

This article is one of four reflections on retirement written by former AALL member Jean Holcomb, the retired director of King County Law Library, Seattle, WA. Her articles were originally posted on the blog of the Virginia Association of Law Libraries (VAL). She has given the Encore Caucus permission to post them on our webpage.

Up for Adventure: Putting Your Library Skills to Work

By Jean Holcomb

Leaving the library upon retirement doesn't necessarily mean that the skills you spent years acquiring will gather dust. Leaving the workforce might not be a permanent option for a variety of reasons: financial, social, entrepreneurial, or altruistic. Regardless of the motivations calling you to put your skills back in play in the non-profit or for-profit environment, bridges must be crossed to ensure a positive experience.

While the choice to search out opportunities may be driven by a wide range of circumstances, your approach to identifying these opportunities and addressing potential hurdles will be similar. Your search process begins with a process of self-evaluation. Understand what drives your interest in outside involvement. Identify your personal parameters before you actively examine paid work or volunteer settings. How much time do you have to give? What skills do you have to offer? What personal, physical or technical skill limitations do you have? Will transportation be a challenge? How long a commitment are you prepared to make?

Once you complete your self-evaluation, the process of identifying opportunities that match your criteria will be a familiar one. The two classic approaches you used during your library career, classifieds and contacts, remain the mainstays for position identification. Continue to read the literature in your fields of interest. Donna Bausch's article for the April 2008 Virginia Lawyer, "Your Second Season of Service is Just Beginning," is an example of helpful advice about finding ways to use your legal skills in retirement. Stay current with how positions become available in your areas of focus to jump start your search. Maintain personal networks centered on both social and professional interests to keep you apprised of options for involvement.

When did you last prepare a cover letter and resume? When did you last sit on the other side of the table from an employer or volunteer coordinator in an interview scenario? For many law librarians considering post-retirement work or volunteer options, the answer to those questions is probably, "not in the recent past." If you left law librarianship after spending many years with one employer, the answer will most likely be, "not for a very long time."

In preparing a cover letter, remember that this is your best opportunity to ensure you'll get to the interview stage. To convince someone to talk to you in person, your cover letter must explain why you are interested and how your skills match the requirements. If I had a dime for every cover letter we received at the King County Law Library describing why the applicant wanted to live in Seattle, but omitting why they wanted to join us, I definitely could have treated our whole staff to fancy lattes even at Starbucks prices. Have a neutral "reader" review your letter to help detect typos and grammatical errors that kill employer interest. Since much of the application process now proceeds electronically, test your formatting to be sure your transmitted documents have the look you intended.

As you are leaving for retirement, take with you an updated copy of your resume. Continue to keep this document current by revising to reflect your ongoing professional and volunteer experiences. Note training and skill development acquired post retirement. Customize your resume for each opportunity you explore. Use the language of the position announcement and highlight your relevant experience to illustrate why you “fit the bill.”

If an interview will be a part of the selection process, first put yourself in the interviewer’s shoes. Be ready to address questions both directly asked and implied. While the interviewer should not ask about your health, be prepared to volunteer information about your fitness to fulfill position requirements. Also be ready to answer questions about why someone with your qualifications and experiences might be interested in this position. If your colleagues will be younger, what can you say that will defuse concerns about how you will fit in.

If the position you seek is as a volunteer, what can you do to make sure that this is a happy choice for both you and the organization? Be clear about your role. After 20 years working very closely with law library boards of trustees, I learned how important clarity about job responsibility will be to the success of the experience for both parties. Know which particular skills you possess led to your selection. Understand the time and commitment required. Be clear about whether there are hidden costs involved such as an expectation that you will make a financial contribution to the organization. Be aware of who in the organization makes final decisions and who speaks to outsiders about the entity. And the most important key for success: remember that this is not your “day job.”

If a successful placement occurs at the end of this process, enjoy the chance to be of service and to use your particular expertise. Keeping your mind and body engaged will contribute to your self-esteem and quality of life. The opportunity to continue to acquire new skills and new colleagues will make this exercise a worthwhile adventure.