

Navigating a tight job market

There's a job for you

by Laura Saunders

In the last couple of years, there has been much discussion about the projected shortage of professional librarians and the looming challenge for libraries to recruit and retain new talent. Much of the concern stems from the fact that librarianship is an aging profession, and within the next ten to fifteen years, there will be more people leaving the profession than there will be new graduates to replace them. An article by Rebecca Lenzini points out that 25 percent of librarians will reach age 65, traditional retirement age, by 2009, and by 2019, that number will jump to 58 percent.¹ Compounding the problem is the fact that many librarians are not waiting until they are 65 to retire.

According to James Matarazzo, 1990 census data shows "librarians retiring at 63 years of age, and far fewer librarians working after age 65."² In the meantime, the number of library school graduates remains relatively flat, with little fluctuation from year to year.³ ACRL counts recruitment and retention of librarians as one of its most pressing issues.⁴

Although this news might sound encouraging for new MLS graduates, the economic recession—as well as factors such as the slowdown in the tech industry and the September 11 terrorist attacks—has meant that the current job market is tighter than might have been expected from the above research.

The *Christian Science Monitor* reported, "the demand picture is decidedly a mixed bag depending on region and state economic conditions," with states such as Massachusetts, California, Arizona, and Illinois facing

some of the tightest budget crunches,⁵ resulting in fewer openings.

The Boston Public Libraries' Real Sheet reports that 51 of their librarians who were within five years of retirement have opted to take early retirement packages while the library director is only being allowed to fill 15 of those positions, although he intends to petition for additional positions.⁶

The New England Jobline, which posts library openings for the New England area, saw a 13.5 percent decline in job postings from 2000 to 2002.⁷ At the moment, however, the market is tight and new graduates, as well as others returning to the field or simply looking to change positions, are having to search harder than they did a few years ago.

Nevertheless, library job-seekers should not despair. Librarians are trained to find obscure information using complex retrieval sources. While this work may seem routine at the reference desk, many librarians forget to apply this training when they begin job-hunting. By using several proven job-searching strategies, new library school graduates should be able to conquer even the toughest job market.

There are three basic strategies for job-hunting, and dedicated job-seekers should use all three strategies in combination to find the best jobs.

Strategy 1: Networking

The first, and probably most important, strategy for job-hunting is networking. Network-

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ing is vitally important because, despite the proliferation of job postings, an estimated 75 to 95 percent of job openings are never advertised,⁸ but are passed on by word of mouth.

Before beginning to network, you need to define your goals and review your résumé so that you can speak easily about your prior job experience, skills, and qualifications.

At this point, you can develop a brief introduction about yourself to use in any networking situation. This introduction should include information, such as education, job experience and particular skills, as well as an overview of what type of job or experience you are seeking. It can be a brief, 20-second "sound bite" or a longer "commercial," as described by Katharine Hansen in *A Foot in the Door*.⁹

Next, identify some contacts and talk to anyone and everyone that you know. Even people who are not directly connected to the field of library science could be good sources of information. They may have friends of their own in the field or working in the type of setting that you hope to enter. Faculty and classmates are another great networking source. Many faculty members are still active in the field of library science, serving on boards, consulting, or doing research. In addition, alums will often solicit recommendations from the faculty for openings in their places of employment. Likewise, classmates are often working in libraries and are aware of openings or know who to contact about open positions.

Other graduates of the program are another great networking source. Many colleges and universities maintain a network of alumni who are willing to serve as mentors. Alumni or career offices should have a list of other graduates of the program who are currently employed in the field.

Additional networking contacts can be made through professional associations. Associations such as ALA, ACRL, SLA, or their regional branches, offer their members myriad ways to connect with other librarians in the field. Attend conferences and events to meet other professionals who are active in the field. Often word of jobs will be passed around at these events before the openings are posted. Many of these associations also post jobs in their newsletters or on their electronic lists.

Strategy 2: Job postings

The second job hunting strategy is to search through actual job postings. There are a number of ways to access position openings, and some ways are better than others. Large, general job banks, such as Monster.com and Hot Jobs, do not offer much in the field of library science. You get more relevant results by searching the many library-specific job banks available online.

There are also several metalists that organize these job banks and provide easy access to them, including Library Job Postings on the Internet (www.libraryjobpostings.org), LIS Jobs (www.lisjobs.com), and the Simmons College Career Resource Library site (www.simmons.edu/libraries/crl/library.html). Follow the links from any of these pages to find the job banks best suited to your needs. ACRL publishes job postings in *CCRL News*. These postings, along with online only ads, can also be found on their Web site (www.ala.org/acrl, select "Career Opportunities" from the Quicklinks dropdown menu).

Use limitors judiciously when searching any of these job banks. The more limits the you place on a search, the fewer results will be generated. Try several different synonyms as keywords to broaden your search results. For instance, if you are searching for a reference position, try the words *reference*, *readers services*, *public services*, and even *instruction* to get the most results.

Finally, especially in a tight job market, you may need to broaden your criteria a bit. Perhaps a new graduate's dream job is in a corporate library, but he or she is finding no suitable openings. The graduate might consider a position in an academic library with a business focus, where many of the same resources and research skills can be developed in preparation for a corporate job.

Strategy 3: Target employers

The third and final job hunting strategy is to target employers. With this method you compile a list of potential employers, research the organizations, and market yourself to those organizations, whether there is a suitable position posted or not. To create this list of employers, you need to define your career goals, and then find institutions that might recruit in those areas. For instance, a

librarian with a biological science background might be interested in hospital libraries or in universities with graduate programs in the health or medical sciences.

A number of directories exist to help you compile this list, such as the *American Library Directory* or the *Peterson's Guide to Graduate Schools*, either online or in print, for academic libraries.

Once you have created a manageable list, look for job openings that match your qualifications and apply if one exists. If there are no current openings, you can still market yourself to the organization by sending a résumé with a cover letter expressing your interest in the organization, detailing the type of position you are seeking and listing the skills and qualifications you would contribute to such a position.

Follow the résumé in a week to ten days with an e-mail or phone call to the organization. Reiterate your interest in working for that institution and inquire about the status of your résumé. You could also ask about the possibility of setting up an informational interview, which is a great chance for you to learn more about the organization and to market your skills and qualifications.

Either way, an informational interview offers a great chance for you to learn more about the organization and market yourself to the managers. Kate Wendleton's book *Getting Interviews* offers an excellent overview of informational interviewing tips and techniques.¹⁰

Although some job-hunters are skeptical of targeting employers because it is labor and time intensive, it can be a very effective job-hunting strategy that should not be overlooked.

The key to targeting employers is to be selective in compiling a list and to keep the number of potential employers manageable. In general, five to ten employers would be more than enough for this type of search. In addition, you must be consistent in following up with these organizations. In most cases, simply sending a résumé, especially one that is not targeted for a specific opening, will not lead to a match or a hire. You must take responsibility for making further contact with the library and demonstrate your interest and enthusiasm, as well as your qualifications.

(continued on page 669)

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This is an excellent, effective model created by the California State University system. The challenge for college and research libraries across the country is to build partnerships and connections with teaching faculty who are enthusiastic not only about integrating information competency, but championing the potential with their colleagues as well.

These workshops were successful because librarians and teaching faculty worked together to create an effective library assignment. As Evan Farber once said, "When that cooperative relationship works well, it can result in assignments that approach, if not reach, what I consider the ideal: where both the professor's objectives and the librarian's objectives are not only achieved, but are mutually reinforcing the teacher's objectives being those that help students attain a better understanding of the course's subject matter, and the librarian's objectives being

those that enhance the students' ability to find and evaluate information."¹³

Conclusion

These examples of partnerships and connections represent only a few of the thousands developing at colleges and universities. We must constantly learn how to better market our services and resources. As I stated earlier, collectively we are beginning to see progress in our outreach effort as we build effective relationships throughout our campuses. Administrators, staff, teaching faculty, and students—all important members of our learning communities—have critical roles in encouraging the support and effective use of libraries.

Notes

1. "ACRL Board of Directors' actions, June 2003," *C&RL News* 64, no. 8 (September 2003): 518–521.

(continued on page 681)

(“Navigating a tight job market” continued from page 663)

Perhaps most importantly, you should not get discouraged, but should be persistent in your search. In the current market, it can take an average of three to six months to find a job, so new graduates might not expect to have a job lined up upon graduation. But with time and patience, they will find openings.

Asked what advice he would give new graduates looking for library jobs, James Matarazzo, former dean of the Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science, said to make concessions about “where you will live, how far you will drive, what kind of library you will work in. Make those concessions up front and then apply. There’s a job for you.”¹¹

Notes

1. Rebecca T. Lenzini, “The Graying of the Library Profession: A Survey of Our Professional Association and Their Responses,” *Searcher*, 10, no. 7 (2002): 88–97. Library Literature Database, WilsonWeb (accessed April 28, 2003).

2. James Matarazzo, “Library Human Resources: The Y2K Plus 10 Challenge,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 26, no. 4

(2000): 223–4. Library Literature Database, WilsonWeb (accessed April 28, 2003).

3. Jennifer Jacobson, “A Shortage of Academic Librarians,” *Chronicle of Higher Education Career Network*, August 14, 2002, chronicle.com/jobs/2002/08/2002081401c.htm (accessed May 1, 2003).

4. W. Lee Hisle, “Top Issues Facing Academic Libraries: A Report of the Focus on the Future Task Force,” *College and Research Libraries News*, 63, no. 10 (November 2002). Library Literature Database, WilsonWeb (accessed May 1, 2003).

5. Mark Clayton, “Outlook Mixed for Nation’s Librarians,” *Christian Science Monitor*, April 8, 2003. Lexis Nexis Database (April 23, 2003).

6. Serena Enger, “November Trustees Meeting,” *The Real Sheet* 32 (2003): 5–6.

7. Clayton, “Outlook Mixed.”

8. Katharine Hansen, *A Foot in the Door* (California: Ten Speed Press, 2000), 16.

9. *Ibid.*, 67–72.

10. Kate Wendleton, *Getting Interviews* (New Jersey: Career Press, 2000).

11. James Matarazzo, interview by author, April 29, 2003, in Boston, Massachusetts. ■