

Job Searching beyond the Classifieds**

Jean M. Holcomb***

Few situations give rise to more anxiety in the life of an individual or an institution than the process of matching the skill set and the individual with those skills with the appropriate position. Individuals and institutions can take steps to limit the pressure that the employment process induces.

¶1 Searching for the perfect employee or the perfect job?

¶2 Few situations give rise to more anxiety in the life of an individual or an institution than the process of matching the skill set and the individual with those skills with the appropriate position. Law librarianship as a profession will be faced in the next few years with the need to address the consequences of an aging workforce.¹ As older members retire, middle managers move up, and newly minted law librarians join the profession to help fill the gaps. Few institutions will be untouched by this sea change in the employment marketplace.

¶3 Popular culture from television to the comics portrays the employment search process in an unflattering light. Viewers of Donald Trump's reality television show *The Apprentice* observe the tensions that develop between a pool of contestants vying for a position with the business magnate. Readers of the comic strips *Dilbert* and *Sally Forth* follow story lines that center on characters struggling with the consequences of staff turnover. It's not surprising that the tasks of finding a new position or filling a vacant one often appear on lists of life's most stressful experiences.

¶4 In spite of this grim portrayal of the employment process, individuals and institutions can take steps to limit the pressure that the employment process

* *Editor's Note:* "Managing by the Book" is a new *Law Library Journal* column commencing with the Winter 2005 issue, Vol. 97, No. 1. In each column author Jean Holcomb highlights a book outside the field of librarianship that has a message about management topics that will resonate with law librarians. The author introduced the column in 2003–04 in the newsletter of the State, Court and County Law Libraries Special Interest Section of the American Association of Law Libraries. Copies of prior articles are available on the section's Web site (<http://www.aallnet.org/sis/sccll/membership/newsletter.htm>).

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1. Victoria K. Trotta, *An Aging Workforce*, in AM. ASS'N OF LAW LIBRARIES, MEMBERS' BRIEFING: GENERATIONS IN LAW LIBRARIANSHIP 1, 1 (2004) (contained in AALL SPECTRUM, Dec. 2004).

induces. For academic and corporate law librarians in large institutions with their own human resources staff, professional help with the employee search might be just down the hall. Law librarians whose library is not a part of a larger parent organization must find other options. In either case, however, the key to crafting a stress-free approach to finding the most suitable position or the best employee for a vacancy begins well before the position announcement appears in the job listings of the local paper or on the e-mail discussion groups of AALL special interest sections or chapters.

¶5 Writing for the business community, Bob Rosner, Allan Halcrow, and Alan Levins outline a step-by-step approach to finding, retaining, and removing employees in *The Boss's Survival Guide: Everything You Need to Know About Getting Through (and Getting the Most Out of) Every Day*.² This resource also works as a guide for law librarians and law library employers in framing their low-stress employee search strategy. While the title would suggest that the book's focus on the employer might limit the usefulness of this resource for individuals considering whether to seek a new position, its suggestions can be effectively utilized by both sides of the employment equation.

¶6 The underlying premise of the *Survival Guide* is that today's workforce has little in common with the gold watch-earning, long-serving labor pool of earlier generations. Because today's employees don't see any one job as lasting a lifetime, the dynamics of recruitment and retention in the workplace have changed. When employee turnover becomes the norm rather than the exception, both employee and employer must acquire new skill sets.

¶7 The authors describe in great detail the critical steps in the employment continuum that begins when an organization makes the decision to fill a position and ends with managing the performance of the newly hired employee. Five of the book's twelve chapters focus on the hiring process, while another five cover concepts related to managing employee performance. The remaining chapters contain helpful general personnel management information ranging from strategies for retaining your best people to tips for staying out of jail.³

¶8 If tips to stay out of jail don't grab your immediate attention, the authors go to great lengths to stress the importance for employers and employees of understanding the rules and regulations that govern workforce interactions every step of the way from job posting to employee termination. In each section of the book, common organizing elements tie the text together. These common themes include the following:

- **Know the issue:** a brief explanation of the central concept of the topic.
- **Take action:** specific suggestions about steps to take.

2. BOB ROSNER ET AL., *THE BOSS'S SURVIVAL GUIDE: EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT GETTING THROUGH (AND GETTING THE MOST OUT OF) EVERY DAY* (2001).

3. *Id.* at 20–21.

- **Stay out of jail:** advice—delivered without jargon—about following legal and regulatory guidelines.
- **Real life examples:** cautionary tales to illustrate the issue and risks of the topic.
- **Do at least the minimum:** helpful prioritizing tips of what actions should be taken.
- **Manage up:** suggestions about information that needs to be shared with others in the organization, especially when the individual making the employment decision is not at the top of the organizational chart.
- **Get more information:** additional resources to consult.

¶9 While the authors recognize that management techniques and organizational culture will provide boundaries for the employment process that vary from institution to intuition, their use of these common themes provides a mechanism to transcend such boundaries and offer advice with universal application.

¶10 So if our goal is to make the job search-job selection process less stressful, what universally applicable principles does the *Survival Guide* offer? Where do we focus attention first?

¶11 For employers, the authors suggest threshold decisions that relate to the big picture as the starting point.⁴ Questions to be answered by employers include: Who will be involved in making the hiring decision and how will that decision be made? Will the hiring team rank candidates? Will the supervisor make the decision with the advice of the team? Will a majority vote lead to an offer? How and when will this information be communicated to applicants? Once agreement has been reached, those involved with the hiring will be ready to move on to the next tasks in the process.

¶12 The authors recommend that employers carefully review the job description as a necessary first step in the hiring process.⁵ The employment needs of the organization may have changed since the position last was vacant. Although the book doesn't specifically address the employment process from the job seeker's perspective, prospective employees who follow the step-by-step explanation that the *Survival Guide* offers will have a much clearer picture of what happens before the position announcement ever appears and should not feel uncomfortable asking for information about how the hiring decision will be made.

¶13 Once the organization has decided which qualities it will seek in a candidate for the vacancy, the *Survival Guide* stresses the importance of marketing the position.⁶ The primary vehicle for spreading the news about the vacancy will be the job posting. At the same time the position announcement is being prepared, those responsible for the hiring must decide how they want candidates to respond.

4. *Id.* at 25.

5. *Id.* at 42.

6. *Id.* at 56.

Decisions must also be made about how the institution will handle the responses from interested candidates, including such aspects as who will open the mail or check e-mail (if submission may be sent via e-mail), where will the resumes go, who will answer questions about the position, and what time line will be used to respond to candidates. The authors suggest: "It's good form to acknowledge every application, even if you use a form letter. Anything less is disrespectful."⁷

¶14 For a candidate interested in applying for a position, the tips offered for the employer on how to review applications can act as a road map for how to draft a compelling resume.⁸ The list of action steps include paying attention to presentation and a logical order for the information, and watching out for hyperbole and name dropping. Because employers are cautioned to look for explanations if a pattern of job hopping or unexplained gaps in employment history appear, candidates should be forewarned to provide explanations for such situations. The authors highlight things to look for to spot the top candidate, including specific accomplishments, relevant special training, indications that the applicant has tailored the resume to focus on the requirements the employer has stressed, and a career path that demonstrates job changes reflecting career progress.

¶15 To wrap up the pre-employment process, the *Survival Guide* stresses the importance of verifying information provided by the candidate. Most candidates don't hide information from prospective employers. However, the consequences of not thoroughly vetting candidates can be painful for institutions.⁹ In addition to asking candidates for a list of references, the authors provide ideas about getting information when a current or prior employer has a policy that limits or prohibits providing reference information. For candidates, the implications for the verification process include making sure that you let your references know why and when they'll be contacted.

¶16 For both the employer and candidate, being aware of the nuances of the job search process as detailed in the *Survival Guide* will dispel much of the anxiety that the terrain of the job search process generates.

¶17 At the same time, because the *Survival Guide* has been written to address a broad business-based audience, the detailed directives offered by tools like this can make the process appear overwhelmingly complex. What can law library employers and prospective employees do to build on the foundation provided to make the job search process a positive one for all involved?

¶18 Moving away from the *Survival Guide*, a series of common sense approaches specifically geared to law library employment can make a positive impact. The most important is to conceptualize the employment process as a delicate balance of power. Neither employer nor prospective employee hold all of the

7. *Id.* at 60.

8. *Id.* at 84–87.

9. *Id.* at 120.

good cards. For the process to ultimately be positive for both the institution and the individual, each side must engage in a series of assessment activities.

¶19 For the library, assessment activities include the initial consideration of asking whether the vacant position needs to be filled at all. Sometimes budgetary constraints limit options about filling vacant positions. At other times, vacant positions provide the opportunity to review and revise organizational responsibilities, or to consider outsourcing tasks or bumping a part-time position to full-time.

¶20 After assessing the institution's needs and making sure that the job description matches the new vision for the vacancy, time should be spent discussing how the selection process will be structured. If it's been a long time since the last hire, review how position postings are drafted. Explore options for letting the law library community know about the vacancy. Determine if law library funds will be available to pay for candidate travel and accommodations. Choose the staff contact person who will answer all questions about the position and communicate with candidates. Identify the criteria that will shape the hiring decision. If the candidate will be required to make some type of presentation, draft and communicate clear guidelines. Develop a decision-making time line so that prospective candidates can be informed.

¶21 At the same time that a law library prepares to announce a position vacancy, a law librarian interested in securing a position can also engage in a series of assessment activities. While it might seem strange to prepare for being a candidate before you know about a vacancy, there are steps that can be taken. To be ready when an opportunity presents itself, keep your resume and skills current. Broaden your group of professional contacts by becoming involved in law librarianship professional activities at all levels. Develop a name for yourself by volunteering to serve on committees or to write for publication.

¶22 Even before a job announcement appears, prospective candidates can begin their homework. The Web has broadened ways to learn about a law library without ever leaving home. Visit the library's Web site for a virtual tour. Read the library's annual report. Search for articles written by and about the library and its staff. Learn about the community served by the library by using Web tools such as Sperling's BestPlaces (www.bestplaces.net) to find out about the cost of living and a host of other relevant facts. Get to know the staff of libraries whose mission and location catch your interest.

¶23 For both the institution and the individual, the assessment process requires a long-term investment that doesn't end when the offer of employment has been accepted.

¶24 To limit staff turnover and to ensure a happy and productive employment relationship, both the institution and the new employee have a series of continuing assessment responsibilities. The institution must provide the training, tools, oversight, and support necessary to ensure that the new employee can be integrated into the existing workforce. New employees must take steps to assure their own

assimilation process by assessing how they can demonstrate value, accept new responsibilities, and partner with existing staff to work toward intuitional objectives. Within such a framework built on this open process, the uncertainties that underlie the negative view of the employment process as portrayed in popular culture will be dissipated. The positing of a position vacancy in the classifieds will become a harbinger of opportunity for both law library employer and employee.