

Keep those vague phrases coming!

A response to Scott DiMarco

by Marilyn Christianson

In his *C&RL News* article, “I know that’s what it said, but it’s not what we want: The difficulty of really describing a job,” Scott DiMarco roundly criticized our position descriptions and ads as vague and general.¹ He is right, of course. He believes that if only we wrote with more detail and clarity, mismatches would be prevented.

Alas, the forces that shape our environment also shape our hiring practices. One force acting on us is the desire not to be sued, or if sued, not to lose. Even the clearest and best writers among us bow to this. Other forces are money, human feelings, and individual motives. The longest, most detailed ads can hardly prevail against these.

DiMarco seems to believe clearer and more detailed job descriptions will prevent unqualified candidates from applying. You know and I know why they apply. They are desperate, blind to their own weaknesses, lacking in insight, or possessed of insufficiently pruned egos. They need jobs in particular locations. They hope that more qualified applicants haven’t applied. A two-page description of qualifications will not deter them.

The best solution is for a support staff member to scan each application for bare-bones requirements, such as an MLS. Applicants without these requirements need not take the time of a committee.

Closing dates won’t stop them from being late

He seems to think that a closing date will prevent late applications. I’ve served on search committees since before the birth of most freshmen. We always had closing dates and always received late applications. Of course, people knowingly apply late. Some have just started to job hunt. They hope the committee hasn’t begun its work yet. They know how often libraries miss submission deadlines for advertisements, resulting in a short application period for all contenders. If their applications are late, perhaps so are everyone else’s.

Others delay because of the ego-threatening tasks of compiling résumés and asking colleagues to act as references. All too often, the best use of a closing date is simply to make a committee feel comfortable that it won’t be sued by refusing to look at yet another late résumé.

Speaking of hirings that should not have happened, DiMarco says: “Many of these mismatches could have been avoided if the position description had been detailed and more in line with the library’s expectations.”²

Tell it like it really is?

Unfortunately, most of the story about an open position, such as what it is really like to work for a prospective supervisor, can’t

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and won't be delineated in an ad. Advertisements can't point out that employees haven't gotten raises in three years or that the air ducts are filled with mold. These specifics might indeed prevent mismatches. Most ads already delineate the basic daily activities, such as "works reference desk." I don't know why DiMarco acts as if they don't. Being more specific, such as saying "Works twelve hours per week at the central reference desk," will only get libraries in trouble as times change.

DiMarco dislikes general phrases such as: "Strong and positive commitment to public service," "An understanding of user behavior," and "A rapport with faculty, students, and staff."

Why are the "common currency" phrases he abhors, well, common? In two words, *money* and *lawsuits*. Paying for an ad that lists all possible attributes of good communication skills, for example, could exhaust the search committee's budget right there. What are these skills? Libraries need people who can speak easily with their patrons. Libraries need people who have the emotional wherewithal to get out the door to visit members of the teaching faculty. We need people who change with the times. We need people who cheerfully work when needed. Committees use those vague and general phrases to remain within legal bounds when they talk to references. They rely on their inclusion to be able to request evidence that the candidate will get out of the library, will learn new skills, and will work weekends without exhausting management with whining.

DiMarco seems to think that only people who work well with the public apply for public services jobs. Who among us has not met library school students lacking this very quality? They learned their stereotypes before they went to library school, and not all the warnings of employment counselors or experiences in internships will dislodge what

some need—a belief that they can succeed in a profession despite their terrible interpersonal skills. "Libraryland" is filled with candidates who in no way should be let loose on students and faculty.

How to choose the best candidate

How can you weed them out? Require evidence of positive interpersonal skills and a desire to help the public. How do you find this evidence? Call references and question them closely. What can you ask references about? The advertised required and desired qualifications.

DiMarco alludes to lawsuits but fails to acknowledge that those very phrases he dislikes can provide a certain level of preemptive protection to an employer. DiMarco is right when he points out that being stuck with people who don't have needed skills causes wear and tear on the whole staff. These people will not weed themselves out of the pool; search committees must do it.

Let us suppose you are on a committee that has to decide between the following two candidates for a position as engineering librarian. The first candidate has an advanced degree in engineering but was fired from a job because of his or her hostile communication style. Casting about for a new direction, this person goes to school to become a librarian and applies for your position. When references are called, they are unable to give examples of effective communication. The candidate spends two years studying engineering before deciding against it as a career.

This second candidate has demonstrated excellent people skills as a successful salesperson at Radio Shack while in library school. The store manager cites examples that show the ease with which the candidate works with customers. You do not want to have to hire the first person simply because he or she has more engineering knowledge. You need those vague phrases about interpersonal skills or commitment to public service to save you.

Many of us would like to be clearer and more specific. We'd like to ask for what we really want. We'd like to hire those who would fit in well with others on our staff. But who could get the following ad approved?

Reference Librarian: Required: Smiles when patrons approach. Speaks well. Listens better. Still smiles while answering the 10,000th bathroom-location question. Writes most sentences in the active voice. Shows instead of tells. Does not make fun of patrons. On handouts uses big type and few words. Happily works nights and weekends. Goes out to faculty offices on own initiative. Between patron questions, studies reference sources that he/she should have used to answer the last question but didn't. Learns spelling and meaning of important words in area of assigned responsibility. The ideal candidate is bored by assigning blame and does not find comfort in excusing bad service by cit-

ing policy. MLS. *Desired-*. Gets book orders in before the deadline. Does not have to be drafted but volunteers to teach user education sessions. Remembers to remove uneaten lunches from staff refrigerator.

This is the person I want for reference. If I hire someone who claims to be able to search BIOSIS but can't, I can teach that skill. If I hire someone who claims to love working nights but blows up when actually asked to do so, I can't teach flexibility or professional commitment. At best, I can work with the employee to develop responses where he or she has ability, but no experience. Because nobody would approve ads that clearly state desired qualities in a detailed manner, we need those short phrases to cover in a legal and af-

Scott DiMarco responds

Shortly after my article was published in the June 2000 issue, I received immediate positive feedback from many esteemed colleagues. I thank them. I thank the writer of this essay for agreeing with many points and welcome her comments on the few differences of opinion. I am sure we all agree that when it comes to the recruitment process, sculpting a job advertisement is easier said than done.

I sympathize with the writer and her frustration about the process and would like to address just a few of the points mentioned. A common mistake is giving the job advertisement far too much credit, as it is just one part of a detailed process.

First, while we all feel for the unqualified job seeker trying to catch a break, it doesn't mean we can include an unqualified applicant in our search. The time spent on such applications is wasted for both parties. Also, certain standards and minimums must be enforced. For example, degree requirements must be adhered to even if they seem "ego-threatening" to many.

The essay perpetuates the myth that one isn't responsible for his or her actions in our society. Accepting late applications because the applicant has just started their search is irresponsible. Try telling government agencies or foundations that your grant application should be considered late because you just heard about it.

How is this fair to those who followed the rules? Lawsuits and liability are far too common for us not to protect ourselves.

A vague position description will only increase frustration within the search process. I, for one, would much rather be presented with as many of the details concerning the position as possible. How else could anyone make an educated decision?

I welcome feedback or comments from colleagues in regards to bettering the search process. After all, we are all in this together.—*Scott R. DiMarco, Herkimer County Community College, dimarcosr@hccc.suny.edu*