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First Impressions

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Once the interview is over and you have the job, you will be dealing with many first impressions. Some of them are your own impressions of your new work environment; others are your colleagues' impressions of you. What you do and say in the early days of your employment can impact the smoothness of your work life for the next several years. This chapter explores first impressions through the interview process and during those first days on the job.

GETTING MY FIRST LIBRARIAN JOB

While attending graduate school, I was fortunate to work part time as a library assistant in an academic library. This gave me my first impressions of how a library operates, and I was able to observe librarians in their element. This experience also gave me a glimpse of what to expect from my first job as an academic librarian. Although every academic library has its own unique culture, this experience provided a frame of reference.

Unfortunately, I was finishing library school just as the economy was in a tailspin and educational budgets were being obliterated. Knowing that the job market for librarians had become exceptionally competitive made for a stressful final semester. However, I decided to use that semester to do everything possible to increase my chances of getting a job after I graduated. So, in essence, I began working on my first impression before I ever met any potential employers. One of the ways I did that was to convince two librarians in the academic library where I worked to let me co-teach some of their library instruction classes. This was a great learning experience because I was working alongside experienced library instructors. The experience also gave me the confidence to teach library instruction to large groups of students and prepared me for a presentation during an interview. Finally, it helped me stay abreast of the latest Web 2.0 technology tools and gave me ways to embed the tools in my class assignments and presentations.

Another way that I prepared myself for future interviews was by attending library candidates' presentations. I was able to extract ideas from all of the presentations I attended. I knew that I would be applying for jobs in academic libraries, and I knew that I would probably have to give a presentation as part of my job interview. Even if you don't work in a library, it still might be possible to attend a job interview presentation while you are in library school. Talk to a librarian at the type of library you are interested in working in and ask for a contact in human resources or the head of a department. It is so much easier to know what to expect once you have seen an interview presentation or two.

In addition to listening to the presentation, I observed each candidate's demeanor. One thing I learned was to smile and appear pleasant. While this may seem simple enough that it does not need to be stated, many candidates were so tense and nervous that they appeared upset or unpleasant. My impression was that this made everyone slightly uncomfortable. The candidates with a smile put people at ease.

MAKING GOOD IMPRESSIONS IN THE INTERVIEW

A month before graduating, I applied for a position at a small academic library. I was excited when I was asked to do a phone interview. I practiced answering library-related interview questions, and I studied the library's website to familiarize myself with their offerings and services. During the interview I focused on remaining calm and speaking clearly and at a moderate pace. I tried to answer each question thoroughly, despite being very nervous. There were five academic professionals interviewing me. Throughout the interview I tried to "read" the interviewers to gauge how well I was doing. I thought that I had made a good impression. I must have, because I received a call later on during the week to schedule a face-to-face interview.

On the interview day I arrived early because I know being late can leave a bad impression on a lot of people. I had my PowerPoint presentation uploaded to my flash drive and was ready to go. I knew that was important, too, because nothing tries people's patience like watching someone fumble to get a presentation going in front of a room full of people. I thought I did a fine job, but I was not offered the position. While disappointing, it was also a moment for me to realize that my impression of myself was as important as that of potential employers. I needed to focus on the positive, and one positive from a failed interview was that it better prepared me for future interviews by giving me additional questions to practice on. My second interview was more successful, and I was offered the position.

Tips for a Good Interview

- Practice answering library-related interview questions.
- Study the library's website to become familiar with offerings and services.
- Arrive early.
- Have your presentation ready to go.
- Remain calm and speak clearly during the interview.
- Answer questions thoroughly.

The job was at a small, private academic institution. Having worked exclusively in a large academic library, I was unsure how I would adjust to such a small staff. My first day on the job was a whirlwind. The human resources orientation was long but useful. I made a point to smile at everyone. It is always important to appear friendly, but it may be even more important in a small institution because the people you meet outside the library are likely to know your new colleagues. You don't want anyone saying, "Your new hire seems aloof."

MAKING GOOD IMPRESSIONS WITH COWORKERS

Within the first few days I also made a point of sitting down with each of my new coworkers, even those with whom I did not work directly, to get an understanding of how their skills contributed to the library's operation. I knew that my new colleagues were watching to see how I fit in and to determine if I was going to create any problems. There is always a period of adjustment when someone new is added to a staff. That adjustment can be even more critical with a smaller staff. I made a point to hang back the first few days to observe how the others interacted. My goal was to be a team player, but first I had to figure out where I fit into the team. Every single day was not paradise, but when unpleasant situations arose—and they did—we respected one another enough to resolve the situation politely. This conflict resolution process was already part of the culture of the organization, so it was easy for me to go with that flow. However, if you find yourself in a tense situation, be careful not to take sides or further contribute to those tensions. Especially make sure that you are not drawn into gossip. Instead, try to maintain a neutral status and focus on the work to be done.

My day-to-day tasks involved working with six other librarians. I knew that each had an area of expertise, and I was careful not to overstep any boundaries because I knew that would create a bad impression. For instance, when I had technology questions, I always asked the IT (information technology) expert for advice instead of developing my own solutions. We would sit down and brainstorm the pros and cons of introducing a particular new technological service to our patrons and try to ascertain the implications. If the pros outweighed the cons, we took those ideas to the director as a team. This way we were sharing in both the possible praise and the possible rejection. When striving to make a positive impression, it's important to show that you are willing to put yourself on the line. If the cons outweighed the pros, then we would put those ideas aside until we could conjure up more pros. Making sure I always followed this process strengthened my relationships with coworkers.

Tips for Making Good Impressions With Coworkers

- Sit down with coworkers to understand how their skills contribute to library operations.
- Observe how others interact.
- Do not take sides in tense situations.
- Focus on work to be done. Do not engage in gossip.
- Do not overstep boundaries. Work together and share ideas.
- Show initiative and innovation without stealing the limelight from others.
- Participate in new projects.

Sometimes when you are trying to make a good first impression, you need to show initiative and innovation without seeming to constantly seek out or steal the limelight from others. For instance, as the distance services librarian, I thought it would be useful for me to know what type of technological platforms our distance learning students were using to access our online resources. With this in mind, I created a technology survey designed to ascertain the following: the type of Internet connectivity they used from home, whether it was dial-up, broadband, or DSL (digital subscriber line), and whether they used a regular cell phone or a smartphone. My

results indicated that in order to successfully reach our distance learners, the library staff had to provide resources through a multitude of technological platforms, such as laptops, tablet computers, and smartphones. This initiative showed my supervisor that I was serious about my job, and I believe it confirmed her impression of me as a serious employee. It also allowed me to engage in some meaningful research that made me feel more positive about my job.

Another way to create and maintain a good relationship with new colleagues is to participate in new projects. When the Friends of the Library group contributed \$40,000 to finance a much-needed quiet room, the collection management librarian orchestrated a massive weeding project. I participated with my colleagues in creating enough space to build a cozy quiet space in the library. I found that working together on this project helped create stronger ties.

It would be dishonest to pretend that being friendly and a good worker will win over every colleague. We have all worked with others who are challenging and who will, frankly, not engage with us or like us no matter how hard we try. If you perceive that you may have difficulty working with a particular coworker, observe to see how others deal with this individual. It is seldom the case that someone is a problem only for you. Sometimes it is necessary to acknowledge that we don't have a positive working relationship with everyone and move on. The key is to attempt to create good impressions and good working relationships with as many people as possible. If it doesn't work, well, at least you tried.

YOUR FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Along with making sure that you are putting your best foot forward in your new job, you should also assess your new environment and form your own judgments and impressions. Is the job what you expected? Do you believe that you will work well with your new coworkers? Are there unexpected parts to the job that you like or don't like? Are there job expectations that require skills you don't have?

No job can be perfectly represented during a job interview, and it is up to you in those first days and weeks of employment to learn your new environment in greater detail. This isn't simply an academic exercise. This is the time to ascertain that you really can do the job. If you realize you don't have a necessary set of skills, talk with your supervisor about training. Yes, it may feel a little awkward if he or she believed that you already possessed those skills, but it is far better to be honest than to try to bluff your way through.

Most positions are probationary for the first few months. Although no one wants to consider that he or she may have made a mistake and accepted a position that isn't right, it does happen. The early days are the time to gain a true impression of your work environment and colleagues and to make certain that this is the place for you. If your new situation is not going to work, you need to determine this sooner rather than later. More to the point, you want to be the one to make the choice to leave rather than have someone tell you that you aren't working out and should leave.

In most cases, your new job is the job you applied for and is where you want to stay.

However, some job responsibilities are bound to be more complex than you anticipated or are performed differently than in your previous institution. The more carefully you observe and make your own first impressions, the better able you will be to learn the new system quickly. This will make you feel more comfortable and will reassure your supervisor that the right choice was made in hiring you.

MAKING A GOOD IMPRESSION ACROSS CAMPUS

Initially, the hardest part of my job was reaching out to the faculty members, especially the adjunct faculty members because they did not have a physical space on campus. My main objective was to deliver a library instruction session or sessions to *all* communication classes, undergraduate and graduate. I realized that this was an ambitious goal but, as the information fluency librarian, it was my responsibility to market information fluency to the entire university community, both face-to-face and virtually.

I began by writing an e-mail for the faculty members in the School of Communication. I included a brochure that explained the services I could provide. I was careful to make sure the brochure looked professional and was a good introduction of myself to the faculty. I believe that I created a positive first impression with this brochure, and I was rewarded when several faculty members asked me to give library instruction sessions.

That led to step two. Although I had “met” the faculty and created an impression virtually, it was important to maintain that good first impression once I entered their classrooms. Before teaching a library instruction class, I made a point to sit down with the professor and find out what he or she expected from the session. This was my first face-to-face meeting with the professor. I always arrived on time and dressed professionally. These are small things, but they do matter. After meeting with the professor, I customized an instruction session relevant to the students’ assignments. Although I may have impressed the professor, I knew that once I entered the classroom I needed to make a good impression on the students. The way to do that was to offer them something of value and to do it in a way that let them know I was approachable and available to assist them with their needs. Because I know it is important to keep students engaged, I always include some hands-on projects during the library instruction session. This gives students a concrete and visual learning experience and allows me to move around the room and talk with them, rather than remaining a remote instructor at the front of the class.

While it was important that I make a good impression on the faculty and students, I was also making my own judgments and forming my own impressions. Was this a professor with whom I believe I could work on a research project? Could I embed myself in this particular class, or were the dynamics wrong for that? Always bear in mind that impressions are a two-way street, and you must judge as well as be prepared to be judged.

SOCIAL NETWORKING IS MY FRIEND—RIGHT?

I created a fan page on Facebook for our library and posted library and campus events. Facebook and Twitter can be excellent tools for marketing the library. After creating a fan page on Facebook, I encouraged other professionals and students to follow us. This created another avenue to “meet” people and make a good impression by being where the students are.

While Facebook can be a marketing tool for a library, many people also have personal pages. It can be easy to become lax about personal Facebook pages and allow our personal and professional lives to become intertwined. When it comes to creating impressions about yourself, nothing is more damaging than posting unflattering remarks online pertaining to your workplace or coworkers. You may believe that you are safe in doing so because no one at work is your friend on Facebook. However, people know people who know people. If you say something derogatory, there is a very good chance it will be seen by the wrong people. You could hurt your working relationships with coworkers without ever realizing why they no longer seem as friendly or supportive. Recently, teachers and other workers have gained media attention for inappropriate comments about work or fellow workers. Librarians should be aware of the need for discretion. Before you post something, ask yourself if you would want to see that particular comment aimed at you. That doesn't mean you can't mention your library in a Facebook posting. You can. Say something positive about your library or some display currently available there, but avoid mentioning anyone by name.

THE NEXT STOP

One day, out of the blue, I received an e-mail from a friend about a job at another library. To be honest, another job was the furthest thing from my mind because I was doing well at my current job. I had developed an excellent working relationship with my coworkers, and my research projects were beginning to flourish. However, after reading the job description, I was intrigued.

The position encompassed using technology to teach library instruction via distance education. I believe that learning how to use new technological tools is the best part about being a librarian. A job that implemented new technologies to enhance a library user's experience appealed to me. So I applied and two weeks later participated in a phone interview. Once again, I had to focus on making a good first impression. I find phone interviews more challenging than face-to-face interviews because you can't see the other parties to determine how you are doing. I was exceptionally nervous. Although I did not believe I did very well, I was invited to an on-campus interview with the director and the search committee. It was a challenging interview with a lot of questions. Many of the questions required lengthy responses. I focused on making sure I gave the best answer possible to each question, even when I felt myself tiring. After all, this was my one and only chance to make the right impression to get the job. The strategy worked and I was offered the position.

I found leaving my first librarian job bittersweet. While I was thrilled to embark on the second phase of my career, it was hard to tell my current colleagues good-bye because we had created such a good team. I knew that I was going to have to learn another set of personalities

and begin the process of building partnerships in a completely new environment. This was both exciting and daunting.

Once I knew that I would be leaving, I resolved to be present until I actually left. It may be tempting to slack off as a job is tapering down, but I advise resisting that temptation. I wanted to perform up to my usual standards until the end. After all, I was still creating impressions, even if they were no longer first impressions, and I didn't want people to remember me as the person who left a lot of unfinished projects.

CREATING GOOD FIRST IMPRESSIONS WITH A MORE DIVERSE GROUP

Unlike my previous group of coworkers, most of the librarians at my new institution were men. The librarians were also very culturally diverse. I knew this might mean adapting to different communication styles. I began my first days at work by paying particular attention to how the staff interacted with one another, taking my cues from them.

After getting to know my new coworkers, I set up a meeting with the distance learning director. She shared her vision for my involvement with the distance coordinators as well as ideas to enhance the services already in place from the previous distance librarian. While I knew that my working relationship with her was important, it was vital that I work collaboratively with the coordinators if I wanted to be successful as the distance services librarian. The coordinators would connect me to their adjunct faculty members, who in turn would connect me to our distance students. This was my first realization that first impressions can have a domino effect. If I made a good impression with the director, it was probable that she would pass the word along that I was easy to work with and open to new ideas. Similarly, every time I had contact with adjunct faculty members, there was every possibility they would pass along their impressions of me to their fellow adjuncts and to their students.

The distance learning director facilitated monthly coordinators' meetings. This was the perfect venue for me to meet the coordinators. I was excited about that because it meant I could create one killer presentation for the entire group. However, I soon learned that some of the coordinators did not attend these meetings. This meant I would have to contact and create a favorable impression with them in other ways. I sent them an introductory e-mail outlining the services I intended to provide to them and their students. Initially, I didn't receive any responses from the coordinators, which was disheartening and frustrating. I soldiered on and continued to reach out to the coordinators.

Approximately a month later, I received a library instruction request from one of the distance coordinators who manages one of our largest distance learning programs. We met and mapped out a plan for me to provide a library instruction session to all seven of her off-site distance locations. By working closely with her and letting her take the lead on future collaborations, I made a good impression as a team player.

Although this eventually worked out positively, it's unrealistic to believe that you will

achieve success every time. In reality, not every situation turns out well. Not every professor is interested in having a librarian speak to his or her class and will ultimately reject any effort. During the times I was unsuccessful in creating partnerships, I reminded myself that I had made my best effort. That is all that can be expected in any work situation.

THE NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

I have been in my current position for almost a year, and I am no longer the new kid on the block. However, this does not mean that I can afford to become so relaxed that I no longer care about the opinions people have of me. I continue to care and I try not to do things that cause colleagues to negatively revise their opinions of me.

As a new librarian, make sure you understand your job and perform it well. Step out of your comfort zone and try different things. If you can, volunteer to work on departmental committees outside of the library as a way to learn the culture of your environment. Your work represents you better than any brochure you can write, and word of mouth is a powerful marketing tool. Making sure that you perform well is the essence of creating a good first impression and making it a lasting impression.