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Robert P. Holley

Wayne State University, aa3805@wayne.edu

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Column Title: Education and Training for Library Management

Column Editor: Robert P. Holley, Professor Emeritus of Library and Information Science, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA aa3805@wayne.edu

This JLA column will consider issues of education and training for management positions in libraries and other information organizations from the perspectives of both the provider and the recipient. The column will appear in odd-numbered issues of the journal and focus on management education/training at various stages of the individual's career including the effectiveness of these efforts, their content, and the specific challenges of teaching and learning within the field of librarianship. The column will address both theoretical and practical concerns. Prospective authors are invited to submit articles for this column to the editor at aa3805@wayne.edu

**Search Committees: When Members Disagree on the Relative Importance of Candidate
Qualifications**

Robert P. Holley

Professor Emeritus of Library and Information Science, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI,
USA aa3805@wayne.edu

Abstract: A factor not often mentioned in advice to job hunters is that members of search committees may be looking for different types of candidates even with an agreed upon job description and may also have dissimilar views on the importance of the search. This article describes a role playing exercise that I devised to demonstrate this point in my management class. The five members of the search committee, each representing a librarian stereotype, must decide between two candidates with diametrically opposed skills. Candidates will learn that this factor means that no one set of qualifications may satisfy everyone on the search committee.

Keywords: interviewing; search committees; role-playing; job qualifications

I have a particular interest in the process of interviewing for new hires, in part from having served on more search committees than I care to remember. To me, the search process is one of the key elements in the success of any library-related organization. Filling a position, especially at the librarian or faculty level, is an arduous task and one whose success is not guaranteed. An extensive management literature exists with advice for both the employer and the candidate on how to reach their goals. In many ways, the process has become a structured dance in which both parties can find suggested strategies to present their best case while simultaneously trying to discover what the other side really wants or is trying to hide.

In all of my readings on the interview component of the search process, I have seldom encountered one overlooked aspect: the members of the search committee and the library managers who review their recommendations may have different goals in what they are looking for in the candidate. The factor both complicates and simplifies things for the interviewee. The complication is that the candidate cannot be sure that even the best crafted interview performance will satisfy everyone who has a part in the decision. The successful candidate may be the one who identifies the most important players in the final decision, a fact that is not always obvious and requires the candidate to be sensitive to any clues about where the hiring decision resides. The simplification is that the candidate should feel less of a need to find the one perfect answer that will satisfy everyone since it may not exist.

In teaching my management class, I developed a role playing exercise to demonstrate this principle. The rest of this column will describe this exercise, the most common outcomes, student reactions, and lessons to be learned.

Introduction and Mechanics

The role playing exercise (RPE) consists of having students participate in the final meeting of a search committee to decide which of two radically different candidates to recommend to be hired. I give each of the five members of the search committee an initial script that describes the position and role that they are expected to take at the beginning of the meeting. I instruct them to continue their discussions until the committee reaches a decision or determines that doing so is impossible, a rare occurrence.

First, I give each student the one page instruction sheet for the exercise to provide context for what follows. Once I am sure that they have all read this sheet, I form the search committee by

asking the class to divide into groups of five. Any leftover students become observers who do not participate in the process but instead are instructed to take notes on the interactions. I meet with each group and ask one member to give me a number between one and five. I then use this number to assign randomly the five or six parts for the exercise. All students know ahead of time that there will be a short weekly assignment to reflect upon the process. This graded assignment gives me that feedback that I will use in the concluding section of this paper.

Your written assignment for next week is to record your observations on the process in the usual 500 words. Was it useful? Did you learn anything about decision making and negotiating? Were you able to guess the assigned position of the others in the group?

Each student receives the following background information on the search process and what has happened before today's meeting.

This Search Committee is meeting to discuss the two candidates for the position of Social Science Cataloger in the Catalog Department. This position is responsible for original cataloging in the Social Sciences and for some supervisory oversight for the copy catalogers who deal with materials in the Social Sciences. The library is a medium-to-large academic or public library. The Search Committee will forward its recommendations to the Head of the Catalog Department who will then consult with the Director.

The Search Committee has done its job well. You have checked references, skillfully reviewed the resumes and their supporting documentation, and spent considerable time with the candidates during the onsite interview.

Library staffing has changed since I created this exercise so that the library in the exercise now has to be a very large public or academic library to have such a specialized position. The position's main focus is original cataloging that requires significant expertise in the discipline since usually only the most specialized and often most difficult materials to catalog require this treatment as the amount of copy cataloging has increased because many libraries now accept briefer records than in the past. Language expertise would normally be required, but I omitted this qualification to simplify the decision process. Though limited, the supervisory oversight is intended to add some duties beyond technical skills. The second paragraph establishes that the search committee members have exercised the required due diligence and know the two candidates well enough that any hidden surprises about either of them are unlikely. In addition, the search committee does not have the final say in the decision that will be made jointly by the Head of the Catalog Department and the Director of the library.

The Two Candidates

I describe the qualifications of the two candidates as follows:

Chris Malone meets and exceeds all the intellectual qualifications for this position according to the job description. Chris has an undergraduate major in Political Science, magna cum laude, and a second masters in Sociology. Chris graduated with an excellent GPA from a highly respected library school. The reference letters speak glowingly of the candidate's intellectual qualifications. The problem is that it would be a polite understatement to note that a turnip has

more personality than Chris does. The candidate didn't make any major gaffs during the interview, but it was clear that Chris was interested in working alone and in focusing on cataloging. While publication is not required at your library, it's a plus. Chris already has several scholarly articles and has shown interest in publishing on library topics.

Pat Spear, on the other hand, has a degree in English from a third tier college with a modest GPA. Pat is also a recent graduate from a respected library school where Pat was head of student government but with a 3.13 GPA. The Search Committee had some concerns about interviewing this candidate, but the letters of recommendation spoke highly of Pat's leadership potential. Pat wowed everyone on the interview but was somewhat vague about knowledge of the Social Sciences and seemed only mildly interested in cataloging. Pat is already active in library professional associations including several committee appointments.

I have given the two candidates diametrically opposed strengths to heighten the conflict in making a decision. Chris has all the needed technical and scholarly skills while Pat excels in leadership. While the differences are clear cut, which candidate is better for the library is not. The members of the search committee are going to have to choose which strength is more important or reopen the search to look for a more balanced candidate.

The Members of the Search Committee

Before introducing the five members of the search committee, I need to say that I explicitly tried to create stereotypical librarians who would be immediately recognizable as types for anyone who has worked in the field for any length of time. As I tell my students in this class, stereotypes are often statistically accurate. Otherwise, the psychology of group characteristics would not be valid. On a global level Americans are different from Germans as are Democrats from Republicans. What is inaccurate is that all members of any class have the characteristics of the stereotype though some correlations have a higher probability. I also based the members in part on people that I've worked with in my career. The mental image of these individuals helped me create believable characters that students could more easily embrace and imitate during the exercise.

The descriptions of the five search committee members follow along with my commentary on their prescribed role in debating the final decision. I instruct students not to divulge their assigned roles right away, but some groups still do.

Head of the Audiovisual Collection &

Chair of the Search Committee

You don't understand why you were selected to chair this committee. You despise these kinds of assignments because you hate making decisions. Perhaps the Director chose you precisely because you would not be a strong voice in the final selection.

You have to call the meeting to order. You would like to keep it on track, but you may not have the skills to do so because you're not a natural leader.

You've thought about the qualifications of the two candidates for days but have been unable to make up your mind. You're thinking about flipping a coin when you call for a vote. During the meeting, you'll be able to argue for either candidate equally well.

I had this character state accurately why she was chosen to chair this committee. A strong chair, a good management practice in a real situation, would have given the members less opportunity to debate the issues surrounding the two candidates since such a chair would be able to channel the discussion to favor this person's preferred candidate. In many ways, I consider this member to be the least important participant.

Head of Copy Cataloging

You're definitely in favor of Pat. You believe that personal and human relation's skills are the most important factor in deciding upon a candidate. Even if Pat does not have a glorious academic record, Pat can learn the skills needed to catalog in the social sciences. Furthermore, Pat will be a good representative for cataloging around the library and help you create a better image for catalogers who are all too often studious and intelligent but lacking in leadership potential. You personally believe that you can work with Pat and that this candidate is the far superior one of the two.

In my experience, the librarian with this position brought a management perspective to the Catalog Department and was more open to innovation. The functions of copy cataloging change more rapidly because of the need to adjust to updates in the library's internal integrated library system and the external bibliographic utility. The librarian in this position also has a much better understanding of the value of supervisory and leadership talent since the position is judged on its productivity and ability to supervise non-librarians. The cultural value in copy catalog is often high productivity with acceptable quality rather than perfection. As stated above, Pat would bring leadership potential and could be groomed for an administrative position, especially if the library anticipates a vacancy. The issue is whether Pat would be able to focus enough on acquiring the detailed knowledge required for this position though getting this far along in the interview process signals some interest. The visibility in professional organizations is also a plus for the prestige it would bring to the Catalog Department and for countering the stereotype that all catalog librarians are like Chris. If Pat were hired, the Head of Copy Cataloging would most likely expend extra effort to become friends with Pat and induce him/her to stay.

Science Cataloger

You strongly support Chris. The Search Committee carefully crafted the job description that Chris meets, at least in the area of subject background and intellectual skills, but that Pat doesn't. Chris won't need much training and will quickly become a productive cataloger. Furthermore, you admire a keen intellect and believe that Chris' publications will bring increased intellectual prestige to the Catalog Department and to the Library as a whole. You find it hard to believe

that the other members of the Search Committee could pay so little attention to the stated requirements for this position.

You also believe that your opinion should have greater weight because you are the one who will be working most closely with the new Social Science Cataloger.

As stated in the description, this librarian will be most directly affected by the hiring decision since she/he will be working most closely with the new librarian. I should have added that he/she would be the person doing the training. With subject background in the Social Sciences and interest in cataloging, Chris should be a quick learner. Chris also has a personality well suited to cataloging where working alone is a much greater part of the workday than for positions in public services. A final important point is that Chris will be more likely to remain in this position. When I was a cataloging administrator, I assumed that a new cataloger would decrease overall cataloging productivity for at least six months as another librarian trained the new hire. Chris' scholarly bent and ability to publish would add intellectual prestige to the department. Chris, however, has much less likelihood of advancing to an administrative position and could remain in the same original cataloging position until retirement.

Head of Reference

You don't care which candidate is selected. The new person will work in the Cataloging Department and won't have any effect upon your operation.

Catalogers aren't "real" librarians anyway because they don't work with the public. You're tired of Search Committee meetings and just want to get the

process completed. You plan to work towards the quickest possible decision with a minimum of fuss and bother.

This position reflects the frustration I have felt from having encountered such attitudes in my past positions as a technical services administrator. In fact, catalog and systems librarians sometimes have a different status in colleges and university libraries because they don't interact with the public, a fact that makes it harder to justify faculty status for them. Public services librarians most often have some teaching functions, and even service at the reference desk can be argued to be quasi-teaching for its contact with the library's user community. The whole issue of faculty status for librarians is an issue for another article though I spent much time on this subject in my academic libraries course. I can also appreciate that a busy administrator might not be interested in a search for a position that will have relatively little direct impact upon his/her operations.

Systems Librarian

You clearly see the dilemma that the Search Committee faces. Chris has strong technical skills; Pat has strong personal skills. Each lacks the skills required by the job description in the other area. You plan to argue to reopen the search. In these times of unemployed librarians, the library should be able to find a Social Sciences Cataloger with both technical and personal skills.

The final member of the search committee represents another librarian stereotype—the systems librarian with an emphasis upon logic and the need to resolve issues rationally. This librarian makes the good point that the library should be able to find a suitable candidate with the mix of appropriate skills, especially during a time of oversupply of recent graduates. The negative for

this viewpoint is the cost of reopening the search and the continued vacancy in the Catalog Department. Why should a more suitable candidate be found if the original search was well conducted?

The Role Playing Exercise and Its Results

The search committee meeting begins once all students agree that they understand the strengths and weaknesses of the two candidates and the role that each is expected to play. I'm available to answer questions. The most common one is how long each student is expected to maintain the assigned position. My answer is that the arguments of the other members can lead to a change in opinion but that any such change should not occur too quickly and should wait at least until all have had a chance to speak.

Another weakness in my structuring the exercise is that students may randomly receive a part that conflicts with their personality. The most obvious conflict occurs when a strong personality is randomly assigned the role of the weak chair. I remember one case when the strongest personality in the class could not stop herself from actively championing the candidate that she thought should get hired even if the instruction told her to be neutral.

The opposite can happen when the two members of the Catalog Department and the Systems Librarian do not argue their positions with enough force. I never found a good way to remedy this structural fault but considered any problems to be part of the learning experience.

Groups were told to continue the meeting until they selected a candidate or decided to recommend reopening the search. The committee could also either unanimously select

one candidate, the most common outcome, or by a divided vote even if this went against the hiring traditions in this library. I instructed the group to call me over to give the outcome and then to spend some time discussing the experience. I asked them to share the roles they were expected to play and to have students tell whether they had successfully guessed the assigned role of each search committee member.

The most common outcome is to hire Chris. While I didn't keep detailed statistics, I would estimate that Chris gets the job around 75% of the time. The normal group dynamic is for the Science Cataloger to make an effective case. The Head of Reference, who wants to complete the process quickly, then supports this decision and normally influences the Head of the search committee to become the third supporter. The final two members agree to make the decision unanimous unless they are exceptionally strong personalities. The second favored option is to hire Pat but only when the Head of Copy Cataloging is a particularly convincing since most groups accept the principle that the Science Cataloger's preferences should have greater weight. Only in one or two cases has the Systems Librarian convinced the group to reopen the search even if this is a very logical if not financially prudent outcome.

My Comments and Student Feedback

I ask a representative from each group to give a summary of its deliberations to the full class and to emphasize any noteworthy interactions. Most talk about how the winner emerged. I then ask several questions. The first is what gender the group assigned to each candidate because the names, Chris and Pat, are gender neutral. Overall, Chris was generally judged to be male while Pat was female. In my own mind, I would assign the

same genders; but I'm not exactly sure why. Perhaps it's because the model for Chris was male. I didn't mentally identify a specific individual for Pat and may have fallen back on the fact that more librarians are female than male. My second question is to ask if the group would have made a different decision if the task were to hire a reference librarian. The near unanimous response is that personality plays a greater role in reference because reference librarians have to interact successfully with patrons. The search committee would expect to interview candidates more like Pat

My final point is to discuss the remaining two participants in the process—the Head of Cataloging and the Director. I have less to say about the Head of Cataloging since her/his viewpoint is less obvious. The Head will be evaluated on the issue of cataloging productivity, favoring Chris, but also on the reputation of the staff in the department including dealing with professional obligations and service on outside committees, favoring Pat. The Director would most likely favor hiring Pat to acquire a librarian with leadership potential. While the cataloging position may not be ideal for Pat, this person has valuable strengths for other positions likely to open up elsewhere in the library, perhaps in the very near future. Overruling the decision of the Search Committee can create grumblings about not following its recommendation, especially if the majority of the librarians in the Catalog Department favor Chris. On the other hand, the Director may decide that the benefits to the organization as a whole justify hiring Pat. As for my own choice, early on in my administrative career, I would have most likely gone along with the decision to hire Chris if I were given the choice. As a more mature administrator, I would hire Pat as better serving the long-term objectives of the library.

Overall, students told me that they found this exercise useful in their 500 word weekly paper. I should add that, by this point in the semester, most students trust me to not punish them for giving an honest opinion. Very few of them had ever considered that the members of the search committee could have different ideas about the best candidate for the position. They agreed that this would be an additional complication for their job searches and that they weren't entirely sure how to handle this tricky situation. Some also commented that they really weren't comfortable with role playing or that they were given a part that didn't match their personal styles.

Concluding Thoughts

After forty years as a practitioner, administrator, and instructor, I still don't have completely satisfactory advice on how to resolve this additional interview complication of differing definitions of the "ideal candidate." For employed librarians who are happy in their current position but want to move up, I suggest being as honest as possible about their strengths, weaknesses, and personal goals. Accepting a position unsuited to their talents and career plans is an ill-advised choice with potential negatives for both the individual and the organization. For unemployed graduates with rent, food, and student loans as well as for any librarians who are miserable in their current positions, I concur that getting any job may be worth putting up with a less than perfect situation. For this group, learning the "tricks" of successful interviewing may be appropriate. No matter what, I don't suggest giving contradictory answers during the interview. First, the whole search committee normally meets with the candidate for interview sessions so that the members of the search committee all hear the same responses. Even for individual sessions such as the one with the director, the discovery of contradictory evidence from

the candidate will work against being hired. The candidate can, however, choose to emphasize certain aspects of their skills, beliefs, and goals according to the individual interviewer. The director, for example, may be much more interested in future potential than the immediate supervisor.

My second suggestion would be to pay close attention for any signs that indicate who has the most power in making the hiring decision. In the current scenario, the Science Cataloger may be the most important person, especially if he/she represents the attitude of the other original catalogers and the Head of the Catalog Department. To repeat what I said earlier, I would overall suggest as a management principle that higher level administrators give great weight to the recommendations of search committees since to do otherwise will have political costs with its members. But some administrators won't, especially in this case where both candidates represent extremes. Reopening the process as recommended by the Systems Librarian would probably be more easily accepted by the search committee and other staff. If the candidate who desperately wants to be hired believes that the decision making resides elsewhere than in the search committee, candidates could take the risk of giving the responses that they believe would be more persuasive even at the risk of making contradictory statements. On the other hand, this strategy has the second danger that administrators who have interviewed candidates for many years often know how to hide what they are looking for and even word questions to tempt candidates to give an expected answer that harms their chances of being hired.

The more general lesson from this exercise is to reinforce the principle that even healthy organizations with agreed upon goals have members with diverse viewpoints both as individuals and as managers of different parts of the library. Administrators at all levels

are expected to believe in the mission of their units and to lobby for their success. The duty of managers at the top is to harmonize these efforts to fulfill the library's overall mission.