

## Getting the Job You Deserve

Head for the Edge, March/April 2000

Doug Johnson

dougj@doug-johnson.com

There are media specialists who have truly horrific jobs. I hear from them now and then. After working, pleading, planning, exhorting, team-playing, designing, and praying, they are still in positions in which it is impossible to feel like a true professional who does work that benefits kids and is personally gratifying. If you are one of those folks who has sincerely tried everything but are still working in a school culture that squashes innovation, lacks benighted leadership, ignores any attempt at a constructivist approach to education, worships the standardized test, and fails the needs of far too many students, I say it's time too look for another job instead of beating your head against the wall (or buying lottery tickets).

This is a good time to look for a better job. Breathing teachers are in short supply, and good teachers are even scarcer. Something like 40% of the teaching profession is due to retire within the next five years. It's a job seekers' market. Good schools are beating the bushes for great media specialists.

There are two keys to getting the job you deserve. The first is having the ability to sell yourself. That's what most folks worry about. But as a job seeker, I would also be very careful choosing the district, building and administrator for whom I would consider working. It makes no sense to leave one unsatisfying job for another. Let's look at both aspects of getting not just another job, but one that pays in more ways than just salary.

### ***Sell yourself.***

1. **All the standard stuff.** Having a good resume, being on time for the interview, dressing professionally, and writing thank-you notes following the interview are pieces of advice any good job-seeking guide will give. Buy one and pay attention to it. I don't give anyone with a badly formatted resume an interview or a casually dressed applicant consideration for a job. Appearances won't get you a job, but they can sure keep you from getting one.
2. **Prepare for interview questions.** Do a search on LM\_Net on the Web <[http://askeric.org/lm\\_net/](http://askeric.org/lm_net/)> for "interview questions." A surprising number of HITS have been compiled of the usual (and not so usual) questions you might be asked at an interview. "Tell us something about yourself." "What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?" "Why did you leave your last job?" are all opportunities to promote yourself, but only if you are prepared to answer them.
3. **Tell stories that emphasize your past accomplishments.** Pick your three or four best professional qualities and make sure the interview team hears specific examples of how you have applied them in previous work settings. If you are a great team-player, tell about that project you and a teacher jointly designed and delivered that kids and parents are still talking about. Unless you have no work experience at all, people doing the hiring won't give a rip about where you went to school or the kinds of grades you earned. They want to hear about the wonderful *real* things you've done. Best predictor of future performance is past performance, and all that...
4. **Portfolios sell.** Shelly's interview didn't seem to be going particularly well. Like many folks, her nerves made her less than articulate. But then she pulled from her bag a three-ring binder. It held plastic-sleeved sheets of teaching materials, computer-generated artwork, samples of her former students' work, and very best of all, wonderful photographs of her working with students in happy, productive settings. She didn't have to say much. She had visible evidence of the exciting things she had done with students in her last job. And now she's doing them for us.
5. **Personability is everything.** Kathy was a high school media specialist in a local private school. When an elementary media job opened up, she asked for an interview. Although she lacked elementary teaching experience, she was given an interview along with two other more experienced candidates who looked very, very good on paper. But during the interview, Kathy's personal warmth overshadowed the experience of the others. The teachers on the committees simply said, "This is a person I would love to work with. She is

calm, comforting, and capable.” They were right. She is.

***Find the right “buyer.”***

So you are one hot property. How do you keep all his wonderful personal capital you have from being squandered? Find a place that is genuinely interested in what a good media program can do for kids. It is *your* job to:

1. **Ask important questions.** What do you see as the role of the media program in the school? How are departmental budgets determined? Is there a leadership team in the building and would I have a position on it? What technical, clerical, and district support can I expect? What do you envision as my most important goals in the coming year? in the next five years? Good interviews are an exchange of information, not monologues. By asking a school to sell itself to you (in a non-confrontational way), you show the value you place on yourself as well.
2. **Carefully examine the physical plant.** Ask to see the media center and school. It’s usually evident by looking at the level of activity, age of the collection, quality of technology, and even the condition of the furniture how valued the current media program is. A shabby can program can be a great place to work if the principal says something like, “We really need someone who can turn this place around and I am prepared to find the resources needed for you to do that.” But make sure that commitment exists.
3. **Talk to the person who last held the position.** You know *your* references will be checked. You should be checking out your potential new school’s references as well. Just what does the former media specialist have to say? Why is he or she leaving? Talk to teachers in the building if at all possible. Compare what you hear from the interview committee, the former media specialist, and teachers. Then synthesize. Ah, primary research!
4. **Look for challenges.** While a bigger paycheck never hurt, a job that offers opportunities that can provide professional satisfaction will make you happier in the long run than that extra fifty dollars per paycheck. Being appreciated by my principal, enjoying my co-workers, having fun with my students, and actually looking forward to the next day of work makes not just a job, but a life, worth having.

While nobody has the perfect job, silk purses can’t be made from sow’s ears. Doing the impossible sometimes actually is impossible. If you have given your job all you can and it is turning you into someone you really don’t want to be, remember the words of W. C. Fields: *If at first you don't succeed, try, try, and try again. Then give up. There's no use being a damned fool about it.* Look for school where success is possible.