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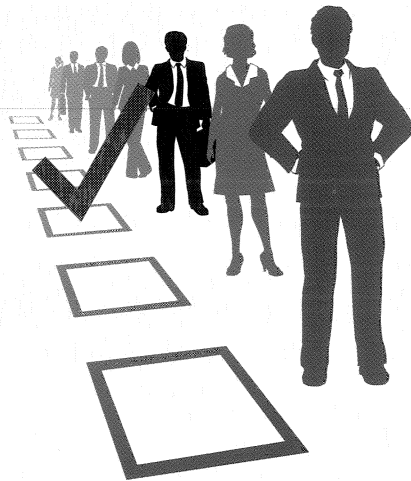
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How to Be Uncommon

Advice to grads seeking a first professional law library job from a recent survivor of the process

By Beau Steenken



As the days grow longer, the graduation bells ring, and the AALL Annual Meeting approaches, many a job search begins in earnest. For many recent information/library/law school graduates with an interest in a career in law librarianship, the initial job search constitutes the most stressful stretch of time in their young professional lives. (And, yes, I am counting both law school finals and bar exams as part of their professional lives!) I know this because I went through the process last summer.

In May 2010, I graduated from the University of Texas School of Information having already earned a JD (also from Texas) and an LLM in Public International Law (from the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom). During my job search, I applied for more than 20 academic law librarian positions, performed 10 screening interviews via telephone or at conferences, and participated in five on-site interviews before ultimately joining the library faculty at the University of Kentucky (UK) College of Law. The process was new to me, as I had stayed in academia as a student past law school, and I made several mistakes along the way. By the end of the process, however, I had gained a better understanding of how things worked and wound up with a job that is ideal for me personally.

In fact, my professional integration into the College of Law progressed rapidly enough that our dean, David Brennen, appointed me as chair of an ad hoc search committee for a tenure-track electronic services librarian position here at UK, a scant four months after I began my employment. My experiences heading the search committee further revealed the intricacies of the hiring process. Since I well remember the stress of finding my first professional-level job, I thought that I would share a few tips for recent graduates, from both my own experience on the market and my behind-the-scenes perspective as a search committee chair, to help make the process as successful and as pain-free as possible.

Miracles in Employment

While I acknowledge the statistical improbability of many members of this year's graduating class having been alive long enough to remember the actual event, for me the 1980 "Miracle on Ice" Olympic hockey victory by the United States over the Soviet Union remains an apt metaphor for landing one's first professional job. The U.S. team consisted entirely of collegiate players and recent graduates who had never played professional hockey, while the Soviets were large, amateur-in-name-only (thanks to appointments to the Soviet military and marching orders that consisted solely of hockey-related activities), and extremely intimidating.

Entering the law library job market with a degree or two but little or no full-time professional experience can be equally as daunting, especially when competing with seasoned veterans for the same jobs. Yet, just as the United States defeated the U.S.S.R. by using the right strategy, with the right approach aspiring law librarians can also emerge victorious with their own "miracles" of professional employment.

Herb Brooks, coach of the 1980 U.S. team, once famously told his assistant that, "I'm not looking for the best players, Craig, I'm lookin' for the right ones." Law library directors and search committees often take the same approach. The search committee on which I served received a number of applications from talented aspiring law librarians. While variation in ability and experience certainly existed, rather than simply select the "best" candidate, we determined at what point our "acceptable" candidate cut-off lay and then looked for the "right" candidate, i.e., the one that fit in the best to our library's culture, philosophy, and geographic location. After all, we not only wanted to find a good librarian, but we also wanted that librarian to flourish and to stick around.

Fortunately, candidates can take measures that help to emphasize how

well they will fit into institutions to which they apply. A candidate's goal should be to stand out in how well he or she fits, because as Coach Brooks also said, "You can't be common. The common man goes nowhere; you have to be uncommon." I have grouped the following tips on how to appear as an uncommonly good fit into four categories: correspondence, conferences, *curricula vitae*, and presentations. As a motivational aid, you can picture a surly hockey player furiously charging while wearing harsh Soviet red with the Cyrillic letters CCCP across his chest. Cross the letters off your list one-by-one and achieve your golden goal: a professional position in a law library.

Correspondence

Correspondence in a job search these days reaches far beyond the traditional cover letter and thank you note. As more and more institutions shift to online application systems, and as email increasingly replaces the telephone as the logistical means of setting up interviews, candidates leave an ever-growing amount of permanent record with potential employers. The good news is that correspondence, and especially peripheral correspondence, by its open-ended nature allows candidates the flexibility to express their personalities in ways that emphasize how well they will fit into any given institution.

Often, law libraries ask for application materials to be submitted directly via email, which allows candidates to generate a quick first impression. While you probably want to keep the initial email brief (you will, after all, be attaching a cover letter as part of your application materials), you do want to use the opportunity, in a sentence or two, to express enthusiasm for the specific institution to which you are applying. For instance, if you have

a tie to the geographic area of the institution, you definitely want to convey that fact. Many law libraries face challenges in retention, and possessing a personal tie to the city, state, or region in which the library is located leads to an inference on the part of those doing the hiring that the candidate will be looking at the position for the long term.

Similarly, you can use your initial email to express enthusiasm about facets of the position itself. In my own job search, I emphasized the fact that tenure-track positions really appealed to me with my academic background. The facet to emphasize depends on the specific job posting but can be anything from working with students to the opportunity to participate in collection development and budgeting. Just make sure you emphasize something that the library is actively seeking.

The tone of your emails also assumes a role of some importance. Your initial email should be professional (especially if you are a recent grad with no record of being an actual professional) yet courteous and upbeat. For example, address your email to a specific person and use salutations. When I receive an application email with just my name and no “Dear” or “Hi,” it definitely leaves me with a poor impression and a doubt as to whether it would be pleasant to work with an individual lacking that basic etiquette.

Please note that after your initial email, you may want to adapt your tone in further correspondence depending on the tone of the replies you get. Kentuckians pride themselves on friendliness and openness, so all of my correspondence with my future employers after the first email was written on a first name basis. Other law libraries emphasize professionalism, so for those I continued to use titles and surnames. You want to demonstrate subtly that you will fit into the culture, so simply follow the cues given you.

Of course, traditional correspondence also plays a major role in landing your first professional job. Cover letters should both conform to standard formulas and be adapted to the requirements of specific positions. Conforming to standards is sort of like a secret handshake in that it shows that you know how to behave professionally, while altering what you emphasize allows you to greater express your fit to an individual position. In my own cover letters, I used the first paragraph to express enthusiasm for the specific location or institution of the position, the second paragraph to express enthusiasm for the specific job and to highlight some of my past academic experiences that matched well with the

job description, and the third paragraph to provide a completely formulaic conclusion. Essentially, by using the traditional structure and memes of a cover letter, you show that you fit in the profession. Addressing specifics of the job posting shows how well you will fit in the specific institution.

While cover letters allow you to express fit, because of their formulaic nature, they do so in a common way. Interview thank you notes, however, allow you to stand out in how uncommonly well you fit. The real beauty of the opportunity presented by thank you notes stems from the fact that you will write them after you meet the people to whom you are writing. You can personalize them and emphasize common ground as well as how much you'd like to work with them on specific projects that came up during your interview.

When I arrived in Lexington to report to work, Ryan Valentin, now head of public services at the UK Law Library and a member of the search committee that hired me, told me that he “really appreciated getting your handwritten note. It was a nice personal touch and showed me that you were someone whom I would enjoy working with.” Valentin’s comment, besides helping to make me feel welcome at my new job in a new city, revealed how drastically important it is that you show not just how well you fit into a place professionally but also personally. Thank you notes in particular, and correspondence in general, allow you to show just that.

Conferences

During one of my interviews, a library director asked me if I planned to attend “the meat-market, where everyone goes to find a job.” She was referring, of course, to the AALL national conference. Interviewers at two other institutions also strongly recommended that I attend conferences to further my job search. These comments led me to deduce two things. First, library directors are not evil. Though they cannot hire everyone who applies to their institutions, they generally do want to see everyone find a job somewhere. Second, attending conferences can be incredibly helpful to your job search.

Sadly, employers do not simply hand out jobs at the door at conferences. However, conferences play three important roles in the job search, and you should make every effort to attend at least one if possible. First, conferences allow you to quickly and efficiently gather intelligence on multiple employers in one fell swoop. Implicit in demonstrating that you are the right fit for an employer is that you know what a right fit for that employer is. Scheduling

informal meetings with your potential employers allows you to develop a feel for individual library cultures and librarian personalities, both important things to be aware of when crafting your strategy for presenting yourself. Most law librarians looking to hire gladly arrange to meet candidates informally at conferences because such a meeting amounts to a freebie for the employer to conduct screening.

You can also use the informal meeting as a screening process, and indeed the opportunity of finding natural fits is the second job-search function presented by conferences. Part of finding the right fit, after all, is also finding an employer that fits your professional wants. To borrow from Confucius, “choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life.” Beyond identifying libraries for which you'd love to work, you will be able to honestly assess how well you match up with a particular place. This allows you to construct a triage of sorts for where to concentrate your efforts. For instance, I applied to a number of libraries that served law schools noted for their trial advocacy and clinical programs and even interviewed at a couple. Doing so was probably not the most efficient use of my time because I have no litigation or legal practice of any kind in my background. When I did land a job, it was at a library with a stronger academic focus, which better matched my background. Thus, conferences afford you the opportunity to screen potential employers and to pick your battles.

The final advantage that conferences present derives from the professional nature of conferences themselves. Participating in professional activities shows prospective employers that you engage with the professional aspects of law librarianship and that you belong in the field. As such, actually attending conference programs, in addition to scheduling meetings with employers, assumes some importance. After all, your potential employers will be attending many of the same programs, and allowing yourself to be seen only helps you to stand out all the more. Plus, it then gives you something to talk about at later interviews, which will also help emphasize that you fit into the profession. Thus, you should not underestimate the importance of attending conferences.

CVs

If you are a recent graduate actively looking for your first professional position, your CV probably constitutes the most frequently opened file on your computer, even if all you are doing



You made
the team?
But you're
not very
good!



is attaching it to emails or online applications. However, you should be doing more than just simply attaching. By tailoring or tweaking your CV for each individual position to which you apply, you can express how uncommonly well you fit. As I had the good fortune to work with two separate but excellent career service directors during my time in information school, I suggest the following two methods for customizing your CV, borrowed from Ron Pollock and Tara Iagulli, respectively.

First, you can create an individual iteration of your CV *de novo* for each position. Pollock suggested drafting a master list of all your experiences, skills, educational achievements, activities, etc. Then, every time you apply for a position, generate a separate list of qualities that the potential employers desire. You can then select items from your master list that answer the requests from the second list and create an ideal CV. Pollock possessed an excellent track-record of helping graduates find jobs, especially in the government sector, when he retired. The drawback of his method is that it can be rather time-consuming.

Iagulli's recommended approach, conversely, took very little time to implement and yet also struck me as highly effective. She suggested that I use a standard CV but that I shift the items up and down the page order depending on the type of position to which I was

applying. For instance, in applying to tenure-track librarian positions, my masters' theses and involvement in university committees moved to positions of prominence, while for more practical positions I bumped up my skills section. Either approach can be quite effective, and I highly recommend that you consult with your local career counselor for additional help in using your CV to stand out as an uncommonly good fit.

Presentations

Not all librarian interview processes involve a presentation, but, for those that do, a presentation presents a wonderful opportunity to explain exactly why you belong at a particular institution. Interview presentations come in two types: those that allow you to choose your own topic and those with assigned topics. I will deal with them in order.

Choosing a topic presents its own challenge and opportunity because your interviewers will judge you by how well your topic matches the mission of their individual library. Research your potential employer, and select an appropriate topic. If you are interviewing at a law school with a strong practicum program, you probably do not want to pick an academic topic such as the Value of Including History Books in a Law Collection (which is a mistake I made). You do, however, want to choose

something that excites your passions so that your enthusiasm will come through. (I also once chose as a topic the UCC Digest and Reporter system, and it came off as lifeless and sterile).

Thus, choosing a topic presents quite the balancing act, and for me that always led to second-guessing myself right up to the moment I began speaking. If you find yourself stuck agonizing over the choice, I recommend that you consult a career counselor or mentor, err on the side of choosing an institution-specific topic, and keep in mind the words of Theodore Roosevelt: "In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing."

Having a topic thrust upon you removes much of the indecision and the potential landmine of talking about something irrelevant to the position for which you are applying, yet it presents its own challenge, namely how to express in a fixed topic and format that you would be a good fit. I suggest using two techniques. First, in choosing specific examples to illustrate your points, always choose jurisdiction-specific examples. If you construct a hypothetical, make sure it involves a local issue or industry (e.g. oil in Texas, automobiles in Michigan, horse-racing in Kentucky). Second, match your illustrations and metaphors to the backgrounds of the individuals in the hiring positions. For instance, one of the professors on the committee that hired me possessed a background in philosophy as well as law, so I used a cartoon version of Plato's parable of the cave in my presentation. In these ways you can express how uncommonly well you would fit in at an institution even when handed a pre-formulated topic for your presentation.

Going for the Gold

Correspondence, conferences, CVs, and presentations do not form an exclusive list of the ways that you can express how well you match up with an institution's needs and culture. I encourage you to keep in mind that you should be looking to be the "right" candidate and not the "best" candidate throughout your job search activities. Keeping in mind the CCCP of the job search, though, should send you skating in the direction of your goal. ■

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