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**Answering "Now What?" How to find and interview for your first law library job.**

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Answering “Now What?”

How to find and interview for your first law library job
Several years ago I saw an amusing cartoon in a college newspaper. The cartoon consisted of five panels. The first three panels portray a typical college student’s last few days of school as he approaches graduation: last minute studying, partying, and of course convocation. In the fourth frame the college graduate has taken off his cap and gown (now lying in a heap) as he looks apprehensively into the blank fifth frame. The punch line is, “Now what?”

In a profession whose members have two, three, or even more academic degrees (you know who you are), this feeling of peering into the abyss may be all too familiar. Taking that fateful step into the working world after years spent in school can cause anxiety. Hopefully, this article will serve as a flashlight, if not a spotlight, to help guide your way as you find that first job as a law librarian. The authors are both recently hired librarians who surveyed other new librarians about their job hunting experiences.

What is the Job for Me?
Perhaps one of the most obvious (and arguably one of the most important) tasks you will undertake in sifting through the available jobs is to determine which job would be best for you. This determination can be deceptively challenging. As you work through the application process, the job that initially seems most attractive may prove to be the wrong fit for you and/or the library.

“Due to my husband’s job, I looked only at local law schools, which limited the number of jobs,” says one respondent summarizing her criteria and search process. “I checked AALL’s Web site, SLA’s [Special Libraries Association] Web site, and the state library jobs Web page. I also called up a law librarian friend and asked her if she knew anyone at the local law schools that I could talk to.”

This comment reveals important considerations that may affect the desirability or possibility of taking any given position. These can be classified collectively as previous commitments. While your marital status and number of children cannot be considered by potential employers, those factors will surely affect your employment with list. Alston Shea, reference librarian at Fordham University College of Law Library, describes other intangibles that affected her application choices. “I picked places that I would want to work for,” she says, “Boston University (where I did my undergrad), Fordham University (they specifically were looking for someone interested in FCIL [Foreign, Comparative, and International Law] work, which I was), and Marquette University (where my entire family went/goes and is in my hometown of Milwaukee).”

Also consider your capacity to live with cold winters, hot summers, or a lack of seasonal change. Cultural activities, national parks, and a myriad of other details about each locale may have a major impact on your lifestyle. It is easy to focus solely on the job itself, but the best job in the world may not make up for an incompatible location. At the same time, remember that you will probably not remain forever at your first job.

Library and professional association Web sites and professional/academic online discussion lists are great ways to find jobs. Shea found jobs with a combination of online searching and word of mouth. “I regularly stalked the AALLNET site,” she says. “Because I was a joint degree student, I had to wait until I was close to completing both to apply. I applied to three positions in January 2007 and was contacted by two of them within a week or two. Two of the jobs I applied to had been advertised for at least two months at the time I applied.”

At many institutions, and particularly academic institutions, the hiring process can last months. If you have a whole semester before you finish your academic work, it is not too soon to start looking and applying. Even if your available start date prevents you from getting one job, by applying you can make yourself noticed by librarians who do the hiring. If the job interests you and you meet the qualifications, go for it. Many libraries will gladly extend the desired start date to accommodate a highly qualified candidate. Naturally, the other side of that coin is that you should not apply for a job you would not actually take.

Research the Job
Once you find job announcements that interest you, learn as much as you can about those institutions and the librarians who work there. In addition to those libraries’ Web sites, AALL’s Member Search (which is available in the Members Only Section of AALLNET) can be a useful source for information on librarians. And using the AALL search function can yield a number of interesting results. A librarian’s AALL publications and committee participation are quite easy to find. This information will help you decide if this job interests you and will enable you to intelligently answer and ask questions during the interview process.

For example, perhaps one of the librarians at this institution has written extensively in the area of teaching legal research. If this area interests you, this person could be a wonderful mentor for you. At the very least, you now have something to talk about with this librarian during the interview.

The best source of information about any institution and its staff may be other librarians. Use the contacts you have made in library school and previous library work to “beat the bushes.” When it comes to law librarianship, it truly is “a small world after all.” It may surprise you that six degrees of separation are not necessary to find someone who knows someone at the library of interest to you.

One librarian describes how she was able to find a wealth of information from her employer while she was studying for her JD/MSLS. “I had the benefit of having a great mentor who knows a lot of people in the profession and who gave me the ‘low down’ on a lot of schools/people to give me a bit of background on them,” she says. “In fact, he specifically advised against applying for jobs at certain schools, since they had a type of culture that he felt wouldn’t be good for a brand-new librarian.”

Follow up on interesting jobs you find on your own with librarians you know. Ask as many librarians as you can about the positions you are most seriously considering.

Even if you feel that you do not have a “mentor,” do not hesitate to reach out to a professor or even e-mail a law librarian you have never met. These blind e-mails are frequently answered with surprising speed. Most law librarians are eager to discuss the profession with potential members, especially those who are about to enter it.

Screening Interviews
If your application meets the library’s criteria, you may be contacted for an interview. The type of interview at this stage varies according to the type of library. Academic law libraries will typically have a relatively short telephone screening interview (lasting 30-60 minutes) followed by a day-long on-campus interview. The AALL Annual Meeting also hosts screening interviews.

Shea describes her experience with screening interviews. “With BU [Boston University], I was just talking to their head of reference [who was conducting the search] for about an hour,” she says. “She was explaining the position, asking me if I had any questions, and briefly asked me to talk about what I had been doing in preparation of a reference position. At Fordham it was a conference call with four librarians, one of whom was the hiring librarian and the others, who were members of the hiring committee.”

During a screening interview expect to hear a summary of the job and the library. Before this interview find out who will be involved and write those librarians’ names on paper you use to take notes during the interview so you can address people by name.
Occasionally this process will yield surprising information. For example, Shea hoped to find a position involving FCIL. One job she applied for was a general reference position, but during the screening interview the librarian asked her about an upcoming position with an international focus.

By being forthright about your strengths and your hopes for a position, both you and the library have the best chance of making an informed choice about whether you are right for one another. Applicants and hiring librarians alike typically put their best foot forward in this process. Avoid the temptation to "yes" your way into a job that is not right for you.

In-Person Interviews

Once a candidate has made it through the first round of resume tag and telephone interviews, the real work begins. The in-person interview is your chance to deliver the knockout punch; that is, present yourself as capable, likeable, and enthusiastic.

Several helpful articles have been published in *Spectrum and Law Library Journal* about the structure of law librarian interviews. One of the authors' favorites is "The Zen of Law Librarian Job Interviews: How to Interview for a Job and How to Interview the Job," by Jennifer S. Murray in the Spring 2004 issue of *Law Library Journal*. Not only does this article discuss typical law library interviews in detail, it also includes an appendix of sample questions applicants can (and should) ask their interviewers. These questions include topics like the political climate of the library, ways to evaluate the position, and how to evaluate the surrounding community. The questions can be tailored for each applicant's needs.

Based on our survey and our own experiences with interviewing, here are some major considerations for the enterprising law library candidate to keep in mind.

Answering and asking questions.

A candidate is equal parts interviewee and interviewer. To prepare for the "interviewee" role, make a list of all the possible questions you could be asked and an outline of your responses. This is not to carry around with you during the interview as a crutch ("Why I want to be a librarian? Wait a sec…that’s on page six."), but to organize your thoughts in your own mind. Bring a copy of the job description in case you need to clarify the responsibilities of the position.

The interviewing role is equally important. Asking intelligent, informed questions is consistently impressive. You will want to go over the law library's (and parent institution's) Web sites with a fine-toothed comb. This will give you an idea of how the information center is organized, what users are interested in, which library resources tend to be emphasized, the quality of the online catalog interface, and whether the Web site as a whole is user-friendly. Just as important as asking about what appears is asking about what information is omitted.

"I asked about things that would not have been obvious from their job description and published materials," says Shea. "The one that comes to mind was security and access policies."

"Interviewing" suggests a wide variety of the library’s issues also enhances a candidate's position, as it displays interest in not only the job, but also the community as a whole. Amy Taylor, now a librarian at the Georgetown Law Center Library, took advantage of the chance to ask questions.

"I asked about the library's long-range plan, about the new ideas/projects that were undertaking," she says, "about the possibilities for collaboration among librarians and also with the law center community, about the support for technological innovation, and during smaller group interviews, I asked individual librarians to tell me what they found most satisfying about their work and why."

Taylor's last question was particularly smart because it demanded a positive answer. Instead of asking the librarians "Are you satisfied with your job?" (a question to which almost every savvy person will say, "yes"), she also asked for specific examples. If the person you're talking with has trouble articulating a satisfying aspect of his or her job, that is telling in itself.

If the job seeker has a law degree, he or she is guaranteed to hear the question, "So, why don't you want to be a lawyer?" Often someone who works outside the law library asks this question, but it will come up. A sincere, yet diplomatic, answer is the best bet. A bad answer: "Because lawyers are all stressed, arrogant workaholics." A better answer: "Given my organizational skills and service orientation, I would be a better fit as a librarian."

One of our respondents suggested another appropriate answers: "I tried practice and did not like it" or "I love to teach." Citing statistics on the overabundance of lawyers in contrast to the relatively few librarians available to teach legal research skills also illustrates that you are more in demand as a librarian than as an attorney.

The presentation isn't everything. Do not overemphasize the presentation portion of your interview. It's easy to spend hours obsessing about your 30-minute talk on legislative history and forget that the presentation is often finished before lunch, with several hours left in the interviewing day.

"I was given a very solid piece of advice by a current law librarian," says Taylor. "They want to make sure that you can stand up in front of a group of people and talk coherently. This is an entry-level job, and you're a new librarian, so nothing you say will be new to them. It sounds harsh, but it's true, and it took the pressure off of me. I could focus on being competent rather than dazzling."

"Because the presentation is a competency test, it is normal to be nervous. As always, practice makes perfect. Also, if possible, visit the library before your interview to get a feel for the room where you'll present. The more details you have, the more you can visualize yourself succeeding there.

Show that you have kept up with the profession and are aware of current issues. The organization, structure, and dissemination of information continue to change rapidly, which significantly affects law libraries. In particular, some administrators use the proliferation of online legal databases as evidence that law librarians are more or less obsolete. Your job as a candidate is to educate them on the role of the 21st century librarian.

When talking with the librarians, explain how you would combat the "free online information" perception among law library users and the institution's administration. You will win major points for reminding everyone how important their own jobs are.

When talking with the administration, be an advocate for the library profession. Point out that the need for information experts is greater now than ever before. Previous *AALL Spectrum* and *Law Library Journal* issues (both available online) and your regional literature are the best sources for reading about current trends in the profession. And, of course, draw from your own experiences in libraries, whether you were the student library assistant or a regular "civilian" patron.

Practice the Golden Rule. Always treat your interviewers and others at the institution the way you would want to be treated.

While finding the right job is important, finding the right people to work with may be even more important. Remember, you spend more time with your co-workers than you do with your friends and family. No matter how much talent and enthusiasm you bring to a first job, both will suffer from a lack of feedback, too much feedback, chronically disgruntled support staff, unlike co-workers, or an institutional culture that is incompatible with your lifestyle.
For instance, how does the institution appear to treat diverse people? Take note of whether it is welcoming, or at least accommodating, of differences such as race, sexual orientation, religion, or political and social background. You will spend 40 or more hours a week with these people, so make sure that you will be happy and comfortable in the environment.

Candidates must also ensure that they present a proper mixture of confidence and humility. Most candidates do not intend to be rude when they fail to thank someone for the ride to the airport or for a meal or when they overlook acknowledging a member of the support staff because an assistant dean has entered the room. Understandably, job candidates are taking in a lot of information and thinking and processing incoming information on multiple levels. But make manners a priority!

Treat everyone well, regardless of where you think they fit into the hierarchy. People will remember, especially those staff members who are used to being overlooked yet wield enormous influence. It is hard to remember that even though for you this is an extraordinarily stressful experience, it is just another routine day for your interviewers. Being sincerely polite always makes a favorable impression.

**After the Interview: Active Waiting**

While it is tempting to fall into a state of relief or celebration now that the interview is over, there is still work to be done. First, take a minute for yourself and take a deep breath. Find ways to relax. Call your mentor for reassurance. Do not dwell on the negative; instead, focus on what you did well. If no job offer is extended, then it may be appropriate to ask how you could have improved your chances. But until then, think positively.

Second, put your name in front of the interviewers one last time. While those in the institution may have a favorable impression of you from the in-person visit, the memory fades with each passing minute. Write effective thank you notes to make your final impression a positive one.

Ideally, you want to write to everyone you interviewed with, but given that sometimes you see 40-50 people during the course of one interview, this is not always practical. In that case, you might write just the department heads or those who hosted the interviews in their offices and ask them to pass the note along to their colleagues. Depending on the culture of the institution, either handwritten or e-mailed notes may be appropriate.

In the body of the thank you notes, reference a specific detail from each interview, whether that detail is a concern about the number of periodical subscriptions cancelled or a question you received that you did not have the opportunity to answer fully. This shows that you were truly listening to each person and reflects positively on you.

Third, always have a Plan B. Clinical studies show that having a Plan B is 89 percent successful in preventing unwanted nervous breakdowns. If your first choice does not offer you a job, have a contingency plan. If a library does offer you a job, create a self-rubric to evaluate whether it’s the right job for you, using both the criteria mentioned above and your personal criteria.

If you receive more than one offer, come up with a rational way to compare them. One of the authors fashioned a multi-columned chart in Microsoft Word with 40 factors that influenced the decision, ranging from “Opportunities for professional growth” to “Would my office have a window?”

**Conclusion**

Welcome to the profession! Hopefully, that fifth panel of the cartoon is no longer blank for you. Both authors of this article recently went through the interviewing process and answered the “Now what?” question to their satisfaction (and to the satisfaction of friends and family who had grown tired of explaining why their relatives were in the “21st grade”).

We would be glad to talk to any job applicants about any aspect of the interviewing process. As new librarians ourselves, we look forward to meeting new members of the profession and working with existing members. You can reach Katherine at kmash@utk.edu and Nathan at npreuss@utk.edu. Best wishes in your job search!

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**Job Search Checklist**

**Start searching online.** Good Web sites to check regularly include AALL’s Job hotline (www.aallnet.org/hotline/hotline.asp), Special Libraries Association, and local library listings. However, don’t forget about the value of word-of-mouth searches, too.

**Determine which job(s) would be best for you.** Consider previous commitments, such as your marital status or children; the locale, such as your capacity to live with the weather, cultural activities, or environment; and how your professional interests and goals match with the institution’s.

**Research the job.** Learn as much as you can about the institution and the librarians who work there. In addition to the library’s Web site, AALL’s Member Search (in the Members Only Section of AALLNET) can be a useful source for information on librarians. Don’t be afraid to ask—the best source of information about any institution and its staff may be other librarians.

**Screening interview.** During a screening interview expect to hear a summary of the job and the library. Be forthcoming about your strengths and your hopes for a position, so both you and the library have the best chance of making an informed choice about whether you are right for one another.

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**Keep up with the profession and current issues.** Previous AALL Spectrum and Law Library Journal issues (both available online) and your regional literature are the best sources for reading about current trends in the profession. Also draw from your own experiences in libraries, whether you were the student library assistant or a regular “civilian” patron.

**Practice the Golden Rule.** Always treat your interviewers and others at the institution the way you would want to be treated. Remember that even though for you it is an extraordinary stressful experience, it’s just another routine day for your interviewers.

**Write thoughtful thank you notes.** Ideally you should write to everyone you interviewed with. Depending on the culture of the institution, either handwritten or e-mailed notes may be appropriate. In the body of the thank you notes, reference a specific detail from each interview to show that you were truly listening and engaged.

**Evaluate your job offer.** When a library offers you a job, create a self-rubric to evaluate whether it’s the right job for you. If you receive more than one offer, come up with a rational way to compare them.