

the last word

Passion and the job interview

RMIT University Librarian Craig Anderson ponders one quality of the modern information professional he hopes will never change.

Many would say that passion should not be part of an employment interview. I'd like to use this opportunity to argue against that – I see passion as a core value in a hiring decision.

Potential applicants can rest easy – I'm talking about passion for the position and work that an applicant is seeking.

Passion is hard to measure and can be harder to find – but ALIA membership and activity indicates to me that a person is passionate about their profession and the information industry.

It wouldn't be news to anyone that a potential employer cannot discriminate against, or in favour of a candidate on the basis of affiliation – that is, their membership (or lack of membership) of a group such as an association, trade union, or other body. You could argue for or against this particular piece of legislation, but it exists and is a fact.

This raises the question of ALIA membership, and whether it is worth being a member. Speaking as someone with responsibility for about 160 library staff, I'd like to explain the way in which I see ALIA membership in potential employees.

While I cannot and would not hire or refuse to hire someone on the basis of their membership of ALIA, this affiliation and participation is still important to me as someone involved in employing library staff. The reason is simple – in my library we need people who are passionate about connecting users (in our case at RMIT University, students and academic staff) with information.

There is an old saying in staff selection: "hire for attitude, train for skills". When I see that a potential staff member is a member of ALIA, and particularly if they are active in the Association, it tells me that they are committed to their profession and have a personal investment in the same values and goals as the group I lead – that they have 'the right attitude'. Personally, I believe Librarianship (and

I've used an upper case 'L' deliberately) is more than just a job – it is a commitment to a number of deeper principles, such as the free flow of unbiased information and getting the right information to the right user at the right time. Hiring people with this commitment means there is a greater chance that they will provide better service, understand the reasons we do what we do, and know where to take the services in which they are involved.

ALIA membership (whether as a general member, a technician or associate) and activity in ALIA

indicates to me that the potential employee is more likely to be knowledgeable about current trends in the industry, and more likely to have discussed these developments with others working in the libraries and information sector.

This is especially important when assessing cross-sectoral applicants – those that have worked in a public or special library, or come from another section of the information industry and now wish to enter academic libraries. ALIA involvement has sensitised these applicants to the sector they wish to move into, and made them more aware of issues of common interest.

There are other ways to demonstrate professional commitment to a potential employer in the information industry – academic papers and presentations, volunteer work, and active and engaged reading that can be demonstrated in the interview dialogue. These all take more time and more commitment than an annual ALIA membership.

Libraries are the cultural memory of our society. They are the only source of quality, unbiased, information in a world which is increasingly busy with information which is none of these. It is important, not just for the sake of our institutions, but for society more broadly that we maintain our commitment to these principles – ALIA membership and involvement is one clear and simple way to do this.

“LIBRARIES ARE THE CULTURAL
MEMORY OF OUR SOCIETY.
THEY ARE THE ONLY SOURCE
OF QUALITY, UNBIASED, INFORMATION
IN A WORLD WHICH IS INCREASINGLY BUSY WITH
INFORMATION WHICH IS NONE OF THESE.”

Craig Anderson
University Librarian, RMIT
craig.anderson@rmit.edu.au