pertaining to nondiscrimination in hiring and employment. In general, no piece of information that might be used to discriminate on the basis of race, sex, color, religion, national origin, age, physical disability, or veteran's status can be asked of a candidate for a position. If this information is provided by the candidate, or learned inadvertently, it cannot be used in the selection process.

The Equal Pay Act of 1963 prohibits discrimination in salaries including almost all fringe benefits.⁸ Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of race, sex, color, religion, and national origin.⁹ The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was created to regulate nonfederal employment as a result of this act.

Executive Order 11246, as amended by Executive Order 11375, requires that all federal contracts must include nondiscrimination clauses on the basis of race, sex, color, religion, or national origin.¹⁰ The order also requires work force analyses, goals and timetables, and written affirmative action plans.

The Age Discrimination Act of 1967 prohibits discrimination against persons aged 40-70.¹¹ Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in any educational program or activity receiving federal assistance.¹² The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 503, requires affirmative action to employ and advance in employment qualified handicapped individuals.¹³ Section 504 of the same act prohibits discrimination on the basis of handicap in any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.¹⁴

The Vietnam Era Veterans Readjustment Assistance Act of 1974 requires affirmative action to employ and advance in employment disabled veterans and veterans of the Vietnam era.¹⁵

The reason for the concern is clear. Typically, the library personnel officer is immediately responsible for compliance with the regulations listed above. The danger in failing, for any reason, to scrupulously observe all these regulations is, in addition to the simple failure to ensure equal opportunity, the possible cessation of federal support to the institution involved.

Interestingly, two Canadian respondents indicated that Canadian laws parallel U.S. regulations in this area. One cited a provincial human rights code. The other, while not citing either national or provincial codes, indicated that he was responsible for ensuring nondiscrimination on the bases of race, sex, color, religion, age, national origin, or physical handicap.

Several respondents made it clear that although the intent of the regulations is laudable they cause difficulties for personnel officers. Efforts to recruit minority librarians are frustrated because they cannot be identified in some instances. The personnel officers are reduced to assuming that a candidate who attended library school at a predominantly black institution is black or to assuming that a Hispanic female is not Hispanic because her married name obscures this fact.

This is the heart of the dilemma faced by the personnel officers. Although personal information on race, age, sex, etc., shouldn't be known, the officers are also expected to successfully recruit members of groups protected by these laws but underrepresented

in the profession. Two comments sum up this problem:

Race, etc., should not be important. However, since affirmative action implies more than equal opportunity, it would be helpful to have this information.

Theoretically sex, race, etc., should not be on an application. . . . However, we are trying to increase minority recruitment . . . most times it is impossible to tell from the resume whether or not a candidate is a member of a protected group.

A much less serious, but still annoying, problem occurs because it is sometimes difficult to address a candidate properly in correspondence without knowing the sex of the candidate. One respondent noted that the sex of the candidate was "helpful when replying to Oriental applicants where gender isn't immediately identifiable."

For the job seeker the surest course remains not to offer information such as age, marital status, number of dependents, a photograph, sex, physical limitations, spouse's occupation, height and weight, race, religion, or any other personal information that does not bear directly on one's ability to perform the duties of the position. If one is not a U.S. citizen, some indication of legal permission to work is important. In this way the job seeker does not offer potential employers an opportunity to discriminate or put them in the position of having to attempt to ignore known information.

References

Names and addresses of references were judged to be quite important in the résumé, as indicated by the mean importance rating of 3.62. A number of respondents also felt that telephone numbers and an explanation of the reference's relationship to the candidate were important enough to demand inclusion. The phrase "References available on request" was stated to be unacceptable to many respondents. Inasmuch as many advertisements and position announcements state specifically what they require in the way of references, job seekers are probably best advised to tailor their applications to the employer's specifications in this regard.

Other Information

Contacting applicants, by mail or by telephone, also generated comment. As a generalization, anything applicants can do to make themselves more accessible is important. As shown in table 1, current address and telephone number are two of the most important items in a résumé. Listing home and work phones—and for library school students a phone number in the library school where a message can be left—all seem highly important in a résumé.

Foreign language skills were judged to be very important pieces of information in the résumé. Making a prudent evaluation of the level of those skills can be difficult, and respondents indicated that some explanation of how those skills were acquired is very useful.

The inclusion of a Social Security number was judged to be relatively unimportant. However three respondents noted that their institutions require the use of the number for processing travel reimbursements for those candidates who were interviewed.

Previous experience in librarianship was judged to be "very important" by every respondent. Comments on this subject stressed the importance of including in the résumé a description of the duties and the responsibilities assumed by the candidate in previous positions. As one respondent put it:

A carefully worded paragraph about each position's duties is paramount to understanding whether the applicant's experience is viable for the position in question.

CONCLUSIONS

No single résumé will be found to be ideal by everyone who reads it. This is probably as it should be because the number of combinations of competencies and experience that must be detailed in résumé form, and the numbers of perceptions of those involved in selection decisions, and their permutations, are nearly infinite. It should be useful and possible, however, to use the data gathered in this survey to construct a model résumé that will satisfy the needs of many academic libraries involved in filling professional vacancies. In selecting

items of information, only those receiving a mean importance rating of 3.00 or higher are used. Such items are:

Personal Data

- Current address
- Permanent address
- Telephone number (home and office)

Educational Data

- Colleges and universities attended
- Years degrees awarded
- Foreign language skills
- Awards, honors, and scholarships received

Work Experience Data

- Previous experience in librarianship
- Dates of employment in previous positions

Brief description of duties in previous positions

Full chronological accounting for time after completion of education

Previous experience in other occupations

Professional Data

List of references (names and addresses)

Offices held in professional organizations

Complete list of applicant's publications

Memberships in professional organizations

Just as no single résumé will be seen as ideal by those who read it, no single résumé will be suitable for all job seekers. It is hoped, however, that thoughtful adaptation of the information presented here will aid job seekers in librarianship in constructing résumés and using them to secure professionally satisfying positions.

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