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Job search during COVID

A new librarian navigating a new normal

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For nearly the last two years, we have faced new challenges in unprecedented ways due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to current technology, however, we have been able to get creative to keep things moving as much as possible and find new ways to do things, including searching for jobs. Like many others, I found myself having to traverse a job search process that involved doing only virtual interviews. In my case, however, I am a new librarian (class of 2018) and this was my first full job search in the profession.

Previously, I was fortunate to have landed a job as a direct hire visiting professor of library services, which was extended to two years due to COVID. This allowed me to put my foot in the door and get the experience I needed to be competitive during the job search process. But I had only experienced one other interview for a resident position, so I had no idea what to fully expect. Of course, having to do this completely virtually added a whole new level of difficulty. Along the way, there were a lot of lessons learned and experience earned that I want to share with both interviewers and interviewees. Especially because I do not see virtual interviews going away as we adjust to the new normal that COVID is creating for us. And while I know many will disagree with some of my points, I do see a lot of advantages to continuing virtual interviews for everyone involved.

The search

Between March and June 2021, I submitted 17 applications, did five preliminary interviews, and had four final interviews before accepting my current position as business librarian at the University of Nebraska-Omaha Libraries at the beginning of June 2021. After accepting my position, I received seven other requests for initial interviews, but I was happy with my offer and turned them down. I attribute my good fortune in responses to the time I took with customizing my cover letters and CVs, and making sure that my website and LinkedIn profile were updated and matched what was on my CV. I did spend about two hours per submission and while that felt like a full-time job, I am glad that I took the time to do it right.

Initial interviews

Four of the five initial interviews I had were on camera, the fifth took place over the phone and they were very specific in saying that they preferred it that way as that is how the process would have been during “regular” times. Honestly, I much preferred having the interviews on camera as they feel much more personal, and you can at least get

some reactions and a better feel for how it went. For these short interviews I did some of the standard prep that you would normally do, but also had other prep to think about for a virtual setting. These are a few of the things I learned from my experience.

- **Job Descriptions**—I re-read job descriptions and dug deeper into the institutions that I was applying to. An advantage of doing this while looking at a screen though is that I was able to leave the tabs open with info and notes to remind myself of the points I was trying to make. You do not want to be reading the screen, as that is obvious, but glancing around to look at something just looks like you are keeping an eye on everyone on the interview committee.

- **Backgrounds and filters**—I was ready with on-camera blurring and turned-off filters. This one might seem obvious, but we've all seen the viral videos of people getting stuck on a filter or not using a background and having a kid/spouse/pet walking behind. In my case, I used blur because my laptop at the time could not handle a full-on background. (I actually had an interviewer ask me how I blurred my background and later they used the same effect during the final interview. That really felt like points in my favor.) You can also use neutral backgrounds that will not distract from you. Of course, if you have a professional looking office or area to do these in, you will not need a background.

- **Distractions**—I made sure to keep all distractions at bay. Again, something that should be obvious but is somehow not. I had more interviewers distracted by something else than I should have had during my search. I scheduled my interviews at times when my husband/ family could entertain my kid and take the dogs out. Since initial interviews are typically half hour to an hour, avoiding distractions was much easier.

Final interviews

I had four final interviews during my job search, and even though I did not have to travel for them, they still took up a lot of energy and time. The fact that they were virtual did not make them any easier, it just made for different challenges. Here are some final interview tips based on my experience.

- **Presentation**—Think about how interactive you want to make this and show off the skills you have teaching synchronously. Use current tech as much as possible but keep it simple. A convenience of Zoom is that you can show off your tech skills, and if something goes wrong you can show off your improvisation skills. And yes, over virtual interviews, something can always go wrong with technology, so be ready for it.

- **Questions**—As with any other interview, have questions ready, but think about the fact that you are not getting the chance to meet people in person and getting to know the campus/community, so really ask those questions that will give you the information you consider important. Some of the questions I used were:

o *Why did you pick (institution) and/or why do you stay?* Really listen to the answers on this one, it is hard to fake enthusiasm for a place you do not like.

o *What are some of the priorities this position should focus on in the first six months?* You can change the amount of time you ask about, but this will give you a great view of the expectations and workload.

o *What do you like/love about the community you live in?* Again, you are not there in person, so hearing about the community will give you a great idea of what is available to you.

• **Distractions**—Distractions are much harder to avoid during all-day interviews than in the initial round. I was fortunate that my family was able to help and were able to take my kiddo for the day, I also made sure my dogs were outside. When you schedule your interview try to do so on a day when you can minimize distractions as much as possible.

• **Temperature/Lighting**—I found this to be an issue during my first full interview and had to improvise for the subsequent ones. You want to make sure that the room you are in is comfortable, and that there are no major temperature changes and lighting changes as the day progresses. The mornings were nice and cool on the side of the house where I was doing my interviews and the light was great, but it would get very warm and dark as the day progressed. Be ready for these kinds of changes throughout the day, it can get uncomfortable and make it hard to see you.

• **Dressing for the interview**—You will want to wear something that you will be comfortable in all day, and as mentioned previously, fully dress for it. While it is unlikely that your entire outfit will be seen, you never know what might happen, and you do not want to get caught wearing pajama pants. And of course, there is the confidence that a good interview outfit will give you, dress the part.

• **Breaks**—Have your lunch, snacks, and drinks ready ahead of time, this way you are not running around your house trying to get yourself something. Breaks go by faster than you think.

What worked and what did not

While in-person connections can be important to the job search process, in this new reality it is doubtful that we will go back to the full “normal” of all in-person interviews. To be honest, I am not sure I would want to go back. There were a lot of things about the virtual interviews that went right for me, and I think for the institutions, along with several things that I would have changed, on both sides. I noticed these advantages as an applicant.

• **No traveling**—I had all my final interviews within a month (three of them in the span of two weeks), this would have been incredibly hard to pull off if these interviews would have been done in person, especially since some of the locations were far from

where I lived. One of the institutions mentioned that they would have their final candidate visit before they had to give a response. This saves time and money for both the institution and the candidate. I can see this continuing in the future.

- **Breaks**—There were real breaks during most of my final interviews. Zoom breaks allowed for turning off the camera and mic and being able to really breathe for a moment. You cannot do this in person.

- **Ability to look things up in the moment**—Virtual interviews allowed for looking things up and sharing links and documents during the interview, you never know what you are going to be asked, so having things on the screen in front of you or pulling them up during your break is great, and it does show off your quick research skills. From my experience, I would recommend that institutions, and candidates, keep the following things in mind when doing virtual interviews.

- **Schedule**—Please keep time zones in mind. I had a situation with an institution being two hours ahead of me, so I found myself having lunch at 10 a.m. Try to figure out a schedule that considers everyone's time zone.

- **Timing**—This one was on me. As the candidate, do not schedule two final interviews on consecutive days. You are not going to have as much time to prep as you think.

- **Questions ahead of time**—One of the institutions shared their interview questions ahead of time with me, which made prepping much easier. It also gave me much more insight into what they were looking for, but, as we all know, it is not always the whole story.

- **Zoom links**—While most of my interviews created one link for the entire day, I had some that had links for every single meeting. Please do not do this, keep it as simple as possible. Also, if you are reusing links, make sure you make it neutral. I had a link that was clearly reused as it was titled "(Other Candidate Name) Interview." It was unprofessional, and it made things very awkward.

- **Virtual lunches**—When meeting in person, lunch is part of your interview. However, watching people eat on camera is awkward. The conversation will not flow as easily or naturally. Keep eating off camera.

- **Virtual or in-person**—Make up your mind. One of my final interviews had me come to campus only to set me up on Zoom in a conference room. Because at times I had a couple of people in the room with me, the camera was set up in front of the room and the people online were getting a full body side view while I hunched over a laptop. If you need to do a hybrid for whatever reason, please think about how you are going to set this up, so it is not so weird and uncomfortable for the candidate.

- **Pets**—I love pets as much as the next person, I have them myself, but they do not belong in an interview. Especially if the side your pet is showcasing is not their cute button nose.

Conclusion

I am sure that as we continue to move forward, we will see more streamlined processes for virtual interviews, and we will know what to expect much more. But until that time happens, we need to help each other learn. I ask that everyone, especially interviewers, have some grace and understanding for each other as we learn how to navigate this new normal.

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