

REFERENCE DESK

The Ideal Candidate

BY JOAN AXELROTH

Whatever your career goals may be, it's important to stand out from the competition and present yourself as possessing the crucial skills employers are looking for.

As a management consultant who advises clients on hiring professional staff, what are the most important qualities and skills that employers tell you they are looking for?

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I must start by thanking American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) Vice President Greg Lambert, chief knowledge services officer at Jackson Walker LLP, who unknowingly provided me with the framework to answer this question. In his *3 Geeks and a Law Blog* he wrote, “good service, along with a good collection, a well-maintained

budget, and on-demand responses to the needs of the law firm are the absolute basics of what a law library does.” Read Greg Lambert’s full *3 Geeks Blog* post at bit.ly/JF17Lawblog.

In the same way, having the technical knowledge and skills to perform the explicit requirements of a job is the absolute minimum of what employers are looking for in their employees. For example, the applicant for a research librarian job must be able to conduct research using a wide variety of print and electronic resources. The head of cataloging must know cataloging and classification tools and practices, integrated library systems, and how to supervise staff. The library director must understand public and technical services as well as possess general business skills such as budgeting and personnel management. These skills are all essential, but they are only a start.

Whether explicitly stated in the job announcement or not, employers today are looking for people who understand the business of the organization—and that is true whether the organization is for-profit or nonprofit—and who understand that their role is to support the organization’s strategic and operational goals.

Here’s what I hear most frequently from law firm managers when we talk about what they expect from the library:

- I want to know how we can be more competitive as we vie for an ever-shrinking portion of the legal services market;
- I want to know how our attorneys and administrative staff can work more efficiently (process improvement); and
- I want answers for clients and potential clients who complain about being billed to reinvent the wheel, and to teach associates how to do their jobs.

When hiring for top-level and other management-level positions, law

firm managers want someone who will constantly look for ways to meet these expectations, keeping budgetary constraints firmly in mind. They want someone who will focus on the specific activities that add the most value, helping individuals to be more productive and the firm to be more competitive. They want someone who will work around obstacles to find solutions, and who can present those ideas persuasively, verbally and in writing. Perhaps most of all, they want someone who will get out of the library—literally and figuratively—interacting with users to uncover their needs and pain points, offering suggestions for change. As one law firm administrator confided, “I don’t want to be asked ‘what can the library do for you?’ I want to be told, ‘Here are the ways we can support you.’”

For all positions, management and those at the front line, employers are looking for staff members who understand and embrace the need for change. No longer is doing the same thing, the same way, day after day for the rest of your career, acceptable. It is also essential to be able to collaborate with others within the department and across departmental lines to reach common goals.

As I read over the preceding paragraphs, it occurred to me that the word technology does not appear. Understanding and using technology to accomplish one’s job is, of course, essential, but I would include it in the list of minimum requirements. Employers are looking for people who not only use technology, but who also understand how it can be used by the organization to improve processes and efficiencies.

If you’re in the market for a new job, a promotion, or a raise, taking stock of the knowledge and skills you bring to your employer is a good place to start. Include the basics—no one wants a research librarian who cannot conduct a reference interview or search databases—but also think about how your knowledge and skills have been

or could be used by an organization to further its mission and goals. Did you use your specialized knowledge in a practice area to help it grow? Did you use teaching skills to get first-year associates up to speed faster so they could start billing sooner? Did you collaborate with the marketing department to streamline procedures and categorize requests, thus avoiding duplication of effort and improving the final product? Don’t be shy; now is the time to tell others how you will use your talents to make them shine. ■



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