Career Opportunities: the Ones That Never Knock

Abstract: With job hunters seemingly now outnumbering vacancies in the legal information field by some margin, recruiters currently have plenty of choice in front of them when seeking to fill a post with the right candidate. In the current market, the applicants themselves need to do everything they can to maximise their chances of selection. The general aspects of good and bad practice in job hunting and recruiting should be obvious to everybody of a professional status. But are they? We're all supposed to know the textbook dos and don'ts of recruitment and selection; but how much attention are employers and candidates in the information sector really paying to the detail? Through his role as Library Manager in the London branch of a national network of law schools, Mark Haines has sat on the recruitment and interview panels for over thirty posts over the past six years. He has also been job hunting himself during this time; applying for more than fifty posts over the past two years, and attending more than a dozen interviews. As a result of these experiences, he has witnessed countless examples of good and bad practice. Employers and applicants may all be aware of what they *should* be doing, but in this paper he will be discussing his experiences of what they're *really* doing; and most importantly, what can be done to improve performance in the light of this.

Keywords: legal information profession; interviews; recruitment

Disclaimer. I begin with a disclaimer: no librarians have been harmed in the making of this paper. That is, amongst the examples of good and bad practice mentioned along the way, no individuals or organisations will be named at any point. The intention of this paper is to identify areas for improvement and to provide ideas about good practice, not to name and shame the guilty parties.

WHO ON EARTH ARE YOU?

So what *gives* me the right, or the *authority*, to comment on this subject?

In my role as Library Manager with BPP University College I was directly involved with the recruitment of between 30 to 40 staff in the period between 2007–2013; in many cases leading the recruitment, in others sitting on the interview panel and participating in the selection process. BPP University College libraries have a relatively high annual turnover in temporary part-time roles at a number of law and business schools around the country. I would estimate that I interviewed around 150–200 candidates during this period, which is perhaps more than some library professionals will interview during their entire career.

In June 2011, I also became a job hunter, practically overnight. Whilst it would be crass to go into detail about the office politics and personal agendas involved, I found myself placed almost overnight, into a position where my long-term future with the organisation had now become untenable and so I immediately began searching for a new role. Inside my head I had now finished with my current employer and it was simply a case of finding the right job to move on to next, ideally as soon as possible.

Two years, fifty-five applications and fourteen interviews attended later, I had still not secured a new position. Instead, however, I was now in the relatively unusual position of having viewed both sides of the recruitment process simultaneously (in forensic detail) over a period of time. Some of what I'd seen impressed me; but much, sadly, did not.

THE JOB ADVERTISEMENT

This analysis could potentially begin at a number of different points. The stage where you first seek sign-off to recruit for a post perhaps, or possibly the moment when you are deciding whether or not to enlist the help of a recruitment agency? However, I have chosen to begin

with the job advertisement, because this is the point in the process where the recruiter and applicant first cross paths.

Ideally, every job advertisement should contain three things:

(1) Job description – a detailed list of the tasks, functions and responsibilities of this position.
(2) Person specification – the skills, experience and qualifications which are essential or desirable for an incumbent in this role.
(3) Some details about the likely potential salary.

From my experiences, far too often jobs are being advertised (at present) merely with a short blurb about the post, but without including the actual job description or person specification. If recruiters do not give this information, then candidates will not always be able to address the correct details and requirements of the post when they submit their applications. Presuming that a recruiter will want to judge the applicants on how well they meet the criteria they are looking for, it is baffling to think what advantage could possibly be gained by not telling the applicants precisely what these criteria are?

> One rejection which I received (after interview) cited the reason as being my lack of direct experience using specific (named) business law databases. No job description or person specification had been provided beforehand for this role, and the brief job advertisement had not mentioned this requirement. In fact, even during the interview itself, no question was asked on this subject; yet it apparently held weight when the final selection was made. In contrast to the recruiters' comments, in fact I already had plenty of experience in using several of these resources; but without ever knowing that this information would be relevant for the post there had been no reason to include it in my application.

Salary is sometimes considered to be a contentious issue, with some employers enforcing a policy of not revealing any salary information about roles. However, from my experience, concealing salary intentions tends to produce the following three outcomes:

(1) Many who apply for the role will immediately withdraw when they become aware of the salary on offer, as it does not match their expectations/ requirements, or may even turn out to be less than they are currently earning. I have found this sometimes to account for up to 50% of all applications received. In one round of recruitment I was attempting to fill a vacancy for which the top of the salary range which could be offered was £22,500 (but my employer's policy forbade me from revealing this). On the first day after the

advertisement went live, an application was received from somebody who was currently earning £50,000 per year. Several days later I heard from an applicant currently earning £62,000.
(2) Applications will also be received from candidates who are dramatically underqualified or not sufficiently experienced for consideration.
(3) A number of potentially strong candidates will not apply for the role at all, as they have no idea what the salary on offer is (my own policy has, in fact, become to never apply for any post which gives no indication of salary).

The two most common reasons given for not including salary information in an advertisement can, I believe, both be debunked:

(1) *"There is no fixed salary, it will be offered according to qualifications and experience"*

The suggestion that a salary range does not exist is not really true; you will certainly have a minimum rate which you would be resigned to having to pay somebody to do this job, and similarly, a maximum above which you could not possibly justify paying somebody (however good you feel they are) to fulfil this particular role. So a salary range definitely exists; the decision is simply whether or not you wish to publicise it. There are plenty of ways that employers could give some indication of the salary level in mind without revealing all of their hand at the early stages of salary negotiation; such as quoting "*Salary from…*" at the very bottom of the range but not revealing how high you might be prepared to go.

(2) *"I don't want our rivals to know what we pay our staff"* I have found that the answer to this line, in most cases, is simply *don't flatter yourself*. Speaking personally, even if you're a direct competitor of mine, at the kind of level you're likely to be recruiting at I am not the slightest bit interested in how much you pay your staff. However, if I wanted to know then I would simply ask somebody (perhaps somebody that used to work for you, and has recently left), or get one of my team to apply for the role and then find out that way. And even if your competitors did find out what you were paying your staff, what are these terrible consequences which you seemingly expect to happen?

It's both courteous and sensible to give information about the anticipated date of the interview in your advertisement. Even if you only have a provisional date, or a loose unconfirmed idea, it is prudent to give whatever information you do have to the potential applicants. Otherwise you may be wasting your time reading and shortlisting applications from people who will not be able to attend the interview, or you may find that some strong

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candidates do not apply because they know that there are some dates coming up when they will be unavailable (e.g. due to holidays) and do not want to submit job applications which they may not be able to follow through.

WHERE TO ADVERTISE?

For recruiters, the question of where to advertise your role is an easier one to address than you might think. In fact, the answer is incredibly simple. The best place to advertise is the place where the target audience for your advertisement are most likely to be looking.

Whereas employers sometimes feel there is more prestige in paying a higher premium for an advertisement (and possibly even reach a wider audience) through media such as a national newspaper, it's more constructive to think about whether you are placing the advertisement in a location where your target audience are likely to see it. For example, if law library experience was essential to this post, think carefully about which applicants you are expecting to reach by advertising in a source like The Times (where the vast majority of people reading the advert will *not* have law library experience, and where many librarians would not necessarily be looking) as opposed to through a source such as BIALL or CILIP (or even an e-mail group such as LIS-Law) where you could reasonably expect your target audience to read it.

At one time I was interviewed for a position with an NHS Trust library. The post featured an appealing job description and a very healthy salary, and so I was amazed at interview to discover that only thirty-two applications had been received for the position. However, this was seemingly because the vacancy had only been advertised on a specialist NHS vacancies website (and apparently nowhere else). Clearly NHS experience was not essential for the role (I had none myself, yet the employers shortlisted me for interview and told me in later feedback that I was very close indeed to securing the position); yet they had only advertised at a website intended to be seen by employees or those with experience of working for NHS Trusts, but not a location likely to attract applicants with the kind of professional information skills which they were looking for to fill this post. I only actually saw the advertisement myself because I was tipped off, by somebody I knew (a non-librarian) working in the NHS.

For applicants, sadly this somewhat de-standardises the list of places to look when job hunting. You can regularly search in all of the best/correct locations, but there's just no magic solution to the maverick approach taken by some employers when advertising their vacancies. You can increase your chances of discovering these vacancies by signing up to alerts and registering with employment agencies, but one additional approach which I found to be of use was to ask friends to send a tip-off whenever they came across a post advertised which looked like the kind of thing which they felt I might be interested in. During the final year of my job hunting, almost half of all jobs which I applied for came as a direct result of such tip-offs, and most of the people tipping me off were not librarians.

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

It is now *de rigueur* for job applications to be submitted online; every single application which I made during the two year period was submitted in this way. The main two mechanisms for applying tend to be either submission of a curriculum vitae and covering letter, or the completion of an online application form.

Although your organisation may have a set procedure which you are required to follow, wherever possible my experiences firmly deter the use of online application forms at all costs. These forms will not be tailored to your particular post, and the outcome will be that your candidates will be forced to answer questions in "required fields" which are completely irrelevant to your post, whilst they are simultaneously not given the opportunity to supply important details which will often be requirements of this particular role.

Even simple procedures, such as entering qualifications, prove to be incompatible with many online forms. I have lost count of the number of different places that I have needed to shoe-horn in details of my professional chartership, including (on several occasions) having to list it amongst my GSCEs. This is perhaps ironic given that I don't hold any GCSEs (I have eleven GCE O-levels – which sometimes cannot all be listed anyway in the section headed "Enter details of all qualifications here" because the form does not provide enough boxes).

When completing an online application form, I once ticked a box which invited me to have a copy of the completed form sent to myself when I submitted the application. When the copy came through to me, I was shocked to discover that it had expanded to seventeen pages long. For most of these pages the document had been divided into columns, and most of my text all ran down a thin column on the right hand side of the page, which had become about three words wide. The document was completely unreadable; unless everybody else's applications had also turned out like that, then I wouldn't expect that somebody would have taken the effort to try to decode it. I wasn't offered an interview for the position.

In contrast, requesting a curriculum vitae and covering letter should enable candidates to provide you with all of the information which you require; all of the content which the candidate would otherwise have written on an application form, and also the information which they would have been unable to! Using this approach becomes a further feature of the selection process itself, as it requires each candidate to identify for themselves which information they feel is important for the application and what should be omitted, whereas an application form will dictate very strictly which details every applicant is required to give.

An approach which I have adopted in recruitment (and strongly advocate others using) is to always submit an application yourself whenever you recruit for any post. In this way you will not only then see what the candidates experience whilst applying, you may also be able to compare how the final application looks in contrast to what was actually submitted. In one previous role I was often surprised by how many applications were received after the closing date given on advertisements, and also why so many of the documents submitted were poorly formatted. However, when I applied for one of these advertised posts myself I discovered that the Recruitment department were taking up to a week to pass submitted applications through to me, and by comparison with my own application I could see that all of the formatting changes were happening at the recruiter's end after perfectly formatted documents had been submitted.

SUBMITTING THE APPLICATION

A useful tip for candidates is wherever possible to convert documents to pdf format before submitting them. This gives the best possible chance that the formatting of your application will eventually reach its intended recipient looking the same as the document which you actually sent. Plenty of free software to convert documents to pdf is available on the web.

As a general rule, unless directed otherwise from the advertisement your curriculum vitae should contain your own personal history (qualifications, work experience and any other relevant details) applied as compatibly as possible with the job description, whereas your covering letter should map directly to the person specification and outline the reasons that you would be suitable for this post. A simple "Please find my CV attached" does not constitute an effective covering letter, and you should additionally be attentive if the employer asks for anything specific to be included in your covering letter. It is sensible to try to keep the letter to a modest length, although if the person specification is particularly detailed then brevity may be difficult without omitting key details. I once submitted a covering letter which was a full three pages long, and I was subsequently invited to interview for that post.

A very important element of all written aspects of the application is to take the key information and present it to the reader, outlining the candidate's key features and strengths, in relation to the requirements for this particular post. All too often, my experience has been that applicants leave details buried away in their application and seemingly expect the recruiter to analyse, decode and extract the information on their behalf in order to decide how effectively the candidate meets the necessary criteria.

I once received an application for a post which included money handling and cashing up in the job description (and the person specification stated that applicants should have experience of accurate and attentive money handling). I received an application from somebody who recorded on their application that they had once worked as a cashier with a bookmaker. However, this information was hidden away halfway down the second page of their CV. Instead of leaving the reader to seek this information out, I would have expected the covering letter to have spelt out: "I have experience of cash handling from my previous experience working as a cashier with a bookmaker". The candidate was not shortlisted for interview.

For this reason, it is often a good idea to provide a summary of your notable skills and experience at the head of your CV before following with full details of your employment history, academic qualifications, etc. in the usual way. This will not only draw out and give prominent place to the details which you particularly want to promote to the reader, it will also ensure that this information is seen, as during the preliminary stages of shortlisting it is not uncommon for many CVs not to be read beyond the first page.

It is advisable to think carefully about what you write in your CV and how much of the information supplied is genuinely relevant. I regularly receive CVs which are seven or eight pages in length and often (if I actually read them!) they turn out to contain far less relevant content that those which are just two pages long. The most frequent component of overlong CVs seems to be an extended employment history section, detailing (at length) a succession of temporary jobs; sometimes dedicating between half to three quarters of a page to each small role which in some cases were only held for a matter of weeks. Temporary posts should be *listed* on your CV, but for those covering a brief period of time, the amount of experience gained performing the tasks involved will have been very short indeed, and unlikely to be enough to impress an employer looking for proven aptitude in such areas.

Applying for posts can be a very time-consuming experience, and it is perfectly understood that when

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candidates put together applications they will be cutting/pasting elements of the content from previous applications, and often working in a rush; perhaps late at night if that's the only point when they can find the time. However, a minimum amount of proof reading before submitting the application is strongly encouraged; where covering letters jump through different fonts as the paragraphs change, and margins swing backwards and forwards across the page, most readers would usually spot this within seconds of viewing the document, and it can make a very (and sometimes disproportionately) bad impression on the reader.

For reasons mentioned previously, it is also strongly advisable to avoid waiting until the last possible moment before submitting your application; if it needs to be passed through other parties before it reaches the desktop of the person doing the shortlisting, then (through no fault of your own) the deadline may already have passed by the time it actually gets there. As a rule of thumb, whenever I see a deadline attached to a job advertisement in print, in my head I name the deadline as three days earlier than this.

REFEREES AVAILABLE ON REQUEST

One trend which has visibly grown over recent years is for applicants to state "Referees available on request" at the close of their curriculum vitae, rather than identifying and including contact details for their referees.

Personally I dislike this approach, as when I receive an application I am expecting the candidate to bring all of the details to me which will support their application, not to be inviting me to request them. However, this approach does seem to have become accepted into common usage over time, and so you would not expect to be marked down for doing this.

However, if you are inclined to take this approach then you will need to be attentive to what the employer asks for in their advertisement. If they ask (amongst other things) for your application to contain "a curriculum vitae, including the names and contact details of two referees" then "Referees available on request" will not be a suitable response to this; under these circumstances they have in fact already explicitly asked for details of your referees, and so if you do not supply them then expect your application to progress no further.

It is understandable that some candidates are hesitant about providing referees' details, because in many cases they wish to avoid revealing to their current employer that they are job hunting. However, in order to secure the job these details will need to be given *somewhere* along the line anyway. Jobs which require the completion of an application form will usually have a compulsory field to provide details of referees; otherwise, employers will almost certainly request the details of referees at the point when you are called for interview (if not at an earlier stage).

In reality, though, employers don't tend to introduce significantly more work for themselves than they have to during the recruitment process, and so although your referees' details may be requested at an early stage, in many cases these referees are unlikely to be contacted unless you are actually offered the post. For two years I listed my line manager's details as a referee on every application which I submitted, yet the first time she became aware that I had been actively job hunting was the moment that I handed in my notice.

INVITING SHORTLISTED CANDIDATES TO INTERVIEW

Once you have selected the candidates to interview, recruiters are strongly urged to take control of inviting them. You will want to choose the order that you see the candidates in, to be aware of who has accepted the invitation to interview and also who to chase up if they have not responded. You may also wish to offer vacant interview slots to reserve candidates if any of your applicants withdraw from pursuing their interest in the role at this point.

On one occasion I allowed my employer's 'Recruitment' department to take control of inviting the shortlisted candidates to interview. I provided them with details of the candidates that I wished to interview, along with the date and time for each one. When the interview day came around I discovered that instead of following my instructions they had simply phoned each candidate asking them which of the interview slots they would like to claim. Those candidates who could not be contacted by telephone at the time had simply been arbitrarily allocated one of the remaining interview slots, and informed of this by e-mail. Two candidates did not respond to the e-mails, but I could not offer these slots to reserve candidates because there had been no follow-up since the e-mail, and so we did not know for sure whether these candidates were going to show up or not. On the day itself we did not know which order candidates would arrive in, as the Recruitment team had completely changed the order around which I had organised. One candidate who was travelling a long way to attend the interview had been allocated a late afternoon slot to best facilitate this, but we found that Recruitment had changed her interview time to 9:15am. My employer would not reimburse travel or accommodation costs. This is an example of the kind of scenario which can arise if you do not take control of the interview process yourself.

How many candidates you choose to shortlist may depend on the number of vacancies. Six may be

considered a sensible maximum when interviewing for one post, but ultimately it's entirely up to the recruiter whether you would prefer to invite more or less than this. However, when recruiting for several posts at once it will not always be necessary to directly multiply, particularly if you are recruiting for similar positions at the same time. For example, if recruiting for three part-time positions at the beginning of an academic year, I typically find that candidates have asked to be considered for more than one position, and six interviews for one post would usually become something like twelve interviews for three posts.

When scheduling the interviews, there is a school of thought which says that it is a good idea to try to interview your strongest candidates (on paper) first. It's preferable to have seen a candidate that you feel you could definitely offer the post to as early as possible in the proceedings; rather than to be anticipating stronger candidates later in the day, but if they don't turn out to be as impressive as expected then having to go back and reassess earlier interviews. However, with candidates nowadays typically travelling from much further afield to attend interviews than used to be the case in the past, your preferred schedule may need to be balanced against how far candidates have to travel.

If the candidates have not yet been notified of the anticipated salary by the time that they are being invited for interview, then this really cannot now be put off any longer. During one round of recruitment which I was involved with, where the salary had not been previously advertised, fifteen candidates had to be approached just in order to find six who would agree to attend an interview (the others all immediately withdrew when they heard the salary range). If the salary details had not been announced at this point then we could potentially have spent the whole day interviewing candidates who would not actually have accepted the role (if offered it) due to the salary.

Be sure to give candidates as much information as possible to assist them in your invitation to interview letter. It is both good practise and courtesy to say who will be on the interview panel, and also roughly how long you expect the interview to last. Tell them where to go on the day, and who to ask for when they get there. Many unexpected things can go wrong on interview days; the more information you give to all of the parties beforehand, the better.

I once attended an interview having been given little more detail beforehand than the address of the premises and the time of the interview. When arriving at the building's front desk the staff did not seem to know where I was to go, or who I should be seeing; I was sent instead to an annexe building next door (which was locked), and found that he only way to proceed was to randomly press buzzers with unfamiliar names displayed. Eventually I was greeted by somebody from the Human Resources department, who took the documents from me which I had been asked to bring to be photocopied, but then took ten minutes to return (most of which time seemed to be spent talking on a telephone in the next room). I was then sent back into the main building with directions and details of how to reach the interview room, but I still couldn't reach it because it turned out to be located through a corridor which required a security pass to gain access. When I was finally able to reach the interview room the interview was still not able to proceed, as by now one of the panel had been sent to look for me. Eventually the interview started twenty-five minutes late, and yet all of this could have been avoided if just the most basic of information had been supplied in the letter inviting me to interview.

CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

One of the first decisions to make about the interview itself is who will sit on the interview panel. One might sometimes be inclined to wonder whether there is some kind of unspoken agreement in place that interview panels should consist of three people (for all but one of the interviews that I've attended over the two years in question this was the case), but in fact there is absolutely no reason at all why this should be the number. It's useful to have at least one other person on the panel with you (so that you don't have to talk continuously, and to provide a second opinion on the candidates interviewed), but other than that it's entirely up to you how many people you have on your panel.

My own personal preference is to have two people conducting interviews; the person recruiting (usually myself), and somebody with some specialism in the particular role which is being recruited for. Sometimes when interviewing you may find that your line manager wishes to sit on the panel and oversee the procedure; this will usually be harmless to the process, and you may not be in a position to refuse. However, if they do not specifically ask to be on the panel then there is no need to approach them and suggest it. Less welcome on your interview panel, however, will be staff from your organisation's human resources department, and my personal advice is to turn them away at all costs. They will not understand the skills and experience required to do this job, and so will not take any part in the selection process, and serve no worthwhile purpose at all on the interview panel.

It is perfectly acceptable to invite somebody from another organisation onto the interview panel, so long

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as this is done *for the right reason*; the right reason being that (in the absence of the now departed ex-employee in this post) you currently have nobody on your own team expert enough in this particular subject area to interview. In contrast, inviting external interviewers to read out a list of pre-prepared questions, then giving them no input into the appraisal and selection process (nor even inviting their contribution when candidates request feedback) serves little purpose at all; you may just as well pull any random employee from your own organisation to do this, or just ask the questions yourself.

The questions asked in the interview should relate directly to the criteria being assessed for appointment to the role, or to test each candidate's aptitude for performing it. If something is not listed on the job description or person specification, then it bears questionable purpose to ask about it in the interview.

It is also good preparation to send the questions which you intend to use to the members of the interview panel beforehand. It can become uncomfortable and clumsy during interviews if panellists are attempting to read questions which they have clearly not seen before, and verbally stumble whilst reading; allow your panel members to rephrase the questions beforehand (whilst keeping the same theme) into sentences which they find more comfortable to speak, and feel better able to communicate to the candidates in the interviews. Do not use jargon or your own local office-speak in your interview questions; you have nothing to gain from this, and it will only prevent you from getting the best possible answers out of your candidates and hence being in the strongest position to assess their suitability. Your candidates should be able to concentrate on answering your questions to the best of their ability, not trying to decode them.

> I was once asked during an interview to describe what 'Legal reference experience' I had. A little unclear as to what was being asked for, I told the panel that I did not understand the question and asked them to elaborate, but received no further guidance. Halfway through giving my answer I paused and asked the panel whether I had interpreted the question correctly, and was giving the kind of information which they were looking for (to be met with little more than a shrug). Later, in feedback I was told that one of the reasons I was not appointed in the post was because I lacked the necessary legal reference experience. Bearing in mind that at the time I was a lecturer on the BIALL Legal Reference Materials course this might be considered surprising, but of course the real issue here was clearly one of communication. At a later date, I looked up who had been appointed to the post from the organisation's library newsletter; it explicitly stated that the successful candidate had been appointed because of her strong legal reference experience. To this day, I still have no idea what they actually meant by "Legal reference experience".

You should bear in mind that as well as assessing the candidates in your interviews, the applicants themselves will also be making their own judgments about your organisation and this role. It is therefore a professional approach for members of the interview panel to make some attempt to dress smartly for a formal interview, as this displays an appropriate level of respect towards the candidate and the interview process itself. In contrast, the interview which I once attended in which the leader of the panel sat reclining at a forty-five degree angle in his chair, with shirt unbuttoned halfway down and chewed gum throughout out entire interview did not inspire confidence or respect from me towards him or his organisation.

When conducting the interviews, allow in your schedule for the fact that you may find yourself running late as the day progresses; unexpected events are (by their nature) impossible to predict, but if you find yourself running late by mid morning, it is preferable to not consequently spend the entire day behind time as a result. I prefer to schedule a few extra fifteen minute gaps every now and then between interviews to accommodate the unexpected; if they turn out not to be needed then use them to grab a breather or to freshen up.

It makes good practical sense to arrive at your interview room in plenty of time before the first interview begins, to set up the room, ensure that everything is working and also to deal with any unexpected surprises. On one occasion when interviewing I had to call security staff to clear a room which I had booked in time for the first interview, whilst on another occasion when attending an interview as a candidate I attempted to begin my presentation only to discover that the PC was locked, and nobody on the interview panel knew the password. You may not always be able to anticipate such mishaps, but if you do not include the preparation of the interview environment beforehand in your planning then you leave yourself with less manoeuvrability to deal with such problems if they should occur.

Candidates deserve to be given a fair chance; they will almost certainly have put a lot of time into their application and preparation, and probably also made sacrifices (such as taking time off from work) to be there. I once interviewed alongside a senior manager who exhibited the trait of often deciding at some point during an interview that the candidate wasn't going to be successful, and then from that point onwards always tying to accelerate towards the end of the interview as quickly as possible,

not giving the candidate time to answer questions fully, and even sometimes missing questions out. This kind of conduct is extremely disrespectful, and also very unprofessional. However well or badly an interview is going, your candidates deserve a fair hearing right through until the end of it.

In order to make your selection at the end of the interview process, it is absolutely imperative that notes are taken during the interview itself. You may wish to take notes throughout or another approach sometimes taken is that whilst one panel member is asking questions the others will be recording the answers given. Either approach is entirely satisfactory, so long as some detailed written record exists at the end of what was said during the interview.

You will need some mechanism to justify your selection once a decision has been reached and scoring each candidate's performance is becoming an increasingly common way of doing this. If you choose to do this then bear in mind that each question or section need not necessarily carry equal scoring weight; "Why do you want this job" should perhaps not carry the same potential score as "tell us about your experience of doing certain fundamental elements of the post in your previous roles". Also, it is a good idea to not to actually start allocating scores until all of the interviews are finished. Tempting as it is to score candidates as you go along (whilst their performances are still fresh in your mind, and also cutting down the time needed for analysis and assessment afterwards) this approach should not be considered good practice. Remember that you are scoring the candidates' performances against each other, and so it will not be possible to do this effectively until you have heard all of the candidates' answers. Otherwise, for example, you could award a candidate four out of five for their answer to the first question, only to find yourself in a difficult situation if every other candidate interviewed that day proceeds to give a better answer than this.

At the end of the interview it is both good practice and also common courtesy to let each candidate know when they can expect to hear a decision. You will not be doing the candidates any great favours by being over-optimistic about this timescale; you may be considering how soon you will be able to contact the *successful* candidate and make an offer, but how much longer will it really take before the other candidates can subsequently be notified? From my own personal experience, during the two years of this exercise I was never contacted with the result of an interview within the timescale which I had been advised on one single occasion. Be realistic.

ATTENDING THE INTERVIEW

It surprises me that some candidates do not seem intuitively aware that they should dress smartly for an interview. Every year, without fail, I interview candidates who turn up wearing jeans, tatty blouses or with shirts hanging out of their trousers. It does not matter how you would be required to dress in order to perform the role, you should always dress smartly when attending the interview.

Arriving on time at an interview is also important. From my experience candidates almost never arrive late, but a surprising number show up early, sometimes by up to an hour, or even more. It is actually just as bad to arrive early to an interview as to arrive late, as the interview panel will be working to a timetable with other candidates to see before you and others after; there will be no arrangement in place to deal with an early arrival, you will simply become a nuisance until the time that you were expected at. However, arriving early is entirely avoidable with appropriate planning.

Before an interview, I would always look up where to go using an online source such as Google Maps. Then I would immediately scan around the local area to identify a café near to the interview location. On the interview day, I would travel with an itinerary which placed me at the location forty-five minutes before my allotted interview time. But instead of entering the building early, I would turn around and retire to the café to prepare; reading my interview notes, drinking water and using the toilet if necessary. This planning also meant that if the journey took a little longer than anticipated then I still had a little flexibility in my timing, and consequently I was never late (or early!) for an interview.

A good way to prepare for an interview is to think about questions which you are likely to be asked; "Why have you applied for this job?" has come up at every interview which I've ever attended. Think also about the key responsibilities of this post and expect to be asked questions directly relating to those, as well as spending some time finding out information about the organisation itself (and perhaps also some of its competitors). Answers to interview questions are usually enhanced when you can provide a relevant example from your own previous experience which demonstrates your understanding of an element of the role, or even examples of previously having done something similar in another job. It is useful to have a rehearsed portfolio of experiences and skills from your previous roles prepared in advance, such that as you respond to questions during the interview you can add these to supplement your answers as and when they may be considered relevant.

The interview experience rarely feels like walking on clouds from beginning to end for each candidate. It is important, however, that you do not give up or lose heart if you feel that the interview has started badly, or taken a wrong turn at some point. When conducting

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interviews myself, the questions are arranged in self-contained sections and performance is marked accordingly, so even if a candidate achieves a low score for one section there is no reason why they cannot still go on to score highly on the others. It is also important to try to give an answer to each question, regardless of how confident you feel in what you have to say. If you say nothing, or answer "I don't know", then you will definitely score zero for that answer, so it makes sense to attempt to say *something* even if you feel you may not have quite the answer which the examiners are looking for.

You may be able to pick up signs from the panel which can help you during the interview as well. If the interviewers are furiously scribbling notes as you speak then they are paying clear attention to what you are saying, whereas if they have stopped and put their pens down then you are clearly no longer providing content in your answer which they want to note down, so you may wish to switch the direction of your answer slightly. If you are unclear of precisely what is meant by a question, then don't be afraid to ask.

POST-INTERVIEW

A useful activity which I encourage all candidates to do *as soon as they leave the interview* is to write down all of the questions which you can remember being asked. After an interview I always begin doing this on the train or bus immediately as I begin my journey away, and typically within around half an hour I will tend to have remembered all of the questions which were asked. When I get home, I type this up into a document, which I then file in my job applications folder. Surprisingly few people seem to do this, yet it can be very beneficial when preparing for future interviews.

After my first year of attending interviews, I found that it was becoming increasingly rare to be asked any question at interview which I had not been asked at least some variation of before. On average, I would estimate that around 50% of all interviews which I attended from this point included *no new questions at all*, only questions which I had been asked at least once in the past. At later interviews, going over past interview questions (and planning answers) whilst sitting in the pre-interview café would often turn out to be a very useful method of preparation.

Some candidates regularly contact the recruiter shortly after being interviewed as a matter of course, thanking them for the interview and re-asserting their enthusiasm towards the position. It is perhaps questionable whether this will make any difference towards the final selection in most cases (it has certainly never influenced my own

decisions when recruiting), but it certainly does not do any damage to your chances, and so if you feel inclined to do this then there would be no harm in giving it a try.

Less advisable, though, is the act of chasing up recruiters after the interview to pester them for a decision before they have approached you with one. It is difficult to imagine how this activity could ever possibly lead to a positive outcome; if they do wish to offer you the post then at some point they will certainly let you know. It may be the case that they are waiting for another candidate to respond to an offer (who could very well turn the role down), but by trying to push them into giving you a decision before they are ready, then the only possible answer which you could receive is no; what you will basically be doing is asking them to confirm that you don't have the job.

Common advice suggests that recruiters should keep interview notes for a period of six months after the interview. You will need to retain these in case there is an appeal against the decision. Legally, candidates may appeal against a decision up to three months afterwards, but a small extension can theoretically be granted if the candidate can prove that there were reasons why they were not able to appeal sooner. However, six months should always be more than adequate to cover this. After this time it is advisable to destroy your interview notes, as for data protection purposes you should ensure that you are not keeping data about candidates once it is no longer needed.

Candidates are potentially entitled to make a data protection request at some date after the interview to see your interview notes. However, this practice is not common, and if it occurs then you are under no obligation to provide any further information, annotation or explanation, just a copy of the written notes themselves which were taken at the interview (even if your notes are illegible). A data protection request only covers information about an individual which is *currently* held, so if you have since destroyed your interview notes then you are at liberty to say that they are no longer held, and would not then have to provide any further documentation.

FEEDBACK

There is actually no legal requirement whatsoever to provide feedback after an interview. If you are troubled by the idea of giving feedback, you are perfectly at liberty to decline any requests and state that feedback is not available from the interview and selection process.

For some reason, there appears to be an interpretation held by many that feedback is supposed to be negative, and candidates should routinely be told (in a defensive fashion) the reasons why they were not offered the job. I struggle to understand why this approach is taken, as positive feedback about ways in which candidates performed well at interview are often equally

(if not more) beneficial than simply defining the negatives. If candidates are only ever criticised in the feedback which they receive, then they will tend to start feeling that their current approach is wrong and try to change large parts of it; whereas in fact much of their approach might actually be excellent, and making substantial changes to this could actually lower the quality of their performance in the future.

> In the very last law library interview which I attended, I could reasonably feel that I had done well in my application by the fact that I had been shortlisted for interview, yet the summary of my performance supplied afterwards could perhaps be more accurately described as *character assassination* than feedback. Thankfully I had enough experience of interviews to not take this personally and instead to merely think lower of that potential employer as a result, but for a less experienced applicant, their "feedback" could actually have been very damaging.

I personally tend to group feedback into three categories: pointless, paranoid and productive.

(1) Pointless feedback consists of standard responses (often directly from an HR department) which say absolutely nothing whatsoever about the candidate's performance; comments such as "We were impressed by your application and interview, but on this occasion we saw an exceptionally strong field of candidate, and one of them just beat you." This type of feedback is largely a waste of everybody's time.

(2) Paranoid feedback is when recruiters seem more concerned about the fact that an unsuccessful candidate might sue them than honestly appraising their performance, which can sometimes unbalance the comments which they do make. Paranoid feedback is often symbolised by those providing it refusing to communicate by e-mail and insisting on giving it over the phone. This shows some naivety towards how employment law works (as such documents would have little or no standing in the case of an appeal), and if particularly worried then it would surely make more sense just decline to provide feedback altogether? Paranoid feedback can sometimes include some useful comments, but can be very hit and miss due to the pre-occupations of the persons supplying it.

(3) Productive feedback is very rare, but this is feedback which both weighs up the positives and negatives of your performance, and also suggests what could be improved, or which details made the successful candidate stand out from the others. For example, in practical feedback I might say that a candidate performed very well in some areas, perhaps even pointing out that they gave the best answer we heard that day to one particular question, but that ultimately they weren't successful because another candidate excelled above them in the questions on certain other named areas, and perhaps indicate how (for example, if the successful candidate gave answers containing better or more relevant examples, or demonstrated a more impressive description of how they might expect to perform in this role, or ideas that they would bring if they were to be appointed).

WHO GOT THE JOB?

If a candidate feels there is any gain to be made from this, then there are usually ways to find out who was actually appointed into the post a period of time after the interviews have passed; such as looking on sources like LinkedIn, reading the organisation's website or newsletters, or even just asking your own professional contacts and finding out through basic networking.

In theory it could be constructive to identify the reasons that one particular candidate beat you to the post, to be aware of this for your future applications. However, in practice I have found that more often than not it simply leaves you frustrated that the employers have made what appears to be an unfathomable or badly considered decision, and the end result (for myself at least) is more likely to simply be disappointment and bitterness towards the employers themselves.

> The result of finding out who got the job can often be more soul-destroying than professionally productive. On numerous occasions I have discovered that posts were effectively inherited by internal candidates, or that appointments were made to candidates so over-qualified that they left the role a few months later when they subsequently managed to secure a new position more suited to their career progression. On one occasion, the appointed candidate only actually worked in the position for a few weeks before signing off with stress for the next eight months, then finally resigning. Whilst the employer could perhaps not reasonably have foreseen this, what followed was the appointment of a former work colleague of mine in her place. My former colleague immediately approached me and asked for help and training in preparing for certain aspects of the job, in which she felt she lacked the necessary confidence or experience. I found it interesting that I was never considered the best candidate to offer this position, yet was deemed the best person by the next successful candidate to actually train her to be capable of doing the job.

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Nowadays I rarely follow up and investigate who successfully beat me to a post any more, as the only purpose it has seemed to serve is to suggest that I did little wrong in the application and interview process, and I've never yet had a practical experience whereby I found out who had got the job and learned something from it.

THE HAINES EQUATION OF JOB APPLICATION SUCCESS

As a result of my experiences, I have constructed what I call the Haines Equation of Job Application Success. In equal measures the affecting factors are: the applicant's performance, the quality of the recruitment process, professional nepotism and luck.

Of course, any candidate will maximise their chances as far as possibly by performing well in the interview, but ultimately the overall success will also fall at the mercy of other factors which are likely to be completely out of the candidate's hands.

As has been discussed, the quality of the recruitment process is completely beyond your control, and can be highly variable. Using exactly the same application has got me to the interview stage and then at the verge of success in some cases, or completely ignored and not even shortlisted with some other applications.

On one occasion, whilst sitting in a corridor waiting to be called into an interview, I realised that I was actually watching the previous interview taking place through a window to my right. In addition to considering this arrangement unprofessional in its own right, the interview over-ran to twenty minutes later that the time that my

interview had been scheduled to start, with the familiarity and communal laughter taking place in the room suggesting that the formal interview had long run its course, and the interview panel had warmed to this candidate. I was later told in feedback that although my performance was strong, the panel had in fact already decided to offer the post to this previous candidate before I had even stepped into the interview room.

With regards to professional nepotism, I have personally often found myself up against internal candidates, or even previous employees returning to an organisation because there was not a clear route to progress upwards within the organisation when they were previously employed there at a lower level. Often there is little that one can do in these situations; if knowing that you were up against an internal candidate, in likelihood many would simply withdraw and not waste any more time on this application, but in practice you will rarely find this out until after the appointment has been made.

With regards to luck, I described above a scenario whereby I was told that the interview panel had already selected the successful candidate from the interview which took place directly before mine. Who knows what might have happened if the interviews were conducted in a different order? We never will.

SO LONG, AND THANKS FOR THE FISH

By the time you read this article, I will have left the profession. Whilst I very much enjoyed working in the library and information field for twenty-one years, after two years of attempting to progress from a post which felt untenable in the long term but finding no success, there came a point where I chose to address the issue of whether I could go on being a job hunter indefinitely, or whether to concede that I had now done everything I possibly could have done (without success).

It was heartbreaking to leave, because in the end I never fell out of love with the library and information profession, but I felt that the profession had fallen out of love with me. On 4 September 2013 I commenced my new career as a trainee primary school teacher, with the Wandsworth Primary Schools Consortium.

However, this should by no means be seen as closing the article (and my career) on a negative note. Whilst the skills and experience gained working in this field have not taken my career any further, they are clearly recognised and valued elsewhere, outside of the profession. The trainee position I secured, received 164 applications for just 24 places; Of the nine candidates who attended my

first interview day, I discovered that seven of the others were currently working as teaching assistants at the time; yet not only had I secured an interview, I was telephoned back late that afternoon and told that I was felt to be the stand-out candidate that was seen that day. I was even told that I was one of only a small number of candidates in recent memory to have scored 100% on the maths test.

This coda is therefore intended as a message of hope to job hunters everywhere. Clearly, the professional skills which have been gained from working in the library profession can be very useful elsewhere if a day comes when we no longer have a place in it, and I hope that some readers may be able to take encouragement from this.

Biography

Mark Haines BSc MSc MCLIP worked in the library and information profession for over twenty years (with most of this time spent in professional posts), and has been chartered for more than a decade. After previously holding posts in both academic and commercial law libraries, eventually he moved to the middle ground and for over six years held the role of Library Manager at BPP University College of Professional Studies. Until recently Mark was Chair of the BIALL Professional Development Committee, organising seminars and training events of professional interests to BIALL members. He also lectured and presented at BIALL events such as the Legal Reference Materials Course and the Graduates Open Day, as well as the BIALL Conference.

On 4 September 2013, Mark left the library and information profession to take up his new position as a trainee primary school teacher with the Wandsworth Primary Schools Consortium.

Soft Skills: a Valuable Business Tool or Just Psychobabble?

Abstract: In this article Jackie Fishleigh reviews and analyses three of the sessions, held at the BIALL Conference 2013 in Glasgow, that were concerned with 'soft skills'.
Keyword: soft skills

INTRODUCTION

Standing on one leg drawing an imaginary number in the air, saying "no" firmly but clearly in a role-playing exercise, staring intently into a stranger's eyes for one minute – do any of these activities really help us improve our performance in the workplace? Isn't it enough to be intelligent, hard working and on a mission to get things done?

DR DAVID FRASER

Well, not according to Dr David Fraser who claims in his book, **Relationship Mastery: a Business**

Professional's Guide (Print List Price: £14.99, Kindle Price: £1.99) that the ability to relate to other people is the most critical skill a person can ever have at work, at home or anywhere else. Strong relationships simply make everything easier he says. And yet while there are endless management titles on getting more out of one's self as an individual, very few look at building and improving our relationships with others at work.

Dr Fraser has a First Class Honours degree and PhD from Glasgow University. A Chartered Engineer, he also holds an MBA from Strathclyde University. His first career stalled somewhat because others found him "difficult" to work with. This and the fact he was also "making

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