

Today's Public Library Career

By Paula Wilson

"If you don't know where you are going any road can take you there."—Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

Public libraries continue to evolve over time as the needs of our communities change. Today we can point to a progression of services that did not exist one hundred years ago—entrepreneurial spots, makerspaces, computers, and Wi-Fi to name a few. The public library has evolved throughout time from its roots in democracy as the "people's university" to the community commons open and accessible to all that we know today. This evolution compels library workers to continually update, upgrade, and improve their skills and knowledge in order to meet the needs of their communities.

Hiring managers update job descriptions to match the changing job duties and responsibilities required of public librarians. In turn, librarians update their skills, pursue professional development opportunities, and change and shift into different roles. As this occurs in the field, library schools update their classes to reflect the knowledge and capabilities needed to serve library patrons and customers—also known as "the public." Ah, the public! The reason we do what we do, the very reason we exist is to serve the public.

Libraries Are for People Not Books

What do we find when we review the core values of librarianship? As defined by the American Library Association (ALA) they are access; confidentiality and privacy; democracy; diversity; education and lifelong learning; intellectual freedom; the public good; preservation; professionalism; service; and social responsibility.¹ Recently, I attended a webinar by Michael Stephens, associate professor in the School of Information at San Jose State University. He discussed that the heart of libraries is "supporting learning and our users' curiosity through every means possible" and that "information work and any work where we put people together with information—this is going to be emotional work as well."²

Stephens' work on the heart of librarianship reminds us that when once a public library's focus was books or things, at the very core of what we do as public librarians today is the people, or public service. This then begs the question, why are people attracted to public librarianship—is their reason based on reality or perception?

Recently I posted the following request on social media for my friends, family, and colleagues: Finish this sentence: *If you walked into an animal clinic, you would expect everyone who works there loves animals. Therefore, if you walk into the public library you would expect everyone who works there loves _____.*

When all tallied up, there were no surprises. Most responses were books and reading (34). Public service was next (15) with learning and knowledge trailing (14). Of course, there were those trolls who could not resist: quiet, order, sanitizer, cardigans.

The purpose of the question was to gauge the perception of what people think we do, librarians included, as motivation for entering the field. Most importantly, we must ask ourselves why we work in public libraries. What attracts us to this field of work? Do we love books, or do we love people?

Often when we tell people we work at the library we hear, "You must love books. I wish I could sit around and read all day!" Or, during an interview, when we ask an applicant why they want to work at the public library and they tell us it is because they love books and reading. We know, first and foremost, that our work is about people. Certainly, we must love books and reading,

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but mostly we must love helping people. Public librarians help people with books, reading, learning, technology, and more within the framework of the profession's core values.

In order to find your life's work in the public library be very clear on what public librarians do, why we do it and how it fits in with your personal values, career goals and passion. Because at the very core of what we do is public service.

Take, for example, the roving librarian. In the mid-1980s when Barbara Ford³ suggested removing the reference desk in favor of the roving or roaming librarian, the service model began to evolve to one of a service mindset of "meet the user where they are." This new approach required staff to be proactively seeking users' questions—like a retail service. Staff with a predisposition to books or things versus people would find this approach uncomfortable or awkward.

Where Do You See Yourself in the Public Library?

Public libraries offer a broad range of jobs whether they require an advanced library degree or expertise in another area such as finance, human resources, marketing, or information technology. If you have been in the field for many years and are ready for a change, remember that lateral shifting rather than climbing up the ladder to administration, is also a viable option. Some people make great librarians and do not necessarily want to be in a supervisory role.

Public librarianship is a career you can spend a lifetime in because as the needs of the public change, our services evolve to meet those needs. Staff who provide services constantly update their skills and knowledge whether they serve external customers directly or are in support roles and are serving the staff who are serving customers on the front lines.

If you are already working in a public library or are new to libraries, how do you best get to where you want to go? A great place to start is by reviewing current job titles⁴ and descriptions online at websites

like joblist.ala.org, indeed.com, and governmentjobs.com. Read job descriptions to learn more.

Once you have narrowed down your possibilities to two or three job titles consider the possibility of setting up an informational interview. There are four key benefits to an informational interview:⁵

1. You will gain invaluable insight from an insider on your target industry and company as well as the skills required to enter and excel in your target occupation. The information you gather will be up-to-date and directly relevant as you are getting it firsthand from a practitioner.
2. You will gain important visibility, widen your professional network, and gain invaluable referrals in the industry if the interviewee is accommodating and gives you the names of peers in the industry who may be of further help. These referrals may well end up revealing a position in the pipeline that you were not previously aware of.
3. Informational interviews are an excellent forum to build confidence, reduce anxiety, and prepare for real job interviews when a position does arise.
4. The informational interview will aid you in clarifying your career goals as you explore different career paths and learn more about the different roles, skills required, and responsibilities entailed from an experienced insider.

During an informational interview, the focus should be entirely on the person who has agreed to meet with you. Ask questions such as:⁶

- How do you get into this line of work?
- What do you enjoy about it?
- What's not so great about it?
- What's changing in [children's services or your area of expertise]?
- What kinds of people do well in [children's services or your area of expertise]?

Finding someone in the role can be as easy as contacting your local public li-

Selection of Public Library Position Titles, 2016⁴

- Adult Programs and Services Librarian
- Automated Network Services
- Branch Volunteer Coordinator
- Business Librarian
- Cataloger
- Children's Librarian
- Children's Services Manager
- Communication and Marketing Specialist
- Community Librarian
- Cultural and Community Affairs
- Customer Experience Librarian
- Digital Learning Coordinator
- Early Literacy Librarian
- Genealogy Librarian
- Head of Information and Digital Services
- Information Technology Director
- Online Experience Coordinator
- Operations Manager
- Outreach and Youth Services Manager
- Patron Services Technician
- Public Services Librarian
- Reference and Public Services Librarian
- Technology and Media Supervisor
- Teen Librarian
- Web Developer
- Youth Services Librarian

brary, finding that person within your own organization, or a neighboring library system. Additionally, you can find a person in the job you desire by simply searching through LinkedIn. You may already know someone in that role or know someone who knows someone. Remember that you might find more success with a warm contact should one of your connections be able to make that introduction.

What Does Your Future Look Like?

The future looks bright and your career exploration and the results from your informational interview have confirmed that you are indeed headed down the right path toward your life's passion. So, how do you get there? Have you identified what credentials and experience you need and where and how to get them? Take stock in your current skills and experience. Ask yourself if your previous work experience transfers to the new job.

In addition, it is important to know what the future trends are for your area of expertise. Futuring and understanding how trends affect libraries and specifically, your area of expertise, and how you fit in will help demonstrate in any interview that you are clearly the person they need to hire.

Take, for example, the concept of emerging adulthood.⁷ If you want to become a programming librarian, then understanding the demographic of early twentysomethings would benefit you greatly during an interview. Review the trend spots available through the Center for the Future of Libraries (www.ala.org/tools/future/trends) to discover if they affect your area of expertise. Become knowledgeable about future trends in public libraries because staff who can help libraries navigate these trends will always be in demand.

How else to close the gap between where you are today and your dream library job? Professional development opportunities exist everywhere for public librarians. A great place to look is your state library association. If you are not a member, become a member. You do not have to be a librarian to be a member. Join subgroups and roundtables related to the field you want to enter. Let people know that you are looking for opportunities in that arena. If you want to be a children's librarian but have always been a collection development librarian, let people know. You will be surprised at how much easier it is to get where you want to go when you let people help. Outside of your local area look to PLA for professional development opportunities through PLA membership, webinars, and publications.⁸

With certifications and accreditation, an updated and polished résumé in hand, a solid understanding of the work, you are ready to start knocking on doors. A word of advice—don't discount or downplay transferable skills you have from previous jobs both inside and outside of the library. In other words, you can be credentialed and degreed, but being personable and approachable is equally important whether you work directly with the public or when being a valued organizational citizen.

The Soft Skills of Librarianship

Hard skills like cataloging books and searching databases can be taught, measured, and credentialed. Soft skills, like adaptability, must be acquired, practiced, and perfected but are difficult to measure. When asked what skills they need in library school graduates, library leaders were apt to focus much more on soft skills and mindset than specific duties.⁹ These skills are not only needed in new graduates, but all library workers because even those who work in support roles do not operate in silos. Those in administration and support must provide excellent customer service to those who serve the frontlines. Soft skills are essential for career success; soft skills are what bring an employee's performance to life. However, they are also the key to successful organizations, successful libraries. A library that does not have exceptional *internal* customer service cannot achieve exceptional *external* customer service.

Recently I attended a workshop, Organizational Citizenship, facilitated by Dr. Rachel Rubin.¹⁰ Participants were asked to identify skills most admired in a coworker and skills most admired in a leader. We learned there was a great deal of overlap in which all were soft skills: approachable, balanced, calm, compassionate, confident, decisive, empathetic, flexible, enthusiastic, fair, good listener, humorous, leads by example, personable, positive, professional, respectful, and supportive.

Public libraries hire for good customer service so let's take a look at four key personality traits that are found in someone

who gives good customer service: (1) high emotional intelligence, (2) positivity, (3) adaptability and (4) a passion for helping people. Now, let's approach this as a hiring manager. What type of question might I ask an applicant to determine their customer service potential? From an applicant's point of view, how do we answer the question in order to best present ourselves?

The first character trait is high emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is the term used to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions, as well as the emotions of others.¹¹ How do we know if we possess this trait? We have a heightened self-awareness, self-regulation, internal motivation, and empathy—it's really a combination of all these social skills. Think about someone in your library who is great at customer service and ask, do they have those traits?

Good customer service people also have a positive attitude. As we know, positive-minded people generally look on the bright side of things. In terms of customer service, it means that they are more likely to engage with customers, put in extra effort, get along with others, and—due to their sunny outlook—accept challenges others might avoid.

In order to test for a positive attitude, hiring managers might ask you why you left your last employer. Did you leave because there was no room for growth or you learned everything you could and wanted to take on more responsibility? Find a way to describe a negative as a positive.

Good customer service people are adaptable and flexible. They are also more likely to learn new processes, systems, technologies, and be comfortable with erratic work schedules, as well as navigate the unpredictability of public service better than others.

In order to find the adaptable and flexible applicant, hiring managers look for those who demonstrate they have taken on new responsibilities in their past roles and those who show a true desire to constantly learn something new and improve their skills. Questions you might ask include: "What skill do you feel like you're still missing?" or "What do you want to learn next?" This will help to identify those

who truly want to get better at what they do and the ones who think they already know it all. This question also identifies a lifelong learner—a characteristic needed greatly in forward-thinking libraries.

Good customer service staff have a passion for helping people. At the frontlines, you can find such a person running out the door after a patron stating, “I found another one,” referring to books or movies for which the person was searching. Without a passion for helping people, the experience is emotionless, for both employee and customer. Even if you have listed “passion for helping people” or “people person” on your résumé it must be illustrated *by example* in the answers you give during the interview. If not, it is just words on a paper. Use examples that include helping both external customers and internal ones (coworkers, Friends of the Library members, employees within other municipal departments).

How to Answer Behavioral Questions that Assess Soft Skills

Behavior-based interview questions generally start with any one of the following phrases:¹²

- Tell me about a time when you . . .
- Describe a situation when you were faced with a problem related to . . .
- Tell me how you approached a situation where . . .
- Think about a time in which you . . .

Because you don't want to sound scripted nor appear nervous, an effective strategy used to answer these questions is the STAR method. The STAR method²³ benefits you because it makes it easier for the employer to assess behavioral attributes and it gives you a structured method in which to respond. Here's how it works:


- **Situation:** This gives context to your answer so it might include where you were working at the time, what your role was and any brief background information.
- **Task:** You need to communicate what you were trying to do or

achieve in the example.

- **Action:** Describe what actions you took to manage the task in that particular situation.
- **Result:** Show how you made a difference, added value, or had an impact on the bottom line. The outcome can be quantifiable or anecdotal.

This technique will help you to appear natural and your answers seamless without leaving out key details. Using the STAR method, you can easily illustrate that you have mastered many of the soft skills, which dovetail nicely with your credentials, college degree, and previous experience.

Conclusion

Whether you are new to libraries and carving out your niche or you have been in the library field for many years, you will find that you can reinvent and reposition yourself in this profession. There are many opportunities for librarians who are passionate about helping people, adaptable and who are lifelong learners willing to take on new challenges and explore lateral career moves or take on supervisory roles. Explore different roles and know where you want to go. Develop a career plan to get there. Your contributions further the field of public librarianship. When you find your passion in libraries we all benefit—your coworkers, your library, and your community. 

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