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Use of Work Sample Exercises as Part of Screening Candidates for Support Staff Positions in Cataloging

David G. Anderson
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ABSTRACT

Finding the right support staff for a library cataloging operation is a perennial dilemma. People are needed who can learn and conform to highly complex rules for description and access, survive the ever-increasing rate of change in technology, and yet cope with the repetitive nature of the work. When job postings feature language such as “attention to detail,” or “analytical ability,” do candidates understand what that means? How do employers screen for these attributes in the current legal climate? One screening technique with potential for addressing these questions is the realistic job preview, or work sample test.

Key Words:

Hiring tests
Work sample
Cataloging
Paraprofessionals

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INTRODUCTION

Finding the right support staff for the cataloging operation in a library is a perennial dilemma. People are needed who can learn and conform to highly complex rules for description and access, survive the ever-increasing rate of change in technology, and yet cope with the often repetitive nature of the work. Professional applicants may be expected to have had some exposure to cataloging theory, if not actual hands-on experience, and a certain amount of self-selection takes place. Only those who understand the nature of the job and are attracted to it are likely to apply. But this is not a realistic expectation of applicants for support staff positions. Unless applicants have previously worked in a library, they rarely have any idea what cataloging, as a job, involves. Even those who have worked in the public services areas of a library often have only a hazy idea of what goes on in cataloging. However, it is not reasonable to eliminate from consideration candidates who have never worked in cataloging. There are some potentially excellent catalogers available if they can just be identified.

Once recruited, the paraprofessionals or student assistants, who catalog most of the materials going into many libraries these days, as calculated by percentage of titles cataloged, necessarily require some level of on-the-job training. In general, the need for training has been acknowledged and addressed. There is some literature on training paraprofessionals to catalog, although most still focuses on training professionals to catalog. There are increasing numbers of formal training opportunities, including automated and even online training programs, offered by professional organizations and networks such as SOLINET. But as important as training is to the success of a new employee, training will be more effective if the right person is hired for the job to begin with.

How then do we identify applicants with the requisite cognitive skills and personality traits? When job postings feature language such as “attention to detail,” or “analytical ability,” do candidates understand what that means? How can employers screen for these attributes? Furthermore, how can that be done lawfully in the current legal climate?

SELECTION METHODS

The classic methods of selection include the application form, *ad hoc* interview and reference checks. The literature on personnel recruitment and selection generally categorizes the use of application forms, unstructured interviews and reference checks as ineffective predictors of job performance. The *ad hoc* interview, in particular, has come in for serious criticism because of its subjective character. It relies too much on intuitive impressions of the candidate’s suitability for the job and often suffers from the use of closed or leading questions. Another practice which draws criticism is the expedient of raising the educational qualifications in an attempt to attract better candidates. While it is true that general cognitive ability has been shown to correlate with general competence, it is less predictive of behavior. As one recent book on recruitment and selection points out, “...this use of educational qualifications as a blanket measure of ability will not ensure the recruitment of the right people. Sometimes the organization wins, in that the person selected can do the job quite ably. Very often, however, the organization loses as the person either cannot do the job very well, or the job does not live up to expectations and he or she decides to leave soon after.”¹

More objective methods that focus on the requirements of the job and avoid bias based on non-job-related perceptions include structured interviews and work sample tests. These methods have been described and recommended for quite some time, but inertia, or the ease of familiarity with the traditional methods, has made adoption of them slow. It takes time and effort to analyze

the essential requirements of the job and to plan and develop a structured interview or create and validate a reliable work sample test. The application, off the cuff interview, and reference check remain the standard in use by most employers.

The Georgia State University Library's Catalog Department still uses our university's traditional application form for initial screening to determine who meets the basic qualifications and decide who to interview. The Georgia State Catalog Department employs student assistants for simple copy cataloging of monographs, and Library Assistant IIIs and Library Technical Assistants for complex copy cataloging in all formats. The requirements for the LA3 and LTA levels are defined by the University System of Georgia for staff in all areas of the library, not just cataloging. The requirements, including both educational level and experience, are limited to those that apply across all positions at a given level. The only way to target the skills needed for cataloging are through the "preferred qualifications." This does lead to a tendency to screen out candidates who have no cataloging experience, and thus, as mentioned above, to screen out potentially good catalogers. Work is still needed to address this part of our process. But we have attempted to improve the effectiveness of our interviews and reference checks by adopting a more structured format. Open-ended questions that focus on job related behaviors are prepared in advance and every candidate is given the same opportunities to respond to them. Open-ended behavioral style questions are also prepared for the references. Because so few applicants are familiar with the work, we spend a fair amount of the time allotted for the interview in describing the job. To this end, a work sample exercise has been incorporated into the interview. The goal is to rate the candidates as objectively as possible on job-related criteria, avoid bias and unfairness, and achieve a positive level of reliability and validity.

It is on the use of the work sample exercise that the rest of this article will concentrate. There are a number of advantages to using a work sample in screening candidates for cataloging positions. Done correctly, they are one of the more valid forms of selection. The specific tasks are highly job related and because they focus on what the candidate can do they are relatively free from bias. They provide candidates unfamiliar with the requirements of the job a hands-on experience that is worth more than a thousand words and allow them the opportunity to make an informed decision on whether to accept or decline. Unsuccessful candidates generally perceive them as fair. There are also some disadvantages. They require an investment in job analysis, development and validation. They are job-specific and not transferable to other library jobs; tests for each job must be developed and validated individually. Their validity diminishes over time as changes occur in the way work is done or as successful candidates acquire new responsibilities.

Concerns about diminishing validity prompted the authors to take a close look at our process. As interviewers and supervisors, we wanted to explore several questions that were pertinent at Georgia State University and that may be helpful to others looking for good catalogers. The specific concerns we wanted to address are as follows:

- May we continue to use our own locally developed employment test using cataloging-specific work samples?
- If not, are there standardized employment tests that will predict success in a detail oriented, technical services type job, and can they be identified and used instead?
- What is the current legal climate regarding employment tests?

BACKGROUND

In 1983, Christina Landram published an article describing a test that she developed to use at Georgia State University during the interview process for paraprofessional catalogers.² Her primary interest was finding, “a means to predict the trainability of an individual.” The instrument presented examples of actual tasks a cataloger might be expected to perform on the job, such as recognizing initial articles in a title for coding filing indicators, or reading and following the directions in a classification schedule or a specific rule in AACR2. The test was validated using Georgia State catalogers before being used in support staff interviews. The authors know from personal experience the usefulness of the test over the past twenty years for filling positions at the LA3 and LTA levels.

Ten years later, in 1993, Marie Bednar and Nancy M. Stanley published an article titled, “Hiring Tests for Technical Services Support Staff Positions.”³ Bednar and Stanley emphasized the importance of finding the right people and outlined the principles of employment testing, including development, administration, interpretation, and validation.

Now that another decade has passed, the authors felt there might be a need to “update” the status and use of this screening technique. Apart from the two articles mentioned above, there is not much mention of tests in library literature so we turned to our colleagues in the field. We posted some questions on Autocat, the cataloging listserv, in early 2003 asking: (1.) what attributes or skills are sought when hiring paraprofessionals for cataloging, (2.) whether others have a test or instrument used for screening applicants, or, (3.) if there are standardized tests that are used. The responses indicate that there are a number of cataloging managers who use some form of cataloging or filing exercise in the interview process. Several responses in the thread mentioned a typing speed requirement. Many responses referred to the importance of the whole

interview process, but no one named a standardized test that they would recommend.⁴ Obviously there is hiring taking place based on a variety of local work samples or tests, but still more hiring decisions are based on traditional subjective interview techniques.

LEGALITY AND USAGE

One of our biggest concerns was the current state of the legal climate surrounding the use of employment tests. In 1993, Bednar discussed the need for caution in the use of employment tests to avoid adverse impact on legally protected groups. We began to question whether we should continue to use a locally developed instrument. According to Frank J. Landy, “the use of testing is growing,” but standardized tests are less likely to attract legal challenges than informal, nonstandard tests.⁵

In hopes of finding some widely accepted, standardized instrument to use instead of our locally devised exercise, the authors reviewed a list of the standardized tests currently used at Georgia State University (Qwiz.com). Based only on the test titles, we found that it was not possible to identify which tests might be useful. We met with the Director of Human Resources Information Systems and Records at Georgia State. Using her authorization, we logged into the tests available to the University through the Qwiz.com web site. After reviewing some tests whose titles indicated some possible relationship to specific cataloging tasks, we found two or three that might be close to what we need, but still could not agree that any single one would be best. These tests, being standardized, have been through a general validation process, but there is still a concern that questions may arise as to their validity with respect to a specific job such as cataloging. Their connection to cataloging tasks may not be readily apparent to applicants unfamiliar with our work. This lack of face validity could invite challenges.

Landy goes on to say that, “work sample tests, as opposed to locally developed general aptitude tests, are less likely to be challenged because they come directly from the job itself.” Tests based on an in-depth job analysis are less likely to lose in litigation. The test developed by Landram in 1983 was developed in consultation with Georgia State University’s Human Resources department. The authors shared the test as we currently use it with the Director of Human Resources Information Systems and Records and received approval to continue using it. The sample tasks are clearly derived from the actual job. More importantly, the sample exercise is just one element in the array of other data obtained during the hiring process.

The Georgia State University Catalog Department is still using a slightly modified version of Landram’s instrument during the interview process; but it is called a work sample exercise. The current version is attached at the end of this article. Included are instructions, the work examples, and directions for scoring (although there is no score *per se*). In using the work sample as part of a structured interview we follow a set procedure:

1. Tell a prospective candidate at first contact, usually on the telephone, that the interview will include a work sample exercise.
2. When introducing the work sample in the middle of the interview, explain to the applicant that it will give them a better idea of what the job is like and help us in determining the best candidate.
3. Read the same instructions to each applicant.
4. Go over the exercise with the applicant immediately after they finish it, asking questions about their choices, explaining that there is no score and that how they arrived at their answer is as important as what their answer is.

5. Keep detailed notes on what was answered correctly and what their response was when asked how they arrived at their answers.

Landy makes a number of other suggestions that will protect an employer, and we think we follow them quite closely.

- “Inform candidates in advance about any tests they will have to take, and explain why.” --

As noted above, we do that.

- “Strive to create a climate of respect and individuality as candidates are assessed.” -- When going over the work sample during the last part of the interview, we ask applicants how they arrived at their answers and we give background and historical information about the codes and rules used in the exercise.

- “Get back to candidates with test or assessment results as quickly as possible.” -- We do it immediately and have never had a problem.

Most people seem appreciative and happy to learn about the job. And if some applicants say, “I can see that this job is not for me,” then the “realistic work preview” aspect of the sample exercise has helped the applicant to make a decision that is right for them and subsequently for the employer.

Landy’s final points involve courtesy. Applicants who have been treated disrespectfully or impersonally are more often likely to sue. Respect for support staff also shows up as a key area of concern in the report of the steering committee of the 3rd Congress on Professional Education: Focus on Library Support Staff (COPE III).⁶ Other areas of concern identified by the Congress -- career paths, continuing education, and compensation -- can only be addressed after the hiring decision is made. However, respect can, and should, be a part of the hiring process.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE STEPS

We learned from our investigations that our locally developed employment test using cataloging-specific work samples is still the best instrument for screening applicants when used responsibly as one element in a structured interview. We also concluded that there are still no standardized instruments available to us that can be reliably substituted for our locally developed exercise. And we were reassured that what we have been doing is not as legally risky as we thought. Even though it could use some updating, our process works well for us.

When Chris Landram developed the work sample exercise over twenty years ago, most of a cataloger's job was done with paper and pencil, or paper and typewriter, and cataloging tools were in hard copy. The paper and pencil exercise reflected that. Now one can catalog an item and refer to cataloging tools without leaving the computer. Although the content of the exercise is still valid, we feel it would be better if the mechanics of the test reflected current working conditions more closely. We intend to revise our work sample exercise so that it can be done at a computer workstation. As a bonus, this would also allow us to assess the added dimension of the candidate's comfort level with computers. Even if we are able to use the same, or similar, questions, we intend to re-validate the exercise when we reformat it. That being the case, we will probably develop additional task samples, as well. We hope to find enough catalogers in the Atlanta area willing to assist with the validation.

A process that yields a person who is a good fit for the job is good for the applicant, as well as for the employer. It is essential to use reliable, valid work samples; and we urge our colleagues to find or develop other such instruments. We hope that by sharing our current process, our concerns, and our plans, other cataloging managers will be inspired to develop and share useful, valid, legal measures for selecting the best candidates for cataloging jobs.

ENDNOTES

1. Dominic Cooper, Ivan T. Robertson, and Gordon Tinline, *Recruitment and Selection: a Framework for Success*. London: Thomson, 2003. p. 2.

2. Christina Landram, "A Test for Applicants for Paraprofessional Cataloging Positions," *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1983):73-78.

3. Marie Bednar and Nancy M. Stanley, "Hiring Tests for Technical Services Support Staff Positions," *Technical Services Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (1993):3-19.

4. Responses referring to neatness of work area were much disputed. Many responses cited a fondness for detail oriented hobbies, such as crossword puzzles, counted cross-stitch and building ships in bottles, but this would be difficult to validate and would be more appropriate for behavioral questions in another part of a structured interview.

5. Frank J. Landy, "On the Job: Legal Manager – The Best Assessments," *Corporate Counsel* 3, no. 9 (September 2003): 53.

6. American Library Association. 3rd Congress on Professional Education: Focus on Library Support Staff, "Report of the Steering Committee," (June 2003).

http://www.ala.org/ala/hrdrbucket/3rdcongressonpro/COPE3Final_Report.pdf

INSTRUCTIONS FOR LIBRARY ASSISTANT EXERCISE

LA III

“These are examples of some of the types of work you will encounter in the position. This was developed to give you a better idea of what the work is like and to help us in determining the best applicant. Do numbers 1 and 3 only. Take all the time you need. If you have any questions, please come and ask. When you have finished, return the exercise to me.”

LTA

“These are examples of some of the types of work you will encounter in the position. This was developed to give you a better idea of what the work is like and to help us in determining the best applicant. These are the books you will need to answer some of the questions. Take all the time you need. If you have any questions, please come and ask. When you have finished, return the exercise and the books to me.”

[Books needed: AACR2, classification schedules H-HJ.]

EXAMPLES OF TYPE OF WORK

1. Field 245 contains the title statement of a book. The second group of digits are called indicators and the second indicator shows the number of characters to be ignored in filing when the title begins with an article. 0-9 Non filing characters. To calculate the number of nonfiling characters, count the number of characters in the article, plus spaces, punctuation, and diacritics that precede the first significant word. Example:

245 14 The Masai of Kenya

Please fill in the blank below with the appropriate number:

245 1_ In search of excellence

245 1_ A Red herring

245 0_ NAL newsletter

245 1_ An Apple for the teacher

2. Guidelines state that the most specific subject heading should be assigned to a work. Which of these subject headings would be the most appropriate for the title listed below:

Title of book: Female interns and residents in Georgia hospitals

Subject headings: Circle the number of the most appropriate heading.

1. Medical personnel – Georgia
2. Women in medicine – Georgia
3. Women physicians – Georgia
4. Medicine – Georgia

Title of book: Should the Handicapped Child be Placed in the Regular Classroom?

Subject headings: Circle the number of the most appropriate heading.

1. Handicapped children – Education
2. Mainstreaming in education
3. Education of children

3. Please match the cataloging to the title page of the book and correct the cataloging if necessary. Disregard capitalization. Also fill in appropriate filing indicator.

Title page of book reads:

A STUDY GUIDE
FOR ACSW CERTIFICATION

Cataloging reads: 245 1_ A study for ACSW certification

Title page of book reads: Neutrino Physics and Astrophysics

Cataloging reads: 245 1_ Neutrino physics and astrophysics

Title page of book reads: A photographic Atlas and Glossary
of Coastal Landforms and Surface
Features

Cataloging reads: 245 1_ A photographic atlas and glossary of coastal landforms
and surface features.

Title page of book reads: The Physiology and
Pathophysiology of
The Body Fluids

Cataloging reads: 245 1_ Physiology and pathophysiology of the fluids in the
human body.

4. The classification number of this title: "State expenditure controls: an evaluation" is HJ 7550. That class number can be found on p. 351 of the Library of Congress schedule for Class H. The schedule for H has been given to you. If the title of the book were:

"Expenditure controls of the state of Georgia."
[i.e. subject matter limited to Georgia]

What would the class number be? See p. 351 of Class H.

5. You have been given the book of cataloging rules: Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules. Please read section 24.7, p. 456-457. On the basis of this information, formulate the heading for this conference:

Southeastern Conference on Urban Renewal

Georgia State University
Atlanta
Oct. 10-12, 1980

LIBRARY TECHNICAL ASSISTANT EXERCISE

DIRECTIONS FOR SCORING

1. Did applicant answer all the items in question 1 correctly? ___ Yes ___ No.
If “no,” what explanation did the applicant give as to why the error occurred? [e.g. I did not know In was not an article.]

2. Did applicant answer the item in question 2(1) correctly? ___ Yes ___ No.
If “no,” what explanation did the applicant give as to why the error occurred? [e.g. I didn't know interns were physicians.]

- Did applicant answer the item in question 2(2) correctly? ___ Yes ___ No.
If “no,” what explanation did the applicant give as to why the error occurred? [e.g. I didn't know what mainstreaming meant.]

3. How many of the items in question 3 did the applicant answer correctly?

If all items were not correct, was a pattern indicated?

4. Question 4. Did applicant find the correct classification number? ___ Yes ___ No.
If “no,” did number listed indicate that the applicant referred to the tables? ___ Yes ___ No.
List any comment made by the applicant which indicates why the correct number was not given. [e.g. I saw the footnote but did not know what it meant.]

5. Did the applicant create the correct form? ___ completely ___ partially ___ not at all.
If the applicant did not completely formulate it, list any comments made by the applicant which indicate why the applicant did not create the form correctly. [e.g. I didn't know whether to use the school or the city.]

6. Did the applicant omit any question? ___ Yes ___ No.

7. Did the applicant ask questions when he/she did not understand? ___ Yes ___ No.
Rate appropriateness of questions on a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 being the highest _____.

8. Remarks. List below any special item about the candidate which would indicate that the candidate was or was not well suited for the position. [e.g. Showed good analytical ability; or, Did not know an intern was a physician but did not ask for a dictionary.]