

SfNP recruitment workshops handout – top tips and practical advice

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SEARCHING AND APPLYING FOR JOBS

Try and widen the search by looking for job titles that don't necessarily contain the words you expect.

There's no "perfect" first role, apply to a range of jobs and you will learn and grow from different opportunities.

It is hard to gauge whether you are at the right level for a role. Don't be put off applying for posts that seem too senior. I have often regretted not applying, once I've seen that the successful applicant had less experience than me. Always worth a go. And it gets your name out there. You can also apply for jobs for which you are overqualified, and not get an interview. Recruitment is not a science, it's fairly subjective despite various processes in place to try to make it transparent.

Be aware that some institutions are obliged to advertise roles externally, even if they have an internal candidate in mind, and if they actually wrote the job spec for that person. This is a time waster for applicants, unfortunately, but don't be despondent in that situation if you don't get the job, as it is not very likely in reality. Employers often prefer to employ folk already known to them, as this is a lower risk and the induction period is vastly quicker than for somebody entirely new.

Make sure that you look really closely at the person specification. Match your skills and experience directly to this and *provide examples*. For example, if it asks for experience of cataloguing large archive collections, use specific examples of named collections (with numbers) - e.g. 'I was employed for a year to catalogue the X archive, which contained 150 boxes. This resulted in an online catalogue that can be viewed at x.'

Think very carefully about what examples you use to match the requirements of the person specification. Being the President of the University's Bondage Society may well demonstrate your organisational skills, but it also means the person shortlisting gets to know a lot of personal details about you that might not be the impression you want to give.

It is okay to use non-archive work experience, especially when you're starting out, so long as the skills demonstrated match the person specification.

Try and keep the application clear and matched directly to the person specification, preferably in clear paragraphs. When shortlisting, interviewers sometimes have many applications to get through in a short time, and clarity is very much appreciated. It is challenging to have to sift through a long personal statement to find examples. It's fine to group attributes, as long as you are clear. Don't worry about repeating yourself!

Make sure you address as many of the criteria as you are able to. You may think it is obvious that you support equal opportunities or that you are capable of manual handling, but unless you address these, the person shortlisting cannot take it for granted. For example, you could say that you've received manual handling training, or know about lifting properly and are familiar with the use of ladders/kik stools/trolleys etc.

Try and get everything you need to say into the main body of the application. This may be a personal thing, but I very rarely read additional documents. Also avoid sending links to personal websites/portfolios etc. If that kind of info is wanted, it will be specified in the job description.

Don't sell yourself short, and address as many points as you can on the criteria, but equally don't go overboard and write numerous pages – keep it precise and to the point. We often have over 100 applications for Archive Assistant jobs, so it can be off-putting to have reams and reams of unnecessary detail.

Don't just send a CV, unless the application specifically asks you to. Shortlisting against a CV can be very difficult as it doesn't help to demonstrate how you meet the criteria, it just states the dates and the skeleton facts. If you are required to send a CV, make sure everything is tailored to the person specification and that you provide clear and quantifiable examples of achievements. Make sure the CV includes the examples you draw on in a cover letter or application and remains concise - 1-2 pages is standard but there are no hard and fast rules.

Criteria are generally divided into *Essential* and *Desirable*. Don't forget about answering the desirable ones – they can often make the difference when lots of candidates have the same qualifications and experience.

Missing out essential criteria often means you're not able to be shortlisted at all, make sure you answer them all including the 'obvious' ones like using IT.

It can be useful to use a heading for each criteria or to group several related criteria together into one section, with a clear heading (if there is room on the application form).

Consider using bullet points to help break the text out. It can be time consuming for short-listers to have to read pages and pages of solid text in very long paragraphs, so this makes picking out the relevant info much easier.

You may have to reduce words if there is a character or word limit for an online application, so be aware that this kind of revision can be time consuming, and to leave enough time to do that to avoid a last minute rush.

Online application forms can be fiddly and time consuming – make sure you give yourself time to do this without mistakes etc.

Get someone to proofread your application if possible, to avoid any grammatical or other errors. Detail is important in any ARM role, so try to get your application as mistake-free as possible in order to make a good impression.

If there is an opportunity to ring up/email a contact about the role before, if specified in the job ad, then do so if you have a question to ask. It can be a good way to find out more about the role and any particular priorities for the postholder, as well as making yourself known personally to at least one of the panel in advance of the sift through. If you need clarification on anything in the job ad such as what is expected by terms such as 'equivalent experience', an informal chat is a great first step.

Adapt the terminology and tone of your application to suit the organisation – research their website, try to guess their concerns and priorities and how they ‘sell’ their organisation in annual reports. Echoing the language of the organisation can show you understand what they’re about and will be a good fit if hired.

INTERVIEWS

The interviewers are also nervous. They are not trying to catch you out and they genuinely want you to do well. The panel may be large or small, depending on the institution. There should usually be your line manager-to-be there, and possibly an archivist from outside if there is not one available internally, who can judge better your suitability.

You may not be interviewed by an archivist (depending on the organisation) so try not to rely on this.

The interviewers may not have had time to recap your application since shortlisting, so don’t be afraid to repeat information that is in your application form.

The panel will also need to take lots of notes and will have arranged to ask questions in turn, so don’t be put off by that. There should be a panel chair who does the intros/welcome etc and who makes sure everything goes smoothly.

Do some research into the organisation or the general sector. Have a look at the collections they hold. Have a think about the issues current in that sector e.g. decolonisation, digital turn – it’s very likely that you will be asked about this – it is often one of the desirable criteria.

Make sure you use the right language to show you’re aware of the sector, don’t say ‘heritage’ when you mean ‘archives’ or ‘conservation’ when discussing collection care more broadly.

Think about why you want to work in this *particular* organisation. Use your research. Reference actual collections or projects they are doing.

Do definitely ask to have the question repeated if you have forgotten/got sidetracked. I find it hard to remember questions, especially if they are in multiple parts.

You can also write the questions down – this is easier on online interviews, but I have seen candidates doing this when face to face and it’s actually a very good idea as it helps you to remain focused and to stop waffling.

Make sure you evidence everything and provide clear examples. Don’t be worried about saying too much for an answer – the interviewers will ask you to cut it short if necessary.

Using the STAR framework (Situation, Task, Action(s), Result(s)) can be useful to provide structure if you feel like you’re rambling. It is okay to ask the interviewer if you have answered their question to check you have been clear and detailed enough.

Make sure to speak positively in examples, and emphasise your skills instead of being overly-negative about a situation or task.

There might not actually be that many questions, so make sure you give them enough info to score highly on the criteria. Otherwise the interview may come to an end relatively quickly and you won’t have got into enough detail compared to other candidates. Remember that it is unlikely your

interviewers will go back to your job application for more details or examples after you are interviewed.

Don't be afraid to clarify if you are confused by the question (not all interviewers are great at framing concise queries!) It's also not a problem if you take time to think about it – it's fine to say it's something you haven't thought about before.

If you have a great example of something and the interviewers don't ask about it, feel free to add it at the end. It is absolutely fine to say something like 'I just wanted to make you aware that I also participated in X, which gave me skills in Y'.

Plan your questions! Most interviewers will ask if you have any questions at the end. Make sure you have some and that they are based on your research relating to that organisation. Ask about management structures, how they are tackling specific sector issues, what their favourite part of their job is, which bit of the collection they like the most.

Use a question at the end to clarify anything that appears confusing about the job description. Usually these questions are not scored like those connected to the person specification, but they're a good opportunity to show your enthusiasm, learn more about the role and make a good impression!

Generally – be on time (contact us if you're delayed or not coming at all). You'd be surprised how many candidates just don't turn up, and this means that the place can't be offered to somebody else.

Online interviews – the tech fails all of us at some point. Interviewers know this and will not blame you personally for it. They should be happy to reschedule or compromise if there are technical issues.

If you are an internal candidate or an existing volunteer for the organisation, don't take anything for granted or assume knowledge etc. During an interview it is meant to be a level playing field, so answer all the questions and give relevant examples etc, as if the person interviewing you had never met you before.

If the interview doesn't include a tour of your workplace, do ask for one as this might be possible, either at a separate time or on the day. It is really helpful to see where you will be working, so you can imagine yourself working there, or not.

The interview experience is always helpful anyway, and you can consider applying for jobs you may think you won't necessarily get, to get interview experience and feedback.

Please do ask for feedback after an interview or if you were not shortlisted. Make sure the feedback is specific and not too generalised, as otherwise it is not really that useful in practice. For example, you could ask what skills you need to work on in order to improve your CV etc, or more specifically about that particular role in question.

Interviews are like buses – you can apply for lots of jobs and then suddenly get more than one interview at around the same time. This can be difficult, particularly if you prefer one role over another. You may find yourself in the happy position of having to decide whether to accept one role before the interview for a second one. That's life, unfortunately. And it's surprising how many times that actually happens.

JOB OFFERS

If you are offered the post, you can ask for a brief period to think about it before giving an answer (but make sure you do basic homework before the interview ie can you afford to live in that area, do you really want to move house if that is necessary, does the commute work? Etc). The interviewers will usually choose their first and second candidates on or soon after the interview day. The rest of the shortlist are usually notified pretty soon. If there is a delay, it may well be because the first candidate has asked for some time to consider the offer

Once you've accepted an offer, you can then negotiate with the employer re start date, notice period, working patterns, any benefits, starting salary etc. Then the formal offer/written offer letter are issued. Usually a verbal acceptance of an offer can be withdrawn at any point before signing the contract/offer letter but from the employer's perspective, you need to think carefully about doing this at a really late stage if not absolutely necessary.

Even if the job ad says the role starts at a certain salary point, always try to negotiate a rise before you start if you think you merit this. It is difficult to have that conversation once you've started in post. A couple of points on a scale might be a small concession for the employer if they preferred you out of all of the other candidates, so you may have some bargaining power.

Don't feel obliged to take a job if offered it. A job can be perfect on paper, and then not work out in reality – you may not get positive vibes from the interview panel or tour or meeting your future colleagues etc.