

Editorial Board Thoughts: **Requiring and Demonstrating Technical Skills for Library Employment**

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Recently I've been involved in a number of conversations about technical skills for library jobs, sparked by an ITAL article by Monica Maceli¹ and a code4lib presentation by Jennie Rose Halperin.² Maceli performed a text analysis of job postings on code4lib to reveal what skills are co-occurring and most frequent. Halperin problematized the expense of the MLS credential in comparison to the qualifications actually required by library technology jobs and the salaries offered for technical versus nontechnical work. This work has inspired many conversations about the shift in skills required for library work, the value placed on different kinds of labor, and how MLS programs can teach library technology.

During a period of hiring at my institution and through teaching a library school course in which many of the students are on the brink of graduation, my attention has been called particularly to one point in the library employment process: job postings. These advertisements are the first step in matching aspiring library staff with the real-life needs of libraries—where the rubber meets the road between employer expectations and new-grad experience.

Most libraries already use the practice of distinguishing between required and preferred qualifications, which is a good start, especially for technology jobs where candidates may offer strong learning proficiency yet lack a few particular tools. Although there have been conflicting interpretations of the Hewlett-Packard research suggesting that men are more likely than women to apply to jobs when they don't meet all the requirements,³ I observe a general tendency among graduating students to err on the side of caution because they're not sure which qualifications they can claim. Among my students, for example, constant confusion attends the years of experience required. Is this library experience? General job experience? Experience at the same type of library? Paid or unpaid? Postings are often ambiguous and students may choose to apply or not. Similarly, there are questions about what extent of experience qualifies someone to know a technology: mastering it through creating new projects at a paid job, experience maintaining it, or merely basic familiarity? Not knowing who has been hired, and on the basis of what kind of experience, is a gap for researchers trying to close the loop on job advertisements.

Even when a job posting has avoided an overlong list of required technical skills, it might still be expressing a narrow sense of what's required to qualify. Someone who understands Subversion will be capable of understanding Git, so we see plenty of job advertisements that ask for experience with a "a version control system (e.g. Git, Subversion, or Mercurial)." I recently polled staff in our department and found very few of us with bachelor's degrees in technical subjects. More of us had come to working in library technology through work experience or graduate programs. And yet, our job postings contained long statements that conflated education and experience, such as "Bachelor's degree in Computer Science, Information Science, or other

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relevant field and at least 3 years of experience application development in Object Oriented and scripting languages or equivalent combination of education and experience. Master's desirable." I edited our statement to more clearly allow a *combination* of factors that would show sufficient preparation: "Bachelor's degree and a minimum of 3-5 years of experience, or an equivalent combination of education and experience, are required; a Master's degree is preferred," followed by a separate description of technical skills needed. This increased the number and quality of our applications, so I'll remain on the lookout for opportunities to represent what we want to require more faithfully and with an open mind.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the table, students and recent grads are uncertain how to demonstrate their skills. First, they're wondering how to show clearly enough that they meet requirements like "three years of work experience" or "experience with user testing" so that their application is seriously considered. Second, they ask about possibilities to formalize skills. Recently, I've gotten questions about a certificate program in UX and whether there is any formal certification to be a systems librarian. Surveying the past experience of my own network—with very diverse paths into technology jobs ranging from undergraduate or second master's degrees to learning scripting as a technical services librarian to pre-MLS work experience—doesn't suggest any standard method for substantiating technical knowledge. Once again, the truth of the situation may be that libraries will welcome a broad range of possible experience, but the postings don't necessarily signal that.

Some advice from the tech industry about how to be more inviting to candidates applies to libraries too; for example, avoiding "rockstar"/ "ninja" descriptions, emphasizing the problem space over years of experience,⁴ and designing interview processes that encourage discussion rather than "gotcha" technical tasks. At Penn Libraries, for example, we've been asking developer candidates to spend a few hours at most on a take-home coding assignment, rather than doing whiteboard coding on the spot. This gives us concrete code to discuss in a far more realistic and relaxed context.

While it may be helpful to express requirements better to encourage applicants to see more clearly whether they should respond to a posting, this is a small part of the question of preparing new MLS grads for library technology jobs. The new grads who are seeking guidance on substantiating their skills are the ones who are confident they possess them. Others have a sense that they should increase their comfort with technology but are not sure how to do it, especially when they've just completed a whole new degree and may not have the time or resources to pursue additional training. Even if we make efforts to narrow the gap between employers and job-seekers, much remains to be discussed regarding the challenge of readying students with different interests and preparation for library employment. Library school provides a relatively brief window to instill in students the fundamentals and values of the profession and it can't be repurposed as a coding academy. There persists a need to discuss how to help students interested in technology learn and demonstrate competencies rather than teaching them rapidly shifting specific technologies.

REFERENCES

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