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BY KATHEL DUNN, PHD

Hiring Librarians and Ensuring their Early Success

Hiring a new librarian is both a challenge and an opportunity, and it tests the planning and management skills of the supervisor. For the hiring manager, hiring requires planning, a thorough understanding of the hard and soft skills needed for the position, and a commitment to devoting time to orient and mentor the new hire in the first months (if not the first year) of employment.

Planning to Hire

Hiring to fill an open position is an opportunity to think thoroughly about the skills and characteristics needed for the position and articulate those skills and characteristics to everyone involved in the search process. If you are the hiring manager, make sure that other staff are aware—and, if there is a search committee, that they are aware—of the kinds of skills you want.

Having a conversation with the other staff and the search committee about the skills needed for the position will help reveal any misconceptions, especially among the staff. For example, if you’re hiring someone with social media skills because you want to turn social media duties over to the new person, does everyone on the team know that? Or did an existing staff person think she would be able to turn some unwanted tasks over to the new person and begin leading the library’s social media efforts? Perhaps the previous holder of the position managed the reference desk schedule, so scheduling and organizational skills mattered a great deal; your intention may be to shift scheduling to someone else on the team and hire a leader-coach to develop subject-specific skills with librarians who work with researchers.

Staff who participate in the hiring process need to know the purpose and responsibilities of the new position so they can successfully participate in reviewing applications and meeting candidates. The hiring process can also serve as a succession planning tool for staff, provided you engage them in planning discussions early in the process. Staff may be able to develop themselves professionally for new opportunities if they know the direction in which the library is heading and the positions that will likely result.

Advance planning can also reduce biases in your hiring and provide a clear rationale for hiring a particular candidate. For example, say you want X, Y, and Z skills in a candidate, but members of the search committee are leaning toward a candidate with X and Y skills only, even though the candidate pool contains someone who has X, Y, and Z skills. As the hiring manager, you can choose the X-Y-Z candidate, but you’ll know why you are doing so.

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Wanted: Hard and Soft Skills
Today’s librarians typically need a wide range of “hard” skills in areas such as digitization, instructional design, outreach, programming, Website usability, Web design, user services, systems, cataloging, metadata, and data management. The challenge in the hiring process is to determine whether the applicants actually possess these and other necessary skills for the job.

The key to addressing this challenge is to encourage applicants to be as specific and descriptive about their skills as possible, both in their written materials—their résumé and cover letter—and in their interviews. Ask them to describe in depth how they do what they do and why they do what they do. Asking applicants about their depth of experience and the “why” of their current job will help you discover skills in the modest and unmask the glib.

The “soft” skills desired in an employee can be harder to identify in an interview, but it is possible to do so. These skills—being a team player, helping others succeed, sharing knowledge with others, and accepting criticism—are critical to an employee’s success.

One way to discover whether applicants possess the requisite soft skills is to make sure they do the majority of the speaking during the interview. If, as a hiring manager, you often find yourself doing a lot of the talking, ask an applicant to walk you through his or her résumé, one position at a time. Your job as a hiring manager is to ask the follow-on questions: Why did you take this position? What did you do in that job? I see you did X and Y; tell me more about them. What did you like about the position? What was challenging about it? Why did you leave the position? Why did you take the next position? Asking candidates to speak again and again about their work experience can reveal a lot about how they work.

After the Hiring
As the hiring manager and supervisor, you play a significant role in your new hire’s success and particularly in shaping his or her first few months on the job. You can use that time to implement an orientation program, observe your new hire, and address any potential difficulties he or she is encountering.

The orientation plan is entirely in your hands. You will want to give the new hire a copy of the employee handbook, set up computer passwords, and arrange introductory lunches with colleagues or a welcome breakfast for the department or all library staff. Where possible, arrange one-on-one meetings with others in his or her cohort—department heads, fellow librarians, or key users of the library—to allow the new employee to make connections. Ask someone to serve as a “buddy” or mentor for the first few days, as a new employee might find it easier to ask a peer for help rather than ask his or her supervisor.

Early in your new employee’s tenure is the best time to make your expectations (and those of your organization) clear.

When Things Go Wrong
Some of the potential problems with a new employee are obvious, including tardiness and absenteeism, difficulty meeting deadlines and completing work, and trouble working well or communicating with others. Other challenges are a little more nuanced and can leave a hiring manager puzzling over what to do next. If your instinct is telling you that something is wrong, you’re probably right.

Some trouble signs to watch for are “enthusiastic disconnects” between the responsibilities of the position and the interests and activities of the new employee, mismatches between the skills required to perform the job and the skill set of the new employee, and a new employee who doesn’t display any enthusiasm for his or her work. New employees who display enthusiasm disconnects are often smart and fun to be around and bring a lot of energy to the workplace, but their energy is often easiest to ask during the first few days of employment; later on, such requests can seem more intrusive and have a “gotcha” feel to them.

The first few months also present an opportunity to observe whether the new employee is connecting with other colleagues—not necessarily making friends, but establishing a professional network within the library and beyond. You should also use this time to review the new employee’s work and correct any problems. Direct observation of a new employee is easier for both you and the employee during the first few weeks than it is after several months. It’s also one of the easiest times for a new employee to accept critiques of his or her work.

Early in your new employee’s tenure is the best time to make your expectations (and those of your organization) clear. Is punctuality critical? Is it necessary to submit work for review? If so, state it up front: “Punctuality is really important here; you need to arrive right on time. Also, any public-facing document must be reviewed before it’s posted. It’s what we do here, even for light updates to the Website.”

The first few months are also a good time to directly observe your new employee at work. In the first few days, ask the new employee to show you how to find and open the files to which he or she should have access. Just ask, “Can you show me how to access the shared drive? Not to offend you, but sometimes new staff don’t have their computers set up as they should, and I’ve found it’s best to check.” Or ask, “Can you show me how to make an appointment in Outlook using the scheduling assistant?” Questions like these are...
misplaced. These disconnects can take many forms, including the following:

• An inability to describe his or her work. The employee may be very enthusiastic and able to talk at length about the newest technology or changes in the field, but if you don’t recognize what she or he is talking about, it’s a sign that something is not quite right.

• Proposing ideas that are not within the scope of the organization. For example, if you work for a private institution and the new employee wants to establish programming for the public, that’s a real disconnect that needs to be explored.

• Proposing the use of technology that the organization has decided not to use. There is nothing wrong with proposing new ideas, but when a new employee persists in advocating technology after being told it will not be used, this suggests a similar disconnect.

The remedy for enthusiastic disconnects is time—your time. Sit down with the new employee, tell him or her about the priorities for the library, then ask the employee to tell you the key things you said. It may take multiple conversations to align the employee’s thinking with yours, but this is an effort you want to make to ensure everyone on your team is going in the same direction.

The skills mismatch is a challenge that also is remedied with time: time spent learning, time providing additional mentoring (by you as a supervisor or by a knowledgeable colleague), and time spent on projects and assignments that stretch the new employee.

The challenge posed by an employee who displays no enthusiasm for any of the work at hand is particularly troubling. The remedy here is similar to that used with an over-enthusiastic employee: conversation and exploration. If you can, find out what is really going on with the employee and where his or her interests lie.

If All Else Fails
No matter the challenge, if time, conversation, coaching, and alternatives do not yield changes, the next step is to disconnect the employee from the position. That step is most likely not one that either you as the supervisor or the employee wants to take. Using a well-planned and well-executed hiring process, followed by a solid onboarding program, is your best hedge against such an outcome. SLA