

HIRING A LIBRARY DIRECTOR

Hiring a director is one of a library board's most important duties. While it can be a time-consuming process with many aspects to consider, it is also an opportunity to infuse the library with new energy, vision, and leadership.

Selecting a library director is a big responsibility, and library boards concerned with developing a successful future for their library should have a clear understanding of the many steps involved in the process.

Before launching into the library director hiring process, even before there is an urgent need, it's important to consider and review your library's mission and vision statements, as well as long-range plans and short-term goals, to help inform your preparations.

AVOIDING PITFALLS

The search for a new director can invigorate and energize a library. During the hiring process, the library board has an opportunity to take a fresh look at services and to reflect on the library's future direction. However, there are a few "pitfalls" to avoid:

- Don't rush to resolution.
Reviewing applicants takes a lot of work and time. Recognizing the importance of having a director in place, a board may make a hasty hiring decision without reflecting on the qualities and vision needed in a new director. One example of this is promoting an internal candidate without going through the complete search process. Internal candidates should be evaluated as thoroughly as external candidates.
- Don't hire to the weaknesses or strengths of the former director.
Evaluate every candidate on his or her own merit. Each will have strengths and weaknesses. Finding a comfortable balance of skills and attitudes is essential.
- Don't assume all candidates are 100% candid.
Sometimes candidates inflate their abilities and achievements. A thorough reference and background check should be conducted. Attention should be paid to both what is said and not said during reference checks.
- Don't put too much emphasis on technical abilities.
A library director should be more than a good librarian. Great library directors are visionary leaders that communicate well with the board, staff, and community leaders.

HAVING AN INTERIM PLAN

If the directorship becomes vacant without prior notice, the library board should have an interim plan in place to ensure the smooth operation of the library. An interim plan will allow the board to proceed with detailed succession planning in a thorough and orderly manner, with the knowledge that the library is continuing to operate as usual.

Boards need to think in terms of how the library would operate if the director were suddenly unable to come to work. The plan can be relatively simple, but should answer the following questions:

- Who will serve as a temporary director?
- Who are the members of the management team and what are their areas of responsibility?
- Who can authorize payment of salaries and bills?
- What is the role of the board during this time?

Board members should know the details of the interim plan and have confidence in the abilities of a temporary director and the management team to respond immediately in a calm manner. Libraries should be well organized enough to operate for a few days until the board can meet and formally name an interim director who will oversee library operations while the search is underway for a new director.

GETTING THE PROCESS STARTED

When the board first learns the director is leaving, a brainstorming session to decide how to proceed should be scheduled. This is an opportunity to move the library forward and possibly make significant changes in the way the library operates. The board should be prepared to spend a good amount of time evaluating their situation. The following are just a few typical questions to consider:

- Is the board satisfied with the library and the direction it has taken under the previous director or is it time for a new approach?
- Are there area libraries that offer different models of service to emulate?
- What special strengths or qualifications should a new library director possess to be successful in the community? For example, is experience with construction projects or special political acumen needed?
- Has there been a succession plan in place that offers assurance of internal applicant's qualifications?
- Should the board consider a national search or are there strong candidates in state to consider?
- Should a library consultant be hired to conduct the search?

The board may want to conduct an exit interview with the departing director, possibly in closed session, and use it as a learning experience before moving forward. Sample discussion topics might be:

- How was the board/director relationship? How could it be improved?
- What did the director like most/least about the job?
- What issues should the board be addressing in the near future?
- Is there anything unique about the staff to share with a successor?
- Are there inside candidates who should be considered? What are their strengths/weaknesses?
- Is there any parting advice to offer before leaving?

GOING FORWARD

Allow sufficient time to make a thoughtful decision. The following is a list of components that might be included as part of the process, with or without a consultant:

- Appoint an interim director to administer the library during the transition period. The State Library of North Carolina has procedures for the appointment of an interim director based upon NCGS § 125-7, Article 14 § 153A-267, and Administrative Code 07 NCAC 02I .0201(3).
- Determine the advisability of hiring a consultant to assist with the search for a new director.
- Conduct a visioning session for board, key staff, and possibly members of the public.
- Revise library director job description.
- Post the position.
- Review applications.
- Interview candidates.
- Deliberate after the interviews.
- Check candidate references.
- Offer and negotiate the position with the preferred candidate.
- Review the contract (if applicable).
- Develop a plan to introduce the new director to key community leaders, the staff, and the public.
- Plan a welcome reception.

DECIDING WHETHER OR NOT TO USE A CONSULTANT

A library board can conduct the search on their own by forming a search committee. The advantage to the do-it-yourself process is that consultant fees are avoided, and the library board will have full ownership of the process. This is particularly true when several board members are experienced in the recruiting process for executive positions. Boards that do not have members with expertise at hiring for administrative and executive positions will want to carefully consider the potential pitfalls and consider their responsibility for due diligence to their communities.

Hiring a new library director requires a significant time commitment on the part of the search committee. The tasks for replacing the library director should be the same whether a consultant is used or not, so the search committee must be realistic about sharing the necessary tasks and committing to the process in a timely manner. With these caveats in mind, it is perfectly possible for a skilled board to locate and hire a suitable candidate without the use of a consultant.

CONTINUING THE PROCESS

The board should prepare a budget for the replacement process. Costs will vary by the scope of the search (national vs. regional vs. local). The budget may include funds for the following expenses:

- Advertising costs
- Travel reimbursement for out-of-state candidates
- Background check costs
- Reception expenses for the newly hired director

The hiring of a new library director is a public task. Library boards should be particularly aware of:

- The impact of the Open Meetings Law on the hiring process – The board may hold a closed session to consider the qualifications of candidates, but must be in open session in an official meeting to take final action on the appointment of the new director: [North Carolina Open Government Guide](#)
- Illegal interview questions – It is illegal for an employer to discriminate against a job applicant because of his or her race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy), national origin, age, disability, or genetic information. Any questions that ask a candidate to reveal information about such topics is a violation of federal laws: <https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/practices/index.cfm>.

JOB ANNOUNCEMENTS

Finding and hiring the right library director is the key to the library's success. The job announcement must be attractive enough to entice high quality candidates. Salary and benefits should be competitive with area libraries of like size. Posting a salary range (rather than a fixed salary) and being willing to negotiate salary demonstrates a board's flexibility to highly qualified candidates. The initial salary negotiation between the board and the director will lay the groundwork for the working relationship that is to come. If the initial offer is overly generous, it can lead to unreasonable expectations and mutual frustration in the future. On the other hand, it will be difficult to develop a relationship of mutual trust if either party feels undervalued.

To attract a professionally qualified and diverse array of candidates, the job announcement for library director should include a description of the community as well as any special skills the candidate will need. Generally, the announcement should be a concise, yet thorough summary of:

- Professional duties and responsibilities
- Educational credential requirements
- Desired strengths, skills and characteristics
- Expected community commitments
- Positive library and community attributes
- All salary, benefit, and compensation packages
- How, where and when candidates should respond

Please note for North Carolina, there is a statutory requirement for the library director to have or be eligible for NC Public Librarian Certification ([07 NCAC 021 .0201\(3\)](#)). Suggested wording for job post under qualifications: *possession of or eligibility to obtain North Carolina public librarian certification.*

Once the announcement is prepared, it needs to be widely distributed. Some common public library distribution points are:

- **Your library and local government websites**
- State Library of North Carolina <https://statelibrary.ncdcr.gov/nc-libraries/current-library-jobs>
Job post form: <https://fs25.formsite.com/statelibrarync/6mwtbf7uba/index.html>
- NCLA (North Carolina Library Association) job posts will be linked from State Library posts.
- NC Works Online <https://www.ncworks.gov/vosnet/Default.aspx>
- NCPLDA (North Carolina Public Libraries Directors Association) listserv
Send request to slnc.ld@ncdcr.gov
- ARSL (Assoc. for Rural & Small Libraries) <https://www.arsl.org/jobs>
Send request to: jobs@arsl.org
- SELA (Southeastern Library Assoc) <https://selaonline.org/>
Submit to <https://www.selaonline.org/jobs/jobform/>
- Nearby state library associations:
 - Virginia Library Association: <https://www.vla.org/post-a-position-on-jobline>
 - South Carolina Library Association:
https://scala.memberclicks.net/index.php?option=com_mcform&view=ngforms&id=20061#!/
- LYRASIS Job Bank: <https://www.lyrasis.org/about/Pages/Job-Bank.aspx>
- ALA JobLIST <https://joblist.ala.org/>
- Indeed <https://www.indeed.com/hire?co=US&hl=en&from=gnav-menu-homepage>
- Library Journal <http://jobs.libraryjournal.com/>

Note: Some job posting sites charge a fee.

ESSENTIAL QUALIFICATIONS

Regardless of the library's size, there are five basic characteristics that should be evident in a good library director:

- Common sense – This characteristic is often overlooked and yet is essential to good leadership. Common sense plays a critical part in policy development and implementation. It determines whether a person is rigid or flexible in library operations and can successfully manage the day-to-day running of the library.
- Decision-making ability – The person should be self-confident enough to make tough, informed decisions independently and on the spot
- People skills – Communication skills, fairness, friendliness, empathy, sense of humor and, most significantly, being customer focused are all essential.
- Vision – A good director has the ability to scan the environment in the library profession and the world at large to see how change and innovation might improve library service in the community and to spot opportunities to move the library forward with a commitment to excellence.
- Integrity – The individual must demonstrate a commitment to ethical behavior and to the core values of the library profession.

In addition to the characteristics listed above, a good director will have the following skills:

- Financial management skills to develop, implement, and stay within a budget
- Human resources skills that show the ability to hire, fire, and manage people effectively

- Organizational skills and the ability to multi-task

SCREENING CANDIDATES

The board has a variety of options when it comes to considering candidates. The interview team may consist strictly of library board members or can be broadened to include staff, area library directors, and community members. If a consultant is used, that person might be a full member of the interview team or might serve as a facilitator.

Even if an internal candidate has been groomed through succession planning to assume the Director position, the board needs to interview a rich pool of applicants, thus maintaining the validity of the process. Whether internal or external, the candidate who emerges from competition will be in a stronger position to lead.

For most boards the interview process will be two steps: screening and interviewing, with the goal being to determine the following three things:

- Can the candidate do the job?
- Will the candidate do the job?
- Does the candidate's style match well with the library's environment?

The screening portion of the process will be used to develop a short list of candidates to be interviewed. The board needs to determine the makeup of this team. The screening team does not necessarily need to be composed of decision-makers only. The board may choose to broaden the team to include the following:

- One or two key staff members
- An area library director
- A human resource professional
- Community leaders

Part of the screening process may include phone interviews and, with permission of the candidate, preliminary reference checks.

INTERVIEWS

This is the time for the board to get to know the candidates better and for the candidates to learn more about the library and community. The director will represent the library to the community and there needs to be a comfortable fit. Packets of information and an overview of the area should be provided to all candidates before the second round of interviews.

Just as you are trying to gather valid information about the interviewee, be candid in the information supplied to potential applicants. It is never advisable to hide a contentious situation. If there are problematic conditions that will be inherited, be forthright with the information. A successful board/director relationship is one of trust and honesty, and this is the first step in building that relationship.

Questions should be developed to help determine the candidates' competencies regarding the following:

- Strategic thinking
- Dealing with stress
- Customer service attitude
- Workplace politics
- Cultural sensitivity
- Problem solving
- Multi-tasking abilities

Suggested interview questions need to be phrased so that candidates talk about real experiences.

EVALUATION

A consistent rating/rubric process should be set in place. Numerical ratings are not intended to be the basis for hiring, but comparisons that a numbered chart provides can help make the evaluation process more objective for the entire group of interviewers.

REFERENCES

Checking references is a critical task. Some groups check references before any interviews are granted. Others wait until a preliminary decision on a candidate is reached. Do not limit checking references to names given by the candidate. Search out others, including employees the candidate has supervised as well as the candidate's past and present supervisors.

Obtain any requisite permission from applicants to conduct reference checks. Be aware of discrimination laws when probing for information and be sure all information is kept confidential, sharing information with the committee and/or consultant only. Some considerations include:

- Ask about quality and volume of work, specific areas of competence, management style, relationships with the board and staff, and the candidate's ability to function in stressful situations
- Capture words and feelings with notes during the conversations (but do not distribute these to others)
- Listen to what is said as well as what is not said
- Consider the currency of the information
- Double-check any overly negative responses

COMPLETING THE PROCESS

After the preceding process steps are completed, the board makes the decision to hire and submits a conditional offer contingent upon background checks. The initial offer may be made verbally by the library board or the consultant. The offer should contain the actual salary and benefit package, start date, and form of acceptance expected from the candidate.

Once a conditional offer has been accepted by the candidate, the board may want to complete a criminal background check. A release form needs to be signed by the candidate allowing permission for the background check. While this is an additional cost, it is a small amount of money to spend when this person will oversee all of the library's resources.

The final offer should be formalized in writing and presented to the candidate after the background check. The candidate should write to the library board formally accepting the position and re-confirming the start date.

Do not hesitate to reopen the search if current candidates do not meet the qualifications in any capacity. The position is too important to settle for second best.