On Hiring Library Staff in Rural Areas

Sarah Sutherland
Manager, Library Services
McMillan LLP
Vancouver, British Columbia
sarah.sutherland@mcmillan.ca

Abstract

There has been a great deal said in the literature about what would-be librarians can do to find a job; less has been said about what would-be employers can do if they are having problems recruiting. This article gives some ideas about things that libraries, especially those in rural areas, can do to help them find the employees they need. There are many possibilities discussed, including helping spouses of new hires get jobs in the community, hiring from out of region or country, hiring older workers or new grads, reconsidering what competencies are core for the position and what tasks should be in the job description. The world has changed for job seekers, who must now show that they are more than competent to be competitive, and perhaps it needs to change for employers too. If you don’t think the job you are posting is a great opportunity, then potential applicants likely won’t either.

Keywords
human resources; recruiting; rural libraries; professional staff

Since I became a librarian in 2005, I have generally heard two prevailing points of view on hiring staff in libraries: the first is an attitude generally held by job seekers, who believe that there are very few jobs available and that it is a great struggle to find employment; the second is an attitude generally held by those hiring outside of major centres, who believe it is very difficult to find suitable staff. There has been a great deal of professional literature on the subject of innovative ways to position one’s self to look for work, but very little on how to be innovative in recruiting; however, the last few years have been exceptional markets for hiring.

I admit that I come to this discussion with more experience as a job seeker than a hiring manager, but, as one who has spent a great deal of time reading the literature on the new realities in hiring, I would like to make a few proposals. If people looking for work have had to change the way they search for employment, then people who are hiring should consider changing too. I realize that not every one of these proposals will be suitable for every organization, but it is worth considering what might work for you.
Offer to help an applicant’s spouse find a job in town

The first suggestion is that, if you can reasonably do it, state in your job posting that you will help the spouse of the successful applicant find a job in the community. Often a library director is wonderfully placed to help someone find work, and people whose spouses are employed in a place are much more rooted and less likely to leave in six months or a year. They are also likely to be better assimilated into the community and be more financially stable. This particular strategy is likely to be of most interest to couples that have at least one partner who is unemployed, so I would further suggest that you consider advertising in economically depressed areas.

Advertise in regions inside and outside Canada

There are economically depressed parts of Canada of course, and they may be in your province, but I would also recommend looking further afield to other regions. If you are having, or anticipate having problems recruiting, I would also recommend advertising in parts of the United States where unemployment is high. Americans are regularly identified as being more willing to move for an economic opportunity than most other nationalities, and some parts of the United States have experienced high unemployment for several years. This means that there are a large number of people who are out of work through no fault of their own, but they are likely not actively looking for a job in Canada: so, go to them. Advertise with state associations. Many parts of the United States also have low library salaries, which might be more in line with what rural Canadian libraries can offer. You can consult the American Library Association’s salary survey to get more information on which areas these are and what the average salaries are. Finally, explain about the provisions under NAFTA that make it relatively easy for librarians to come across the border to work; make it seem possible.

Be open to older applicants

The people who may turn out to be the most severely hit by the recession in the States are older workers. There was a story in the New York Times last year (Motoko 2010) discussing how many adults fear that they will age out of the workforce without ever working again, as the economy is not creating jobs fast enough for them to get one before they retire. These people may come with a wealth of experience and may be flexible enough to move. They may also be especially good additions to a library system that often hires new graduates, because they can balance the profiles of existing staff and increase diversity.

Be open to new grads

While you are considering older librarians as potential employees, you should also consider whether you are willing to hire new graduates. Many senior jobs in small urban and rural libraries end up going to new graduates, and many people who have now been in positions successfully for more than twenty years were hired for those positions as new graduates. If you think you are willing to hire a new graduate then say so; many
of these jobs are intimidating, and it is often not clear to newer librarians that the positions are open to them. It may be that the new graduates with the confidence to take on the job you are looking to fill are going to apply anyway if the position interests them, but it may also be that they will read the posting carefully and not bother to apply because the posting says the position requires five years of experience.

**Look at core competencies**

Think about the core competencies you need for this position. You will always need to train a new hire on something, perhaps you could mentor your hire on the thing you initially think is core and benefit from the expertise the person does have. This is especially true when hiring for a job with several similar positions: could you hire someone without the technical expertise, but with transferable skills and great interpersonal skills? Perhaps there is someone in your office already who is not available for the position you are posting but who does have a great understanding about how to run an organization; in that case, do you need someone with HR, strategic planning and experience dealing with a library board from your next hire? It is becoming more popular in business circles to hire for attitude and train for skill (Taylor 2011). Is that something that could work for your library too?

**Look at the job description**

Is the job you are posting likely to be an appealing and humane way to spend a significant portion of a person’s waking hours? If you are posting for a job that involves being on a reference desk for more than twenty or thirty hours a week, or working alone in a basement with no social interaction, perhaps you should reconsider the job description. Also, if you are hiring for a position that simply needs to be done alone in a basement, does the successful applicant need strong customer service skills? If you want someone who will be working on a reference desk, does he or she need to have a strong understanding of databases? Consider assigning some tasks to your new hire that you may not want to give up, such as collection development or managing a portion of the budget. Having diverse tasks makes a job more rewarding.

**Consider where you are posting**

Consider where you are posting you job ads: if you are only posting on job boards, you are missing a large number of potential applicants because the only people who will see your ad are people who are actively looking for work already. You don’t know in advance what might draw someone to apply for a job in your organization; maybe there is someone who vacationed in your town as a child and always loved it; maybe the position might seem like too great an opportunity to pass up, but she won’t apply if she doesn’t know about it. When you are posting, make sure the posting goes out on email lists such as those run by the library schools and associations. Also make sure that you identify any email lists aimed at those with the professional expertise required: this can include cataloguing, systems, subject experts, children’s and other specialties. This way the people who signed up for these email lists get the job postings along with everything
else.

**Work your network**

Finally, more people are hired by word of mouth than by job postings. Make sure that people know about your position: go to conferences and spread the word among your acquaintances. There have been many jobs I didn’t know about that I heard about later as going begging when I was actively looking for work. If you have a position that you want to fill, make sure that everyone who wants to know about it and is putting in time each day to find opportunities will find it too.

There are many reasons why someone might want to apply for an opportunity in your library system, and you need to make sure that those people all know that you are looking for someone and what a great opportunity you have available. If you can’t think of why and for whom the job you have available is a great opportunity, then I would suggest that you rethink the job. It is no longer enough for job applicants to say that they are adequate: they are now required to convey a sense that they are special, and I suggest that you need to be doing the same.

**Works Cited**


<http://blogs.hbr.org/taylor/2011/02/hire_for_attitude_train_for_sk.html>