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Roundtable Topic: What has the job-seeking process been like for you?

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Welcome to our fourth Roundtable, where we ask practitioners to write in with their responses to a new question each issue. This time we asked for your tips, tricks, commiserations, and stories on the job hunt—whether you're in it now, just completed a search, or are looking back to years past. Enjoy!

Kailey Brisbin

Metadata Librarian, University of Guelph

Job seeking and CV tweaking

I started applying for jobs during my last semester of library school. Every day I checked the online job boards for new postings. Over the course of three months, I had applied to 10 jobs.

I started my job seeking process with so much confidence. Unfortunately, my confidence did not last long. Three months had passed and I had not heard back from even one of the places I had applied to. I overheard classmates talking about getting interviews and thought, "What am I doing wrong? Why isn't that person me?" I felt stuck at this stage and thought I would never land an interview.

Feeling pretty discouraged by this point, I was ecstatic when I got a call to go for an interview. The position was an eight-month contract at an academic library. I was happy and relieved to know that I did something right in my application. Even if I did not get the job, I considered getting an interview, as well as gaining interview experience, a major accomplishment in my job seeking process.

After completing my first interview, I was offered the position. I felt extremely grateful and excited to be able to gain some work experience in an academic library. However, because of the contract length, I continued my job search, applying to three jobs over a two-month period. As at the beginning of my job seeking process, I did not hear back from any of these, with the exception of one rejection email.

While I was certain that I could succeed once at the interview stage, I was clearly struggling to land those interviews. I connected with mentors and colleagues who had experience on search committees and had been successful in their own job seeking process. They gave me excellent advice and tips, encouraged me to apply to postings, and offered to read over my applications. With their guidance and suggestions, I improved my cover letter and CV and used it to apply to another job. I was invited to interview for it and then was offered the position!

Natalie Colaiacovo

Reference & Digital Resources Librarian, Professional Library, Toronto District School Board

You've Been Gilmored

When I was applying for jobs a few years ago, I ended up watching a lot of *Gilmore Girls*. Lorelai and Rory, the fast talking women at the heart of the show who consume junk food and pop culture with equal abandon, were perfect companions during late night interview prep sessions. The supportive mother-daughter duo were also the best people to wallow and eat ice cream with after finding out I didn't get the latest job I applied for.

Aside from being the ultimate TV comfort food, *Gilmore Girls* taught me some important lessons about the job hunt. Rather than being models of good sense and judgement, however, Lorelai and Rory taught me what *not* to do—specifically when faced with rejection. The Gilmore girls and their friends are used to getting what they want, and when things occasionally don't go their way, they act inappropriately: they steal yachts, drop out of school, and make embarrassing revelations on national television. Ultimately, the Gilmore girls are unprepared for rejection.

While I've never gone so far as to steal a yacht, I was also unprepared for the rejection I would encounter on the job hunt. I had thought applying for jobs would be a linear process. I would find a job posting, craft a cover letter, prepare for the interview, and then go in there and deliver. If I worked hard enough, the job would be mine. Sometimes, along the way, I would think about how awesome it would be to get the job I

applied for—what my office might look like, the great colleagues I'd meet. What I never thought about, however, was what would happen if I didn't get the job.

I've come to realise how misguided this line of thinking was. I now consider applying for jobs to be a cyclical process: cover letter, interview, rejection; lather, rinse, repeat. And while it might seem pessimistic, I think that planning for rejection is an important step in managing expectations and capitalising on opportunities during the job hunt. Some ways to help soften the blow of rejection:

- **Diversify your dreams**

While the job posting you just read might be screaming your name, don't pin all your hopes on one job or institution. There isn't only one position for you and sometimes what makes a dream job great exists primarily in our dreams. Instead, think of the kind of environment in which you want to work and the type of work you want to do, and don't get caught up on job types or titles.

- **Don't be caught off guard**

What would you say if you got the call saying you didn't get the job? It's difficult to form a coherent sentence if you're surprised or fighting back tears. Instead, be ready. Think about how you'll respond and ask for feedback. Feedback is valuable not only to improve your interview skills, but also to give you some perspective on the job selection process. Most of the time, the reasons you didn't get the job aren't personal. Don't miss out on this great opportunity for a reality check.

- **Think ahead**

After an interview, take some time to consider the questions asked and think critically about ways to improve, and then don't think about the interview anymore. Start looking at job postings and get excited for the next opportunity. If the rejection call comes, it won't matter as much, because your mind will already have shifted focus to the next great thing.

And finally, watch some *Gilmore Girls*. It really is one of the best ways to cope with rejection. Then move on to the next application.

Nicole Eva-Rice

Liaison Librarian for Management, Economics, Political Science, Agricultural Studies, and Liberal Education, University of Lethbridge Library

Luck, libraries, and Lethbridge

I feel extraordinarily fortunate in how I found my first (and only) job as a librarian, but I suppose it was also due to being open to possibilities and a lot of resume-sending.

I was in the last term of my MLIS at Western University in the summer of 2008, having just completed an 8-month co-op term at Lederman Law Library at Queen's University. A 30-something who had returned to school after a previous career, I was keenly aware of the house payments and other bills that awaited me at the other end of my degree and knew that not getting a job immediately wasn't an option. Even before my co-op ended in the spring I started sending out CVs to every job ad I could—public, private, corporate, law; in Canada, American, the UK, and even Bermuda. I must have sent out over 100 applications over the course of a few months, and by May I had two interviews set up—one of them at the University of Lethbridge. Being a Saskatoon girl, I was familiar with Lethbridge: my great-grandmother had lived there when I was growing up, and I still had some rarely seen relatives in the area. I was happy that it was a position closer to home, and at an academic library, and went to my first interview for a full-fledged job as a librarian.

Flying into Lethbridge, I sat beside the former Provost of the University of Lethbridge, who sang the praises of the institution. The following morning, picked up at my hotel by one of the librarians, I was amazed to see the beautiful (uncharacteristically) green coulees. This wasn't something I'd remembered from my trips to see my Oma as a child! I made it through the presentation, group luncheon, and the panel interview, had a lovely dinner with members of the committee that night at a restaurant that reminded me of something more likely found in Vancouver than Lethbridge, and fell to sleep exhausted at the end of my trip. As I returned to London to resume school the next day, I wondered how I'd fared.

I didn't have to wait long, as I received the call from the University Librarian early the next week. They wanted to offer me the job! I was shocked. I still had another interview scheduled, but didn't want to look a gift horse in the mouth (and besides, Lethbridge had more reasonable housing prices than the other place) so I promptly said yes.

It was a huge relief to finish my final term knowing I had a job at the end of it. When classes finished mid-August, I packed my belongings and dog in my car and headed west, with a short stop in Saskatoon to sell my house (which had been rented while I was out east), arrange for movers, leave instructions with my parents, and continue west to Lethbridge.

Almost ten years later, I've not once regretted my decision. Lethbridge has been a lovely place to live; I continue to enjoy my job, and have found a family both inside and outside of work. I realise how incredibly lucky I was to get a tenure track job right out of school, without toiling in the trenches of contracts and term positions. As I serve on search committees, I can see how many get stuck in these short term jobs just trying to get by from one contract to the other, sometimes criss-crossing the country to find work.

But as I look back, I can see that it wasn't just luck that got me where I am (although that played a huge part) but also a lot of hard work sending out tailored CVs and cover letters, and the willingness to go wherever it took. I know many job seekers do this, and I also know not everyone has the flexibility to take a job anywhere in the world—in fact, my independence was also a bit of luck—but I think, too, my previous "life" experience

was an asset in setting me above my younger colleagues in the job market, as well as my ability to demonstrate a maturity in my letters and interviews that perhaps those who hadn't yet been in the "real world" lacked. But mostly, and I will fully admit to this, it was luck. And I thank my lucky stars every day.

Megan Kennedy

Reference Librarian, AD Cohen Management Library, University of Manitoba

Playing the game of contracts

As a recent grad, contract work seems to be the only available option. My first contract was 10 months long and required a move to a new province. I knew that making the decision to accept and pack myself up to move across the country (without any relocation expenses from my institution) was entirely my own, but I don't think I really thought it all the way through. I was lured by the promise of full time work, which is something many of my graduating peers have yet to find. In part, I was also persuaded by the hint that my contract might be extended, become permanent or at the very least, another position might come up at another of the institution's libraries. As this contract was less than a one-year stint, I didn't receive benefits, vacation days (I got an additional percentage on every paycheque in lieu), sick days, pension contributions, or any of the other wonderful things that come along with permanent employment. It frustrates me that institutions can exploit new grads who need to gain experience in the industry and need to make a paycheque. I know that this is the norm in the library game, but really, it's the worst.

Something else I noticed as I was working out my days: knowing that you are on a contract (and therefore may not be there a few months down the road) can really affect your ability to dedicate yourself to your work. Obviously, you work hard while you're there and do what you're supposed to do, but it's difficult to see yourself as part of the big picture and it can be difficult to contribute to projects that you know you will not be around to see completed. It is also exhausting to constantly be on the hunt for that next contract gig, knowing that your time is running out and you need to find something quick. I think that this forces new librarians to take jobs they may not be a great fit for, simply because any job is better than none at all.

I am hopeful that in the future, after I have "paid my dues" and played the game of contracts, a permanent position will be a reality. In the meantime, I will continue to plan my life only as far as my next contract end date, I will continue to make connections in the hope that one day they might help me land my dream job, and I will continue to be optimistic because really, what else can you do?

Sajni Lacey

Learning and Curriculum Support Librarian, University of British Columbia Okanagan Campus

Tips for surviving academic library contracts

I am the happy survivor of three contract positions at three different institutions in the last three years. Each position landed me in a distinct role: project-based, instruction, collection development and acquisitions. This has meant that I have had to adapt to a variety of different environments, cultures, and expectations in the time it takes most people to settle into a permanent role. From this I've learned a few things that have made each contract a little easier, and have helped me maximize my accomplishments and what I have been able to get out of each position.

Tip #1: Ask about projects you may be working on during your interview.

Not only does this show some initiative in terms of your engagement with the position, but it also gives you a chance to determine the type of work that will be expected of you and whether it is something you actually want to do. Contract work is tough because you want to demonstrate your value, but often you're not there long enough to see any long term project through. Getting a sense of the projects you will be expected to participate in will allow you to think about how you can make a contribution, as well as how to position yourself when applying for other jobs.

Tip #2: Meet with as many people as you can in and outside the library.

This may seem relatively obvious, but a common feature of onboarding is to only have new librarians meet with the other librarians (if there are meetings at all). While this is naturally something you should do, it is also essential to get to know and understand the roles of other library employees you'll be working with. I have gotten some of the best support and engagement from these members of the library, and they often know the quickest way to get something done. Also, meeting relevant people outside of the library is a great way of figuring out the culture of an institution.

Tip #3: Use a contract position as a chance to try new things.

Contracts usually come in a couple of ways. The first is a type of leave, whether it be medical, research/study, or paternity/maternity leave; the second is for a specific project. I have experienced all of these in some form and have found that while you are expected to maintain a level of service for the person that is absent, you usually do not have the full slate of responsibilities because of the short term nature of your position. Therefore, use contracts to get experience with something new. This will require some backing from your supervisor, but I have found most employers support the pursuit of professional interests provided that you can demonstrate the benefit to the institution and how it will make the contract meaningful for you.

I have been extremely privileged to have the flexibility to undertake so many contracts. While this is not the ideal situation for everyone, contract work has enabled me to experience a diverse range of roles, learn about different types of institutional cultures, and get a sense of what I want to do now that I am in a permanent role.

Holly Rick

Research and Assessment Librarian, University of Phoenix

Feeling frustrated yet hopeful

As I read through the numerous job descriptions, I find myself looking for very specific jobs that I believe that I would be the best fit. While I *could* blast out my resume to each of these jobs, I instead take my time to read all of the requirements. I want to make sure I document that I am a right fit for the position. I put in hours upon hours of making sure that I have addressed the requirements in my cover letter and that I have a current CV that has all of my credentials, showing the potential employer that I have the experience.

Then I wait. I wait for an email or phone call to actually interview for the position. I wait to hear back from you by the “follow-up date” you provided me, which you do not meet. I wait to fly out for that ground interview, to wait to hear if I have the position. I may never hear from you. I may hear from you that I am a great fit but not right now. I may hear that while you posted a national job, you are going to only hire locally even though your job posting did not make that statement. I hear from you that my materials and interview were great but no real reason why I was not selected to move forward through the interview process.

Where does this leave me? It leaves me with hope. My right job has not been posted yet. I want the right fit for me and for the organization. I want clear communication and organizations who are not afraid to tell me bad news. If you cannot share with me that I am not the candidate while we are still in the process, how will you treat me as an employee?

While I am frustrated by this dance of hiring, I am hopeful that my right job and right employer are waiting for me and ready to start a new dance.

Adam Stewart

Assistant Professor of Sociology and Research Librarian, Crandall University

The devil is in the details: hurdles in hiring

I was elated to have secured a full time, permanent, professional librarian position before I had even finished my MLIS. The PhD that I had previously earned in another field in combination with my nearly completed MLIS resulted in being recruited as a Metadata Librarian by a library association in Chicago, Illinois.

I had all my ducks in a row, or so I thought. I received written assurances of a variety of benefits that I had negotiated during the hiring process. Some of these included: waiver of the standard probationary period so that I could access my vacation entitlement if I needed to return to Canada for a family emergency; the ability to work remotely from Canada for several weeks each year; employer-paid health care coverage for my family and I; complete relocation; a very generous salary; and, perhaps most importantly of all to me, the designation of Metadata Librarian and its attendant supervisory responsibilities, as opposed to the designation and responsibilities given to the regular cadre of (extremely competent and knowledgeable but) non-MLIS Metadata Analysts.

All these benefits were necessary for me to even consider accepting this position. I told the hiring manager that I would entirely understand if they felt that they could not agree to these terms, as I was aware that they were aggressive. Much to my surprise, she enthusiastically sent me a written offer of employment agreeing to my terms.

After securing housing and a TN-1 visa, I arrived in Chicago excited to begin my new position. On my first morning, everything was great. I met my very friendly and brilliant colleagues and even hit the ground running by plugging away at the database that was my primary area of responsibility.

At about 11:30 am, I had a meeting with the Director of Human Resources to review and sign all the required employment documents. After no more than a minute or two of beginning this process, I realised that there must have been some mistake. The documents that I was being asked to sign contained no mention of most of the benefits that I painstakingly negotiated with the hiring manager who was now my supervisor. Although the relocation expenses and salary remained intact, I was asked to agree to: a one year probationary period; no ability to work remotely; no health care coverage for my family; and a Metadata Analyst title.

When I showed the Director my offer of employment signed by both the hiring manager and the Executive Director of the association, I was simply told, "Oh, the hiring manager is new and did not have the authority to offer you those things." When I explained that I would not be able to continue my employment unless the previously agreed upon benefits were reinstated, she tersely replied, "Illinois is a right-to-work state, so you are free to quit anytime that you want." Needless to say, I was flabbergasted. This organization had spent three years trying to fill this highly specialized position—not to mention many thousands of dollars recruiting me—and was prepared to sink that investment of time and money without even a discussion. I was very fortunate to find another position back in Canada in a few weeks' time, and—although slightly traumatized—have nonetheless benefited from the experience.

What advice might this experience proffer? First, before accepting a position outside of Canada, take the time to educate yourself about employment culture and law in the destination country. Hiring a labour lawyer familiar with the country to review your offer of employment and other documents is not a bad idea. Employment norms can vary dramatically from country-to-country, and protections that we take for granted in Canada do not always exist in other—sometimes even developed—countries.

Second, do not avoid international employment opportunities because of horror stories like mine. Most of the information professionals that I know who have worked internationally have had overwhelmingly positive experiences.

Finally, do not be afraid to take risks in your career. Even when these risks do not pay off in the way that you had initially hoped, they will make you a more aware, experienced, and, I believe, competitive information professional. My negative experience in Chicago has been invaluable when negotiating subsequent offers of employment—both for myself and in my role as a hiring manager—and has also helped me, hopefully, to be a more caring and fair employee, co-worker, and manager.