



As the first line of defense for a law library and its patrons, a reference librarian is often the public's first impression of a library. It's no wonder law library directors are willing to let reference librarian positions go unfilled for months at a time until they find the right candidates to represent their libraries. So before you send out that resume or head out to that interview, find out what academic law library directors look for when hiring reference librarians.

Details, Details

Not surprisingly, many law library directors emphasize the importance of accurate and error-free cover letters and resumes. Spelling mistakes and the improper use of grammar are indicative of sloppy work habits. Many directors will disqualify candidates from further consideration if even one mistake of this nature appears on their resumes or cover letters.

In addition, resumes should be arranged chronologically, explaining any and all gaps in work history. Candidates should avoid leaving out significant time periods (more than six months or a year) on their resumes because many directors consider life experience to be just as valuable as job experience. "If you took off two years to meditate or sail around the world, tell me. Don't let me imagine you were in prison or drug rehab," says Roger Jacobs, dean of Kresge Library at Notre Dame Law School in Notre Dame, Ind.

A particularly impressive resume or cover letter highlights how the candidate's previous experience, skills or interests specifically fit the job description. "Blanket cover letters are probably the worst mistake a potential candidate can make in applying for a position," says Roberta Studwell, professor and director of the University of Nevada at Las Vegas Law Library. By tailoring the resume and cover letter to the job opening and the particular library, the candidate demonstrates a high level of interest in the position, making the resume and cover letter stand out.

For example, outstanding resumes for reference positions point out the candidates' publishing achievements or support of serious faculty scholarship and their progressive experience, according to M. Kathleen Price, director of the New York University Law Library in New York City.

"I am looking for enthusiasm, commitment, maturity and teamwork skills as well as strong teaching and communication skills," says Faye E. Jones, director of the Gordon D. Schaber Law Library at the University of Pacific in Sacramento, Calif. "And successful resumes show me all of those things."

The resume and cover letter should also detail the candidate's interest in law librarianship as a profession. Given the ever-changing nature of the profession, it's vital that librarians keep abreast of the newest technology and trends by participating in professional development events and library associations. "The resume should demonstrate committee involvement, attendance at conferences, seminars or related workshops," explains Billie Jo Kaufman, director of the Law Library Technology Center and assistant professor of law at Nova Southeastern University in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.

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Some directors also prefer that job seekers provide references with their resumes instead of submitting them after the interview. "References are important," says Robert C. Berring, director of the Boalt Hall Law Library at the University of California at Berkeley. "Why anyone ever puts 'references available on request' escapes me."

However, before giving employers their list of references, applicants should call each of their references. Job seekers should inform them that they will be giving their names as references and ask what they will say about the job seekers. If applicants believe that their references are reluctant or will not corroborate their resumes and cover letters, eliminate them from the list. "It's always a mistake not to ask your references what they would say about you," Price says.

Judith F. Anspach, associate dean of information resources at the Deane Law Library at Hofstra University in

How to Get Behind the Reference Desk

Academic Directors Share What They Look for in Reference Librarians

by Rhonda Hankins

Hempstead, N.Y., speaks with several of the candidate's references before deciding to interview the candidate. But it doesn't end there. "After the interview but before making an offer," Anspach explains, "I require an opportunity to speak with the librarian's direct supervisor and, in some cases, the director of the library where the candidate works or has worked."

Speaking with a candidate's references gives directors a chance to verify knowledge and skills, but, more importantly, references provide insight into the character and general disposition of the candidate. When Roy M. Mersky, director of the Jamail Center for Legal Research at the University of Texas at Austin, talks with a prospective employee's references, he's interested in learning about a candidate's reliability, absenteeism, initiative, sense of responsibility, relations with peers and ability to accept criticism. Checking references is a way to determine a person's willingness to learn and improve. The strength of a candidate's references is a key consideration for almost all directors when hiring reference librarians.

Recommended Credentials

Most directors will only consider job candidates who have earned their master's degrees in library science from library schools accredited by the American Library Association. In addition, job seekers must demonstrate that they excelled in library school. "A high class ranking, law review, or graduating from a library school or law school with an excellent reputation would be credentials that would get my attention," Anspach says.

While they are still in library school, students should enroll in courses outside reference services that will help them develop administrative skills and an overall understanding of a library's dynamics to succeed as a reference librarian. For example, Kent McKeever, director of the Arthur W. Diamond Law Library at Columbia University in New York City, strongly advises students to take cataloging whether or not it is part of the core curriculum. "The concepts learned there are transportable into any information-processing task," he explains. He also recommends that all students who want to be reference librarians take a basic personnel management class because professional library jobs beyond the entry-level positions almost always involve supervising staff. Reference librarians

who already have their M.L.S.s should take continuing education courses in these areas. According to Jacobs, a typical weakness of reference librarian candidates is a lack of aggressiveness in further developing their managerial skills and a narrow focus on only the reference functions of a library.

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While some academic directors insist on a J.D. and an M.L.S. for all reference positions in academic law libraries, other directors are flexible. "Some of the people without law degrees whom I've hired have had other skills or characteristics that I've found even more valuable than the J.D.," Mersky says. "To know how to do effective reference interviews, for example, is critical." Because Berring has found former law firm librarians especially skilled at finding legal information, candidates with law firm experience stand out from the others even if they don't have J.D.s.

In addition to higher education, most directors also prefer job seekers with relevant work experience. Several suggested that working as a student assistant in a law library or participating in a program that requires a library internship is essential for successful job candidates. Prospective reference librarians can strengthen their candidacy with job experience in other nonreference positions in the library, such as technical services and acquisitions. "That [overall] experience gives you an understanding of the tasks, services and politics associated with library endeavors," Kaufman says.

Communication skills are essential for reference librarians. The cornerstone of their jobs is to answer complex reference questions and relay library policies and procedures to patrons and library staff. In addition, because law librarians are increasingly expected to teach legal research classes and conduct research seminars for students, faculty and staff, the ability to communicate articulately and clearly is a prized asset for any candidate applying for

a reference librarian position. Therefore, prior teaching experience, either formal or informal, can also be a bonus for a candidate.

With the glut of information available on the Internet and on other electronic and digital resources, electronic reference sources are now an integral part of a library. Traditionally reference librarians have handled reference requests over the phone or in-person behind the reference desk, but the same questions are also popping up by e-mail. Thus reference librarians must be technologically savvy and must be comfortable in the role of instructor or adviser when helping patrons find information on the Net. "If you do not understand cyberspace, no degree on earth will help you," Berring says.

Because good reference librarians come from a wide range of backgrounds, the best credentials may in part depend on what specific reference slot is open and what the needs of the library are at the time. For example, McKeever prefers candidates with international or foreign reference experience because Columbia's law library doesn't maintain a separate international or foreign reference operation staffed with a foreign or international law librarian. So it's helpful if a reference librarian at Columbia can handle reference requests about international law. "However, not having [foreign reference experience] is not an impediment to hiring an otherwise attractive candidate," McKeever says. "We'll teach them international law and comparative law if necessary."

"A second language is useful," he adds, "both in working with foreign materials and as evidence of a broadened mind."

The Interview — Image Is Everything

Despite the casualness that has penetrated work environments today, law library directors encourage job seekers to heed the traditional rules of interview etiquette. Appearance and presentation are part of professionalism. Job candidates should look well groomed and dress professionally for the interview, which includes a tie and dress shoes for men. "You dress nicely to show respect for the position for which you are interviewing," Mersky explains. "I once hired a reference librarian just because she carried a beautiful briefcase to the interview. And though I was disappointed that I never saw that briefcase again

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after she was hired, I still find a good presentation impressive.”

Directors generally agree that successful candidates exhibit interest in and knowledge of the library, enthusiasm for the position, and good communication skills during the job interview.

Interviews for reference librarians typically include a discussion of previous positions, with directors asking candidates about the job seekers’ responsibilities and specific duties in their current or previous jobs that relate directly to the reference position that is open. James S. Heller, director and professor of law at the Marshall-Wythe Law Library at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va., usually asks candidates a number of general questions to determine if they understand the job description, the level of their service orientation, how well they work with others, and initiative. His interview questions include: Why do you want to work here? Why do you want to be a law librarian? What are your strongest skills? What kind of work do you like to do best? What interesting or difficult problems have you encountered in a prior job and how did you solve them? What do you look for in a supervisor?

“We always ask questions that get at teamwork and communication skills,” Studwell says. “When we ask what the worst job they’ve had has been, I listen carefully to see how artfully they handle a discussion about someone they worked with that they didn’t like or respect.”

Though some library directors administer tests to evaluate candidates, most ask probing questions to determine a candidate’s breadth of theoretical knowledge and probable level of practical reference skills. “I don’t administer skills tests, but I do present hypotheticals that give me an opportunity to assess the candidate’s reference skills and their ability to make common-sense decisions,” Anspach explains.

When Jones interviews job seekers for reference librarian positions at the University of Pacific, the candidates must give a 20-minute presentation, followed by a short question-and-answer session at the interview. “The presentation gives us an opportunity to assess the candidate’s preparation,

organization, communication, public presence, ability to respond to questions, and ability to think on his or her feet,” Jones explains.

Heller also presents candidates with research problems to solve during the interview. “We’re probably more interested in the process than in the answer,” he says. Because reference librarians at the College of William & Mary help teach legal research to first-year law students and several advanced research courses, teaching skills are vital to the reference librarian job. During the

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on-campus interview at the College of William & Mary, candidates prepare a presentation in which they “teach” members of the search committee a particular research skill.

Directors also expect candidates to raise appropriate questions about the library and the future of the profession to help evaluate their commitment to the job and law librarianship. Job seekers should save questions about benefits and retirement packages for people in human resources.

“I would like to hear questions that indicate that the candidate has an awareness of the place of the law librarian in an academic environment; about developments in research methods; and about the nature of my organization,” Jacobs explains.

“I love to hear questions about what do I want in a candidate, about the culture of the organization, and about what challenges we face,” Jones says.

“I also like to hear about any innovations they have introduced in their previous positions,” Anspach says.

Because reference librarians must work with a variety of people and departments both within and outside the library, several directors indicated that they seek candidates who are well-rounded and participate in areas beyond law librarianship. Thus personality is as important as reference skills.

“I’m looking for a person who reads widely in all areas,” Mersky says. For that reason, he usually asks candidates what books they have read lately and what magazines or journals they read regularly. “I have even been known to ask candidates to tell me about their favorite poets,” he adds.

John Hagemann, director of the law library at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion, S.D., says interviews give him a chance to notice a candidate’s insular attitude and inflexibility, characteristics that are incompatible with the organizational structure of his library. “In a small shop like ours, everyone has to know and be able to do, as necessary, everyone else’s job,” he explains. “Candidates must be willing to do the jobs no one else wants to do.”

Jack of All Trades

As duties of reference librarians go beyond the reference desk, candidates for these positions must demonstrate more than just reference skills in their resumes and interviews. Whether it’s a recent graduate looking for his or her first job or an established reference librarian hoping to climb the managerial ladder, they need to communicate clearly, take initiative and be willing to delve into other areas of law librarianship to land that coveted reference position.

Rbonda Hankins (rhankins@mail.law.utexas.edu) is the senior administrative associate in the Office of the Director for the Jamail Center for Legal Research at the University of Texas at Austin. She is also a master’s candidate in the School of Information at the University of Texas at Austin.