Shad's Job Hunter's Checklist

By Shad Frackental

MY FRIEND M.E.'s grandmother used to say that you only get what you're willing to put up with. I always thought library jobs were a lot like that, though M.E.'s grandmother was talking about men. The trouble is, of course, that you don't always know going in what to expect of a job. And you have to work.

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Select, don't settle

Well, as they say in the song, "the times they are a changin'". You can see the signs all around. How many reposted ads were there in last week's Chronicle? We all saw the article about the need to rear a new generation of catalogers. We know what this really means. The tide is turning; the pendulum is swinging. If you can walk and chew gum and work a microcomputer, you have a choice. If your undergraduate degree was in chemistry, look out! Libraries are desperate for good people; if you're good, you should select, not settle.

I know what you're saying, "Fine. Great. I like it. But I'm the one sending my résumé, how can I keep from getting burned?" Well, it's not all that hard. Most libraries send out all kinds of clues about themselves, and if you just pose a few simple questions as you progress through your search, you can learn more than you might expect. It's not so much the overt problems you'll tend to overlook, but all the little ones. In the end, you may still want to put up with it, but with the help of my checklist, it won't be a surprise.

The ad

To make it worth the 22¢ and your
time, the ad should receive a positive score. Too often, people are not careful enough at this stage. Remember, once your résumé is in the mail, you are emotionally involved. Avoid later dilemmas by exercising caution early.

1. Is this an entry-level job, or middle management? What is the job really? If you can't tell from the ad, score -5. This is a sure sign of mushy thinking and lack of focus on the part of your boss-to-be.

2. A related matter is the salary listing. If they won't list a salary in an ad, what else aren't they telling you? This is not a forthcoming organization, score -5. "Salary competitive" does not count. Competitive with what? This is a tease, still, -5.

3. Is the sex of the person to whom you are to respond clear? Any organization that makes you agonize over "Ms." or "Mr." is not demonstrating tons of sympathy. Box numbers are even worse. "Dear Box 37, Enclosed find my résumé . . . ." This is not fun. Don't expect it to get better. No title, -2, no name, -5.

4. Are there more than five people in the history of the earth who could qualify for the job? "Requirements: MLS; Ph.D. in aerospace engineering; knowledge of two foreign languages, Uzbek or Tajik preferred; experience with online searching and classroom teaching; knowledge of AACR2, LCSH, and MARC . . . ." Such ads mean one of two things: either one of the five people already works for this library and the whole search is a charade or these people have no idea what the real world is like. Think about it—do you want to work for a place that is so inflexible it needs this sort of person? A judgment call, score -5 to -10.

5. Is there time to think about the job for two weeks and still make the deadline for applications? If not, don't expect to work in an organized place. Putting together a search can be a pain, but not getting the ad placed in time is a sure sign of questionable competence. If no, -5.

6. Is this a reposted job? The most likely explanation is that the people good enough to get the job were smart enough to turn it down. Learn from their experience, give it a -5 score. If you applied for this position in the first round and this is the first you've heard, forget it, -25!

7. Does the ad say when you would start? Are the responsibilities of the position clear? Do they make sense? Is the salary more than $22,500? Score +5 for each yes.

The in-between time

Will you go to an interview if you get the chance? The threshold for this is low because interviews are usually fun and, at worst, you get to see how bad it could be. And, of course, practice makes perfect. Take the interview unless the score drops below -20.

1. How long did it take to get an acknowledgment? Score a -2 for every week over ten days. If the library is on the opposite coast, allow an extra day or two.

2. Did you get a postcard? Was the letter photocopied with your name typed in? You can tell a great deal about the state of your potential employer's office equipment from such simple signs. In either case, -5.

3. Did they get your name right? "Dear Fred Shachental"—It may only be the secretary, but . . . , -5.

4. Was a full job description enclosed with the acknowledgment? Were you told whether or not to have references sent? Were you given any idea how and when the search will proceed? For each yes, score +5.

5. If a telephone interview is used, it is a surprise? If yes, score -5. If your current boss was in your office when the call came, score -10.

6. If you call with a question, can the person at the other end of the line figure out who you are and why you called? If not, score -5.

7. When you research the place what do you find? Five points off for each vacancy listed in the American Library Directory. For each article published by a staff member on an innovative program, +2; for each article on burnout, -10.

The interview

This is generally the easiest part. If you get this far, you can probably decide what to do on your own, but a little guidance never hurts. Think very long and hard about taking any position where the interview scores below -40.

1. Are they paying for the interview? Many libraries are poor, but cheap libraries are a real drag. Be smart—spend your money on beer, if you have to pay to get to the interview the score is -50!!

2. How much help did you get with travel arrangements? Were you expected to know the best way to get to Dundus, Minnesota? For reference positions, this may be a legitimate test, otherwise, -5.

3. Do you have an interview schedule, a map, last year's annual report? We are in the information business: expect good information. For each, score +2.

4. Remember the three tests of common courtesy. 1) the airport test: after they pick you up at the airport, are you taken directly to see the dean or the selection committee? 2) The bathroom test: if you had to go and weren't given a chance, they fail. 3) The lunch test: do you get to chew between the questions? Airport and lunch tests, -5; bathroom test, -10.

5. Is your prospective boss the only person to spend more than a few minutes with you? If so, don't expect any more say about how things are run after you get there than your future peers had in hiring you. Another judgement call, -10 to -15.

6. If you ask a question in a group meeting how many answers do you get? Score -5 for each answer over two.

7. For each mention of the previous position holder's name, -1. For each sentence that begins, "Here at West Pumpkin Public . . . " -1. Also, -1 for each time the environment in the library is described as either "fluid" or "dynamic."

8. If all you hear about the benefits plan is that it includes the "usual fringes," look out—there is no such thing as the "usual fringes." If you don't know whether or not you have a dental plan, -5.

9. At the end of the interview, do you feel more like a consultant than a candidate? If so, leave quickly and quietly remind them of your usual $500 a day fee. Score -25.