



University of North Dakota
UND Scholarly Commons

Librarian Publications

Chester Fritz Library

1-2011

The interview process and beyond

Stephanie Walker

University of North Dakota, stephanie.walker@UND.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/cfl-lp>

Recommended Citation

Walker, Stephanie, "The interview process and beyond" (2011). *Librarian Publications*. 6.
<https://commons.und.edu/cfl-lp/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Chester Fritz Library at UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Librarian Publications by an authorized administrator of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact zeinebyousif@library.und.edu.

The Bottom Line

People Make Libraries

The interview process and beyond

Stephanie Walker

Brooklyn College, City University of New York, Brooklyn, New York, USA

Abstract

Purpose – This column is designed to address library personnel issues. This particular installment seeks to discuss preparation for interviews, the interview process, and appropriate follow-up actions after an interview.

Design/methodology/approach – The column is based on the author’s substantial experience dealing with personnel matters in academic, public, and special libraries, including hiring for all types of positions. It is personal opinion, based on lengthy experience.

Findings – The column is intended to help people to deal with all types of personnel issues overall; this specific column is intended to assist people in the process of searching for and interviewing for a professional position.

Originality/value – The column is intended to assist people with personnel issues in general, and specifically, in this instance, with finding and securing a professional position.

Keywords: Libraries, Human resource management, Librarians, Selection

In the last “People Make Libraries”, since it was the inaugural installment of a brand new HR/personnel column, I began with at what is arguably the beginning of every librarian’s career – the search for one’s first professional position. Now, let’s follow up: let’s assume you have seen some interesting job postings and done a little background research to decide if the jobs would suit you, and if you might fit in with the organizations that are advertising. You’ve devised and sent a cover letter and resume’/CV. (A CV, or curriculum vitae, is the “academic” version of a resume’, frequently requested and used for applications to positions in colleges and universities. It tends to be longer, and offers details on such things as publications, conference papers, grants, fundraising successes, involvement with professional associations, and honors or awards, in addition to employment experience and education.) You’ve provided any additional documentation that is requested, such as a completed application form (a frequent requirement for state-funded colleges, municipal libraries and archives, etc.), transcripts, contact information for references, a writing sample, a statement of teaching philosophy, a response to a question the hiring organization wishes candidates to address in advance, or any number of other materials. These days, it is common for many hiring organizations to use additional tools, beyond a resume’ and cover letter, to try to narrow the applicant pool to a reasonable number. You may also wish to ask someone whose opinion you respect, and whom you trust to give you an unbiased opinion, to review your application materials, both to get an opinion on their effectiveness and because a fresh pair of eyes may pick up errors you’ve missed. You’ve done all of this – so what’s next? Hopefully, some interviews!

But before we discuss interview tips, a couple of points. First, don’t feel bad if you

do not hear back from every institution. Some institutions will send rejection letters or e-mails to every candidate who is not selected for an interview, but many do not. Often, especially in today's tight job market, they are overwhelmed with applications; for some job postings, I've personally received over a hundred responses, most of them from well-qualified applicants. For some fields, a response of several hundred or even a thousand applicants is not unheard of. So organizations may have a policy of only responding to those applicants who are selected for interviews. But if, after numerous applications, you are not getting responses, it may be time to review your strategies and materials. Ask someone to help. Approach someone you consider a mentor, or ask someone who has done hiring in your field if they would be willing to review your resume and cover letter. There may be nothing at all wrong with your materials – there may just be other candidates who are better qualified or who appear to fit the organization's needs more closely. But it's definitely a good idea to ask for input. Second, realize that any job search, especially in today's market, is a waiting game, and sometimes an exercise in frustration. Do whatever you can in the meantime – continue to network, stay involved in professional associations, and cast your net as broadly as is feasible in your own personal situation. Explore the growing range of non-traditional career options for information professionals, and if you have to work in a non-traditional field for a while, or even in something unrelated to libraries or information management, but you have your heart set on a different type of position, try to find part-time or occasional work in your desired field to keep your experience up to date, while working at anything else you need to do to pay the bills. I personally spent two and a half years after graduation working in a variety of IT jobs, while working Sundays in an academic library, until I finally landed a full-time academic library position. Even then, it was initially only a six-month disability leave; the position only became truly vacant after those six months followed by two years of long-term disability leave followed by retirement on the part of the incumbent.

Next, we'll proceed with some interview tips. Note that I'm going to proceed as if, in most cases, you will be dealing with multiple interviewers or a search committee. In smaller organizations, you may only have one person interviewing you, but in many organizations, you will face a search committee. Also, in many cases, an organization will have multiple rounds of interviews. Sometimes the first round is carried out remotely, either by telephone or videoconference – especially if there are candidates who are at a great distance from the hiring organization and travel costs would be prohibitive. So let's begin with tips for handling "remote" interviews – first phone interviews, and then a few additional tips for video interviews, which are also becoming more common.

Phone interviews can be daunting. You have no visual cues, so you cannot tell whether your answers are being received enthusiastically, or whether people are rolling their eyes, dozing, or reading their notes. You can't tell anything about the configuration or physical conditions of the room. You can't see where people are sitting and how they relate to each other, and you can't see their body language – all of which might help you in framing your answers or deciding how to respond to a particular question. You may be unsure how much time to spend on each response, or what level of detail the interviewers desire. You probably will not know how tightly the interviewers have scheduled their day – is another candidate due to be called right

after your session, or have they allowed a bit of time in between, to make sure they don't get off schedule? And of course, technological problems can arise, such as faulty equipment, poor reception, dropped calls, problems with cell service or Skype, or poor audio quality. In video interviews, you can usually see the interviewers and they can see you, but sometimes there are awkward transmission delays.

However, you can do a number of things to help yourself, and smooth potential difficulties. There are a few basics. Check the room in which you will take the call well in advance. Try to isolate yourself from any interruptions, either by other people or by external noise. Close the doors. If feasible, post a note or tell people that you are on a conference call, so that you will not be interrupted. Check that the phone line is working, that the plug hasn't come out of the wall or any batteries haven't died. If you can, use a landline: many interviews have gone awry because of cell service interruptions or poor reception. If it's a video interview, try to test the equipment in advance. Try to be in the room in which you will take the call several minutes in advance, in case they call to say they are running early or late. Double check the time of the interview: several times, I have called candidates only to reach their voicemail because they had either forgotten or misremembered the time of the interview. Make sure you have anything you might need right to hand – a copy of the application materials you sent, a copy of the job posting, any advance materials they sent and copies of any advance research you may have done, a prepared list of questions you wish to ask, blank paper and pens so that you can take notes or jot down anything you may wish to ask as it occurs to you, a glass of water in case your mouth gets dry or you begin to cough. Try to think in advance of the types of questions the interviewers might ask, and make notes on your possible responses; don't read from your notes, but have them handy, just in case. This will leave you fairly well prepared for a lot of topics of discussion, and will help you to feel confident.

When the interview begins, if you are having difficulty hearing the interviewers, say something right away! Do not wait, and above all, do not try to guess what the interviewers are saying. Politely mention that there appear to be technical problems, as you cannot hear what they are saying clearly. The remedy may be as simple as the interviewers moving closer to a shared speaker phone! Also, ask the committee if they can hear you clearly as well. If it's a video-conference interview, and you cannot see some members of the committee, let them know this as well, so that if possible, they can move, and you can look at the person who asked the question when you respond. You will generally know how long the interview is to last. But the interviewers may not mention how many questions they have. Go ahead and ask, if it seems appropriate: you can say something like "I just want to make sure that I allow an appropriate amount of time for each response, so that I don't spend too long on the earlier questions or run out of time to properly address the later questions". Also, in one of the best remote interviews in which I have ever been involved, the candidate said, just before answering the first question, "I am not quite sure how much detail you would like, so I'll give relatively concise answers, and if in any instance you would like more detail, just let me know right away". It worked beautifully. Try to keep your answers on point, and if you are wondering if you've completely answered the question, ask!

A few more tips – be very careful if you are going to criticize former employers or supervisors. You may indeed have gone through a nightmare – everyone has one

job-from-hell story – but the interviewers may well wonder if your point of view is accurate or if you're just a disgruntled former employee who can't get along with anyone. Maybe that's not fair – but these people do not know you, and have no reason to take your word over anyone else's word. By contrast, if there were problems, don't try to cover them up entirely either. That may sound like a contradiction, but it isn't. Just try to say what happened in as dispassionate a manner as you can, and explain why you felt or reacted as you did. For example, if you had arguments with your boss over what you felt were excessive budget cuts to your area of responsibility, explain that you had differences of opinion on the priorities, and you felt that you would not be able to meet the needs of the department or the clientele. Don't say your former boss was an idiot, or that she had the priorities all wrong. Be diplomatic and reasonable, but clear and firm. This will garner the respect of the interviewers. Also, do not focus on one single issue, either in the interview or in the position, to the exclusion of all else. I once interviewed a candidate for a tenure-track academic job who repeatedly harped on the difficulties she felt she would have with scholarly publishing. No matter what the question was, she came back to this. It's fine to say you anticipate challenges, or would need some mentoring – but we simply could not get this person to talk about anything else, and even when one interviewer repeatedly tried to break in by saying her name and trying to ask another question, because we were running out of time, she would not cease, and just talked over the interviewers. In the end, it didn't matter, because she did not then make it to the second round of interviews, and it was at least partially because of this. Maybe that's again not fair, and maybe we lost a potentially good candidate – but this is an incredibly competitive job market, and if you inadvertently portray yourself as someone who cannot listen or answer the question that is asked, you may not get to the second round.

Eventually, you will hopefully become a finalist for a position. These interviews are usually done in person. Some may be short interviews of an hour or so, but often, finalist interviews can last an entire day, especially for tenure track academic positions, and I've even experienced an interview that ran for two full days for a senior management position. But a day is common. You may be asked to meet with several groups, and sometimes you are asked to make a presentation. Some tips for finalist interviews follow.

First, leave yourself a lot of extra time to get to the interview. Murphy's Law says that the day you are in a hurry will be the day there is a traffic problem. If you do arrive very early, wait nearby in a coffee shop or something – do not show up to the interview half an hour early. The committee will not be ready, and they'll feel obliged to scramble. Show up five to ten minutes early. Dress appropriately in your best business wear. If you are unsure if something is appropriate, err on the side of conservatism. Personally, I do have a number of people working for me who have impossible-to-miss tattoos or hair that is a color not found in nature (hot pink and turquoise, anyone?), and I honestly don't care – but not everyone agrees with me, and for an interview, it's best to be cautious. If you are overdressed, no one will criticize, whereas if you are underdressed or inappropriately dressed, people are likely to take notice. Make sure the rest of your appearance is tidy and clean as well. Do not wear perfume or use highly scented soaps or lotions – for all you know, someone on the interview committee could be severely allergic to them, and it won't help the first impression you make if an

interviewer is getting stuffed up, developing a headache, or sneezing throughout the interview. Again, it's best to err on the side of caution. When you answer questions, again, try to stay on point, and if you are unsure if you've addressed an issue sufficiently, ask. For the presentation – first, address the topic you've been given! I once sat through a presentation where the candidate completely ignored the requested topic, and instead just discussed his resume´ and awards. Everyone left the presentation saying “What was that?”. Bring a copy of your CV or resume´, cover letter, and anything else that was part of your application: someone may ask to see a copy, and not have theirs with them, or you may have an opportunity to meet someone who did not see your application, but who could be influential. Bring a list of references as well; you may be asked to provide them immediately. Be cautious about using humor: you want to seem friendly, and as if you do have a sense of humor, but you never know when something you find extremely amusing might not be so amusing to someone else. Above all else, be prepared. If you are a finalist, you should at the very least have extensively reviewed the organization's website. Ask other people in similar jobs for any tips, or to tell you about any issues that are confronting their organization, and how they are responding. If there are budget cuts in one academic or public library, it won't be terribly surprising to see them in others as well. Sign up for professional listservs, and lurk for a while, listening to the discussions; you'll get a lot of information about current issues in the profession, and how they are being addressed. Feel free to ask, as well, when you might expect a decision from the committee. After the interview, do feel free to send a thank you. A written card isn't necessary: it's nice, but an e-mail will suffice. Thank the interview committee for their time, and reiterate your interest in the position, if you are still interested. Do not, as one candidate did, repeatedly show up without an appointment at the door of the chair of the search committee, handing her more documentation and trying to convince her that she has made a mistake in not inviting you for a second round of interviews! We all recognize that people can be desperate, but no one likes to feel stalked, and showing up at the doorstep of a busy person is quite simply rude and inappropriate.

Many of these tips sound common sense – but every single thing I've written here has come up during at least one interview I've conducted, and in many cases more. You'd be surprised at what people say and do during interviews, and at how many people arrive for a finalist interview not having even looked at the organization's website or done anything special to prepare. In the next column, we'll move away from the beginnings of a library or information science career, and on to discussions of day to day personnel issues.

Corresponding author

Stephanie Walker can be contacted at: swalker@brooklyn.cuny.edu