BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

The first professional position: expectations of academic health sciences library employers*

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An important responsibility of all library administrators is the recruitment, training, and retention of staff. It is staffing quality that determines the services of the library. The authors of this paper were invited to discuss the topic of employers’ expectations for new librarians at the 1992 Annual Meeting of the Medical Library Association (MLA). In preparation for the presentation, the authors elected to repeat a survey of medical library employer expectations conducted in 1988 [1]. This paper reports the results of the 1992 survey compared to the 1988 survey, with an emphasis on the skills and qualities desired of recent graduates.

THE 1992 SURVEY

In 1988, the authors and one other researcher surveyed the members of the Association of Academic Health Sciences Library Directors (AAHSLD) and a sample of institutional members of MLA. In 1992, the authors sent essentially the same questionnaire to the AAHSLD membership. The 1992 survey mailing was limited to AAHSLD members, because the non-AAHSLD MLA respondents indicated in 1988 that they seldom hired entry-level librarians.

The 1992 survey was mailed to 130 AAHSLD members. Within one month, questionnaires were returned by 102 library directors, a response rate of 79%.

The respondents reported that the number of professionals employed at the libraries ranged from one to sixty, with a mean of 11.27 full-time equivalents (FTEs). Approximately 80% of respondents required the M.L.S. degree from American Library Association-accredited library schools, almost the same percentage as in 1988. Only 4% required membership in the MLA Academy of Health Information Professionals within a specified time period, although 61% felt membership was desirable.

The employers rated the following employee skills as "very important": problem-solving/analytical skills (rated "very important" by 63%), microcomputer skills (55%), bibliographic instruction skills (42%), online searching skills (41%), reference/information service skills (41%), and MEDLINE searching skills (37%). Science/health subject skills and cataloging/OCLC skills were ranked as "important" along with some of the above skills.

Programming/systems skills were ranked as "not important" by 41% of the respondents, as "important" by 33%, and as "very important" by 8%. Many respondents commented that the necessary skills varied with the position, particularly in the case of non-reference positions such as cataloging or systems librarian.

With respect to personal qualities, more than 79% of the employer respondents indicated that the following qualities were very important considerations in hiring recent graduates: communication skills, enthusiasm, self-esteem, flexibility, service orientation, willingness to be a team player, and interpersonal skills. A majority of the employers considered the following characteristics very important: intellectual curiosity, maturity, and professional attitude. Fifty-seven percent of employers considered any kind of library experience to be important, and 48% considered leadership potential as important. Personal appearance was rated important by 61% and not important by 12%.

Recruitment is evidently very important at all AAHSLD libraries, because 77% had vacancies in 1991/92. Twenty-three percent of these libraries reported that vacant positions were filled within four months, 62% in four to eight months, and 12% in nine to eighteen months. Many AAHSLD respondents noted that the number of applications received for each entry-level position had increased since 1988.

Difficulties experienced in recruitment included geographic constraints, difficulty meeting salary requirements, and small applicant pools. The percentages of respondents citing the first two difficulties had increased since 1988, from 42% to 50% for geographic constraints and 46% to 56% for meeting salary requirements. The percentage of respondents citing difficulty with small applicant pools remained stable at 48%.

With respect to adequacy of library school preparation, the AAHSLD respondents were divided, with 43% considering the preparation adequate, 40% considering it inadequate, 10% giving no opinion, and

6% not even responding to this question. The two ways most often suggested for improving library education were requiring a practicum and requiring instruction in database searching.  

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The many thoughtful responses to the 1992 survey and the fact that busy administrators took the time to reply quickly are indicative of the importance of recruitment to all academic health sciences librarians. There seem to be several reasons why administrators may replace experienced librarians with inexperienced ones.

- Salary constraints. Budget realities and the marketplace may necessitate a salary level that will not attract a senior staff person.
- Balance. It is desirable to have a staff composed of individuals with varied viewpoints and areas of expertise. There is a tendency toward a clustering of staff in middle management; this can be alleviated somewhat by the hiring of entry-level staff.
- New demands. New graduates often are more flexible and willing to adapt to employers' specialized needs. They also may bring new skills, particularly those related to technology.
- Availability. New graduates often are looking for change and expecting to make a geographic move.

Heim observed that the best situation for employers seeking to fill library positions would be for librarianship to attract large numbers of new entrants. In this way, employers would be able to specify the desired qualifications and still have a broad pool of applicants from which to choose. In the real world, though, this is not the case. There is often a small number of new graduates from library schools, these graduates often have a median age in the mid-thirties, and many already have begun families or made commitments to their communities, thus drastically cutting back the pool of qualified, mobile candidates for entry-level positions [2].

According to Heim and Moen, most new graduates with mobility target public service in an academic library as the most desirable job. Positions perceived as somewhat static do not draw a large and geographically diverse labor pool [3]. One might speculate that health sciences librarianship sometimes is considered highly specialized and therefore attracts fewer job applicants than do other library fields.

Lebowitz et al. estimated that it costs an average of $6,000 to hire a new employee, and most new hires leave in the first seven months [4]. Although most librarians do not leave new positions that quickly, it is probably easier for a librarian with only a few years' experience to change positions than it is for an experienced librarian. Beyond the issues related to recruitment, employers also need to be very concerned about retaining new librarians.

Improved salaries and development of scholarship and work/study and practicum opportunities for students are achievable means of recruiting more new librarians. It is the authors' opinion that it is not acceptable for starting salaries to be less than $25,000 for a person with a master's degree. Employers should insist on adequate compensation and be persistent in improving new librarians' salaries. Sometimes good salaries for new hires will mean inequities within a staff, but employers hurt the library profession by maintaining low salaries for new graduates. Scholarships, fellowships, stipends, paid internships, and practicums are needed to encourage students to select librarianship as a career.

Several respondents commented that library school education needed to do a better job of integrating theory with practice. One way this might be accomplished is through periodic guest lectures by practitioners. That, of course, is easier said than done; many library school faculty members do not actively solicit such presentations. Health sciences librarians should make a concerted effort to get to know the faculty at area library schools and should volunteer to give occasional lectures. Collaborative research projects with library school faculty also should be initiated.

To provide adequately for the growth of the library profession and thereby also provide well-qualified applicants for entry-level professional positions, practitioners and educators must work together. As employers, librarians must endeavor to create a good work environment for all employees. Although it may not be possible to control many of the fiscal aspects of running libraries, library employers can establish a positive atmosphere, demonstrate high standards of information service, and encourage open communication among the staff. A reputation as a progressive library will foster the recruitment of excellent staff for initial professional positions as well as those requiring years of experience.

**REFERENCES**


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