

# How to Give Your Job Search a Happy Ending



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## Game Changers

With the recession barely behind us, entering the job market is an intimidating and often dreaded prospect for new professionals. It's no secret that the recession caused employment in the library and information fields to dwindle. Even so, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (<http://www.bls.gov/>) reports that an uptick in the U.S. economy will generate more than two thousand MLIS jobs over the next decade—faster than the average for all occupations. And there's even more good news here, which often goes overlooked: If you act with confidence and understand what constitutes each step in the job search process (cover letter, résumé, and interview), you'll be well-equipped to land a professional position for which you're qualified.

## The Job Search, Demystified

Before you begin your job search process, it's important to understand what you're getting into. After an open position is advertised, employers typically are inundated with dozens of résumés. During their initial screening of applicants, search committees will declare approximately fifty percent of the applicants unqualified or undesirable. Other times, employers will

advertise a position even when they plan to appoint an inside candidate, putting you on the sidelines before you even begin the process. The hard truth of the matter is that the ultimate selection isn't always fair or the best candidate for the job.

Navigating the job search process takes patience and persistence if you are to prevail. Understand that it takes time for selection committees to gather candidate-related materials, check references, and conduct candidate interviews. Do as much as you can to move the process along—for instance, be sure to contact your references well before you apply for jobs so that they can start expecting calls—but don't expect to find a job overnight. Do not limit yourself to looking for the “perfect” job.

This is a time when you cannot let your nerves take over. Keep these things in mind as you start the search process:

- Your search is about you and the presentation of yourself.
- You must pique the curiosity and interest of a potential employer.
- You must appreciate that the search can be a grueling process and can become stalled for a variety of reasons.

## Tackling the Cover Letter and Résumé

It is important for you as a job seeker to understand that a cover letter should be action-oriented—use active voice and exhibit a good pace. It's your opportunity to introduce yourself, express your interest in the position, and note key qualifications. The first two paragraphs—which are tough to write—are critical in advancing the interest of a potential employer to read your cover letter and résumé seriously.

Frequently cover letters fall short due to poor writing or content that is not effectively tailored to the job at hand. Indeed, you must identify what the employers' desired qualifications are and not what you think they may be. And of course, your strategy should never be that more about you is better. Hold your opinion of yourself (as well as the number of times you use the pronoun “I”) to a minimum if you want to maximize job offers.

The cover letter is the vehicle that connects you with your résumé. Employers will easily identify “red flags” on a résumé that will jeopardize your prospects of landing the job; here are some of the more frequent

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mistakes applicants make:

- Using an unattractive, cluttered format;
- Making uninformed or untargeted design choices;
- Including an unacceptable number of pages (i.e., more than 2½);
- Including imbalanced content;
- Including incomplete or suspicious employment dates;
- Adding unnecessary information; and
- Failing to identify key accomplishments.

A clean and error-free cover letter and résumé is a must—grammar and spelling count. Avoid language or grammar that you would use when texting or using social media sites; only professional language should land in these documents. Candidates do not get invited for interviews when employers see mistakes on cover letters or résumés. Candidates should also convey in these documents that they understand and share the employers' values.

### You Got the Interview—Now What?

In today's world the way in which job interviews are conducted is in transition, depending on the type of position. What remains the same, however, is that job interviews are like being on a first date, and you'll need to dress to impress. (Make sure you understand what *not* to wear to the interview.)

Be prepared to talk about your internships and experiences and how they helped develop your skill sets. Describe experiences you've had with working at a public services desk, records processing, photographic and scanning work, metadata creation for digital assets, content development of a web portal, blog writing, and supervising others. During the interview, demonstrate your know-how with a story about one or more activities you've completed.

Employers may ask you to sum up your background and experiences in a concise statement. Here is a sample:

I hold an MA in art history, as well as an MLIS with a concentration in special libraries, archives, and cataloging. I improved, created, and implemented art cataloging practices and procedures at a modern art collection organization. I've processed several archival collections, creating finding aids and collection-level MARC records according to DACS standards. I've also copy cataloged and created original records for books and AV materials according to Library of Congress and Rare Books Standards. I've enjoyed working successfully and productively in museum, library, public, and academic settings.

Although the statement is focused on *you*, refrain from using "I" too often. Fully appreciate the use of words that inform potential employers of what you have to contribute to a staff and the larger archival program.

Applicants fall short in interviews when they fail to prepare for them and succumb to pre-interview stress. Research the potential place of employment before the interview, even when that requires you to invest money and professional time. It's also critical that you be an active part of the interview and exhibit some of your personality. You should know your nonverbal cues or language. Upon departing from an interview, at which time the handshakes and good-byes take place, be sure to leave a professional career portfolio with the head of the search committee. Also write a thank-you note that contains a memorable impression following the interview. Always use Mr., Ms., or Mrs. in the note; this is not the time to address a potential employer by his or her first name unless you're asked to do so. End the note by expressing your continuing interest in the position.

Applicants for employment may find the sidebar "Tips for Success" helpful. Paying attention to the items on this list and working hard to stand out and above others should give you a chance to succeed in the long run. Of course, even as you are searching for employment, you should continue to add to your skill sets, maintain connections, and affiliate with professional organizations.

### Tips for Success

To find success, new professionals need to proactively prepare. The first steps begin while you are still in graduate school selecting courses, acquiring practical experiences, and developing networking skills. Making good choices and forming strong connections during these one or two years sets the stage for what follows in your search for a career. Below are tips to help you act strategically and get a head start in your job search.

- Ask your faculty mentor or job coach for assistance.
- Select job references that can deliver for you.
- Avoid the "shotgun" approach in your job hunt.
- Save time and energy by applying only for professional jobs matching your primary skill sets.
- Market yourself through a targeted cover letter and résumé.
- Tell the truth about your strengths.
- Be prepared to identify areas requiring improvement.
- Be able to talk about yourself and to tell a story or two relating to an internship or practicum experience.
- Keep professionally active during the long search for a job.
- Think positively and maintain a confident attitude at all times.

### Now It's Up to You

I'm delighted by the optimism that many graduates expressed after entering the job market, where keen competition exists for every professional opening. Now the spotlight is on you. Spruce up your résumé and cover letter to successfully land a job in archival management, manuscript administration, special collections librarianship, or other facets of the archives field. With a solid résumé, cover letter, and interview skills in place, you're all the more likely to give your job search the happy ending it deserves. ■