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# So, You Didn't Get the Job

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So, you didn't get the job. I have a secret (well, it's not a secret anymore): I don't always get the job I want. Perhaps you, too, are like me? The truth is, there are more of us who get the "Dear John" version of a job rejection than those magical people who get job offers left and right—if there truly are any of them at all.

What do you do when you don't get the job? Call up your best friend and vent? Sail into a pint of Ben and Jerry's with a ladle? Hit the gym to work out the frustration? In this column, I suggest another solution: make changes to your job search to do better next time.

In my years working in the field of career counseling, I've often tried to explain to people what it meant when your application failed to advance at different points in the job search process. I'll be sharing that with you, and I'll discuss how you can improve your chances at each level.

**If you sent the application but didn't get called for an interview:** There are a number of reasons you might not hear from the hiring manager or committee. First, go back and read the entire job application, paying particular attention to the "required skills" section. Did you meet the minimum required qualifications? I am amazed at how many people don't pay attention to the "required" part of the position.<sup>1</sup> If the organization requires a second master's degree and you don't have one, they aren't going to call you. If they ask for three years of experience and you don't have it, don't be surprised when the phone doesn't ring.

If you have all the requirements and you thought you'd be perfect, go back and look at your materials. Did you take the opportunity to make the cover letter an adjunct to your résumé or CV, or could it be interchanged with a cover letter for any number of positions? The cover letter is your first chance to speak directly to the hiring manager, to tell them (in a professional manner) why you are the best candidate for the job. Each application should have a unique cover letter. Make sure you address the requirements for the position as well as the ways in which you stand out as a candidate. The cover letter also should never repeat information found on the résumé or CV, unless it expands upon a point. Finally, consider the quality of the letter. How many typos are there? Most résumés and cover letters might have the occasional one or two, but hiring managers generally feel that documents fraught with mistakes do not bode well for the applicant. If the first impression you provide is a sloppily edited document, what kind of employee would you be? Most library positions require being able to communicate in business English, so you want to show them that you can fulfill that requirement even if it is not stated in the

job announcement. If you struggle to write cohesive business English, ask others for help with editing—if you are uncomfortable asking your friends or family, ask your library school's career services department, or find out if your local public library has résumé or career service support. If you need greater skills in this area, look for free courses at your local library or online MOOCs that can help you develop this skill. At the time this article was written, Coursera had several applicable MOOCs from very reputable universities.

Next, look at your résumé. Are you listing job *duties*, or job *accomplishments*? It's always better to write your bullet points as accomplishments. Hiring managers appreciate résumés that show an understanding of the bigger picture and can connect their role with the mission of their institution. One does not need to have specific data to do this effectively. For example, a library page might write,

Returned books to shelves.

That's a job description statement, and frankly, it's boring. That statement suggests you see your work as a job—not a vocation. Consider this version:

Increased discoverability of physical materials by ensuring items placed in proper position on shelves.

In this second version, you are still a page, but you're one who understand the importance of what you do—which is to make sure books can be found. When revising your tasks to accomplishments, keep clarity and voice in mind. Your new description of your work should be worded in a way that you can explain in your interview.

The best résumé or CV statements are those that contain three parts: a concern, an action, and a result. In the second bullet above, the concern is implied (how to find books), the action is placing items in the proper place, and the result is increasing discoverability. Not every bullet point will map to this type of statement, but if you can use this format, it will help your chances of getting called.

**If you made it past the first round (phone call or Skype):** That is an accomplishment. Typically a hiring manager or team will call between six and eight people for phone interviews. So, if you are one of those people, feel proud that you at least made the first cut. Phone interviews are difficult, teleconferences more so. It can be challenging to connect with the committee. Technical and commonsense suggestions aside (use a landline or stable internet connection, don't have your barking dog on site, and as much as librarians love cats, your feline should not be a part of a teleconference interview), there are other ways to make sure you've done your best. First, smile. Seriously. I learned this trick in one of my earliest phone-based customer service and technical support positions. Smiling changes the pitch and tone of your voice, warming it up and making your voice more receptive to the listener.<sup>2</sup> Second, don't get too comfortable. The committee wants you to succeed and to see if you can

be a member of the team, but don't let your guard down too much. Stay politely formal, and don't forget you're on camera. Remember that to make eye contact, you need to look at the camera lens, not at the screen. Search the internet for phone or teleconference interview tips.

Next, make sure you've reviewed the website, strategic plans, librarian bios, and any available materials on the department for which you are interviewing. I am continually amazed by how few interviewees really take the time to do their homework and learn about the organization to which they apply. An applicant who discusses our annual reports with confidence and knows our mission and the profile of our patrons always stands out.

Be sure to have several brief stories prepared—ones about dealing with conflict, examples of your (formal or informal) leadership (or, if you are looking for entry-level positions, working as a member of a team), and project-based success stories. You may not need all of the stories, but it is excellent preparation to have your best examples for these questions at the front of your mind. Be able to tell them about you and your career in a minute or two, and be sure to have a clear and concise answer as to why you want the job you applied for. Finally, make sure you have questions for *them*. Interviewees without questions make poor impressions on committees because it looks like you aren't really interested. A basic question to ask is about the hiring process and the pace thereof (what are the next steps to the process, and when do they intend to fill the position?). You also might ask what the organization hopes this position will achieve in the first year or in three to five years. You can ask the members of the committee what they like about working at the organization, or what suggestions they'd give to a new incumbent in this position. Remember, you are interviewing them as well as they you, so don't be afraid to find out what the environment is like.

**If you made it to the final interview but didn't get the job:** Congrats! You made it this far. Most library organizations will whittle the applicants down to two to four people to interview (the numbers may vary depending on organizational rules and preferences), so be proud and confident that you made it to this stage. It's frustrating to get to this stage without getting the job, but if you got here once, you can do it again. Suggestions to improve your chances: first, do not underestimate the importance of the presentation. I've never been to an in-person library interview that did not include some type of presentation. Make sure the presentation fully responds to the questions laid out by the hiring committee. For example, if you are asked to discuss how to coordinate a program for a diverse population, don't forget to include your experience with diversity, your understanding of the organization's diversity, coordination of other, preferably similar, projects, and, most importantly, the vision you have for this program. Research how well it works currently (assuming it already exists) and then add to it. Make sure your presentation has vision. In other words, don't just respond to the basics of the request—add to it to show how

it can be improved or expanded. The best candidates show how they can hit the ground running and make an impact in the position as soon as they start working.

It can be so frustrating to get to the finals but not get offered the position. But remember, you'll get there. It will be your turn sooner or later. At this point in the process, the decisions can move beyond what is represented in the position description. Hiring committees and managers need to be aware of implicit bias and be both legal and ethical in hiring, particularly when considering "fit" with the organization. Candidates, including you, may have qualities that augment or complement the strengths or weaknesses of the current team. For example, they might not have advertised for someone with experience in copyright, but your background in that area is perceived as a bonus. A department comprising people with social science degrees might find the candidate with a humanities background will round out their group of "generalist" reference librarians even if a particular degree was not specified.

For all stages: send a thank-you email. Don't snail mail it. I've heard arguments for why it's lovely to hand write and mail a thank-you note, but in the current job climate, decisions could be made by the time that letter gets delivered. Don't miss an opportunity to make another good impression. Use email. Some people just send a note to the head of the hiring committee, while others send individual ones to each member of the committee. I am not sure either is better than

the other. If you do write to each person, be sure the thank-yous are personalized because your communication will be shared among members of the committee.

This column doesn't have the space to fit every good suggestion out there, so I'll close with some online resources:

In addition to changing your résumé points from descriptions to accomplishments, you can learn to "keyword drop" terms into your résumé or CV; read Megan Dempsey's explanation at <http://www.ala.org/educationcareers/employment/career-resources/generaladvice/keywords>.

Mr. Library Dude has a wealth of interview resources: <https://mrlibrarydude.wordpress.com/nailing-the-library-interview/library-interview-questions/>.

Lastly, the ALA has a comprehensive career services section: <http://www.ala.org/educationcareers/employment/career-resources>.

### References

1. Reader's may be interested in the role that gender plays in the decision to apply for jobs when all qualifications are not met: Tara Sophia Mohr, "Why Women Don't Apply for Jobs Unless They're 100% Qualified," *Harvard Business Review*, August 25, 2014, <https://hbr.org/2014/08/why-women-dont-apply-for-jobs-unless-theyre-100-qualified>.
2. University of Portsmouth, "Smile—And the World Can Hear You , Even If You Hide," *Science Daily*, January 16, 2008, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/01/080111224745.htm>.