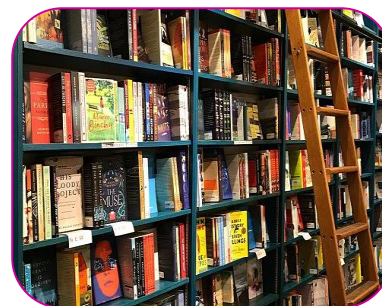




THE CURIOUS LIBRARIAN

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ABSTRACT

I am a reference librarian in an academic library. Through this perspective informs what I have to say, I believe my advice is relevant to other librarians working in other types of libraries. In addition to being a reference librarian, I am also the "Electronic Resources Librarian" at my institution. I mention this because I don't want to be taken as anti- technology. I recognize the value of technology. I have a facility for it, and most of the time, I even enjoy it. Nonetheless, I believe technology and technological skills tend to be overemphasized. What characteristics would I look for in a new library hire?

In a word, I suggest hiring someone curious. First of all, curiosity is itself a marker of intelligence. Secondly and more importantly, the habits of curiosity, exploration and learning, make for a knowledgeable person with perennially up-to-date skills. Don't be overly impressed, if a candidate knows the latest software or as experience in some trendy new area of service! These are transient advantages. In the long run the person of lively and omnivorous interests will be the more successful librarian.

KEY WORDS: *Librarianship, creativity.*

INTRODUCTION:

In general, there is too much focus on technique and technology in the field of librarianship. What tends to get overlooked is the importance of creativity and active intelligence. The best librarians make surprising connections between one topic and another. They can rephrase questions in ways that invite new perspectives. It's not all a matter of knowing how or where to search for something. Often enough, it's a matter of knowledge what else to explore. ("You should also try..."In this regard, the role of intellect, knowledge and creativity are tremendously important. If librarianship could be boiled down to technique, then I assure you, technology will replace librarians.

So how, within the context if a typical job interview, can you determine a candidate's curiosity level? At the end of this essay I've outlined a few ideas: some questions and behaviors to look for. However, there's no question measuring of curiosity. The questions are meant as investigatory aids, to help you "feel out" the candidates. In the end you must rely on your judgment. But doesn't this involve a strong possibility of bias? Isn't it possible that men, for example, will tend to be rated higher for curiosity?

Clearly, there is a potential for bias. One reason technological skills get emphasized is precisely the desire for objective hiring criteria. And yet hiring decisions are so complex that "judgment" is almost always called on. I've seen a candidate rejected because he or she didn't seem very interested in the job. Exactly how disinterest was communicated is not clear. It was possible to identify an instance or two to support this perception, and yet these instances were in themselves ambiguous. Nonetheless, everyone on the search committee shared the perception that the candidate was not especially interested in the position.

Our initiative sense of people, though fallible and subject to bias, is nonetheless highly sophisticated. Instead of trying to eliminate such judgments (yet secretly relying on them), it is better to bring them to the

fore. We can then subject these perceptions to corrective criticism. To control for bias I suggest two things. First, maintain a high level of critical awareness. Take note if you find yourself liking or disliking the candidate. Take note if he or she is confident or extroverted. It's possible to confuse these traits with curiosity. On the other hand you should take note if the candidate is highly nervous or shy. Such traits can obscure curiosity. Secondly I would emphasize the need for a diverse search committee. Conflicting perceptions may indicate the operation of bias, and they need to be hashed out. A diverse committee membership ensures that many biases will be checked.

I don't want to give the impression that curiosity is the only important quality a candidate need possess.

After all, you want to hire someone to work, not to learn about work. If undisciplined, high levels of curiosity will only produce irresponsible eccentrics. However, in a competitive job market, curiosity might well be the factor that separates the ordinary from the extraordinary candidate.

The role of knowledge merits a comment. In large part curiosity is important because curious people are constantly adding to their knowledge base.) The best background librarian can have is a good general education I mean a broad rather than a specialized education. Ideally the candidate will have some familiarity with all disciplinary types: the sciences, the social sciences and the humanities. As the skills and competencies necessary for effective librarianship increase, I hope the profession will resist the temptation to establish undergraduate programs. Future librarians are better served by a broad education, and the undergraduate program is their best opportunity to get one.

Here are some general things to look for in doing an interview:

Questions

- Does the candidate ask a lot of questions?
- Does the candidate ask spontaneous questions, unrelated to the position, institution, or immediate community (e.g., an architectural feature)?

Probe Interests

- What is their interest in the position? Does their interest include the opportunity for learning?
- What was their favorite [non] library science course? Why?
- What is their favorite reference work? Why?
- Ask them, "can you tell us something you recently learned, or learned about, while on the job?"
- Ask about interests and hobbies.

Behavior

- Watch carefully during the library tour. Try meeting them (or leaving them) by the reference collection, new books shelf, etc. Do they scan titles, poke around, etc.?
- During the period of the interview do they take time to explore, by themselves, the library, its resources (such as workstations), the campus, the community?
- In closing, let me reiterate: look for signs of curiosity in your candidates. Curiosity reflects intelligence, which is important per se. But it also reflects something of even more importance: the value and habits of learning. Are the candidates those who will seek out new knowledge? Will they browse and "try out" new reference books? Will they "play" with new databases and applications? Will they take the time to do these things even when they are busy? They will, if they are curious.