

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hiring a Library Director

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The most important decision a governing board or a municipality can make is the selection of a library director. The director must be able to work effectively with the board to professionally manage the institution and reflect the ideals of the institution and the community it serves.

When embarking on this process it is appropriate for the board to ask themselves a number of critical questions about the library, the library board and the type of leadership they require. Such questions might include:

- What qualities do you value in your library director?
- What are the most important skills your director must possess?
- What roles do you see the director playing with the board, the staff and the community?
- What significant initiatives and challenges do you foresee for the library in the next five years?
- Do you prefer a well-experienced director or are you willing to give bright young talent a chance?
- Would you prefer (or not) a local resident?

All too often library boards look for the easy way out, the simplest or quickest choice or the cheapest alternative. Competent leadership of the library is essential for its efficient management and future success. Choosing the wrong director will result in more work for the board and a disappointing library. Every library deserves a qualified library director who is respected by the board and community and is appropriately compensated.

In Maine, library boards that are true governing boards have the authority to hire, supervise, and, if necessary, fire the library director. The library director, in turn, has responsibility for the hiring and supervision of library staff and volunteers. The library board has the legal authority and responsibility for determining the compensation and general duties of the director. The board, with input from the director, determines what other positions the library might need. For municipal libraries that have advisory boards, the above falls under the responsibility of the town/city manager.

Library trustees must comply with state and federal laws that prohibit discrimination in hiring. Any written or oral questions to be asked of job candidates should be reviewed in advance by a person familiar with state and federal employment and discrimination law.

ADA Compliance

The ADA requires reasonable accommodations in three areas of the employment process. The first involves the job application process. People with disabilities

may only be asked questions asked of all applicants. Certain types of questions are not allowed. For instance, all applicants should be told the essential job functions and then asked whether there was any reason why they could not perform those functions. But it would not be acceptable to single out someone who uses a wheelchair and ask how that person would do a particular task.

Examples of questions that can and cannot be asked during an interview are included at the Cornell University site listed below. The site defines “essential functions” as “fundamental job duties of the employment position the individual holds or desires. The term does not include the marginal functions of the position.” Job descriptions should be written so that the essential functions are clear. If pre-employment testing is required, then accommodations must be made, if needed, for people to take the test.

The second area requires reasonable modification or adjustments to the work environment or job procedures and rules, to allow a qualified person with a disability to do the work.

The third area requires equal access to whatever insurance and benefits are offered to other employees.

The ADA does not require employers to drop essential functions of a position in an effort to accommodate a person with disabilities. Employers are not expected to provide personal items not available to other employees, but certain accommodations might be expected, such as adjustable chairs, wrist pads, or modified phones.

Cornell University’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations has a web site with special sections devoted to the employment issues under Title I of the ADA. The address for the site is: www.ilr.cornell.edu/edi/accessforall/index.htm.

The Long-Term Effects of this Decision

Not all library boards will face the responsibility of selecting a new director. However, trustees who undertake this process must understand that it is singularly important and will have far-reaching and often long-term effects. Be prepared for a great deal of diligent effort—effort that will be worthwhile if you succeed in hiring the best person for the job.

What to Look for in a New Director

A library director is the chief administrative officer of the library. The director is responsible both for day-to-day management of the organization and for assisting the library board with “big picture” issues like planning and policy-making. In developing the job description and assessing candidates, consider the following:

- experience working with library boards and governing bodies

- knowledge of budget preparation, policy development, administration, and employee supervision
- library experience in the following areas: public service, technical services, and public relations
- demonstrated leadership ability and dependability

Steps to Follow When Hiring a New Director

1. Contact your district consultant who will be happy to assist you through this process of developing a job description and posting the job on the Maine State Library's job listing (www.maine.gov/msl/libs/jobjar.shtml)
2. Appoint a hiring committee to develop or revise a draft job description, job ad, etc.
3. Ideally, the next step is to review the library's long-range plan (if you have one) and analyze progress in reaching the goals and objectives. Knowing where the library needs to go will help trustees define the qualifications needed in the next director.
4. The board must approve a position description that reflects the necessary qualifications and duties of the job. A competitive salary range and fringe benefit package must be established if you hope to attract qualified applicants.
5. The board or a board committee checks references of applicants, evaluates qualifications, and arranges interviews with promising candidates (paying part or all of necessary travel expenses). A uniform list of questions should be developed for use in the interviews and for contacting references. Be sure to have these questions reviewed by someone knowledgeable about employment and discrimination law.
6. The board should make clear to candidates any probationary status, performance evaluation and salary adjustment procedures, and all other terms of employment.
7. In addition to contacting listed references, the board may wish to contact current or past colleagues of the top candidate or candidates to get a more complete picture of the qualifications of the applicant. If you plan to do this, you should first get written permission from the candidate.
8. Once the board has made a hiring decision, it contacts the selected applicant and confirms the appointment and starting date in writing. It promptly notifies applicants not selected. The employment contract and/or letter of appointment could specify that as a condition of employment the director obtain and maintain the appropriate voluntary state certification.
(<http://maine.gov/msl/libs/ce/libcert.shtml>)
9. A thorough orientation program for the new director, similar to that described for trustees.

10. A six-month or one-year probationary period is a common personnel practice. The board and director mutually determine short-and long-term goals for this period. The board evaluates performance regularly throughout this period.
11. Assuming successful completion of probation, the board's supervision and evaluation responsibilities continue. Reviews of the director's performance and attainment of goals and objectives should be carried out annually.

Sources of Additional Information

- A Library Board's Practical Guide to Finding the Right Director. Chicago: American Library Association, 2005.
- Assessing and Supporting Your Chief Executive; A BoardSource Toolkit. Washington: BoardSource, 2010.
- Your district consultant
- Sample job descriptions (www.maine.gov/msl/libs/admin/jobdesc.shtml)
- Sample Interview Questions for Library Director Candidates (attached)

Sample Interview Questions for Library Director Candidates

1. Tell us about your background, including your education, work experience, special skills and knowledge.
2. Why did you apply for this position? What distinguishes you so that you are the right person for this job?
3. What do you like most about your present position?
4. What do you like least about your present position?
5. What strengths do you have that would serve you best in this position?
6. What is an area of improvement that you would like to make in your professional life?
7. How would you describe your management / supervision style?
8. How would your colleagues briefly describe you as a director? What qualities would they talk about most?
9. If you had control over creating the ideal work environment for you, what would it be like? What would the people that you work with be like and what qualities would you like the board and library to have?
10. Tell us about a situation that you had difficulty with as an administrator. How did you resolve the difficult situation and deal with the persons involved?
11. Tell us about a project or accomplishment of which you are very proud and why. This can be related to experience that you are seeking, such as grants writing, building renovation, automation, etc.
12. What do you think are the major issues facing libraries today?
13. Are you able to meet the requirements for this job? When could you begin work here?
14. What questions do you have for us? Is there anything else that you would like to add?

