# Meeting Recruitment and Retention Challenges Head On

## By Rochelle Logan and Art Glover

When a mid-level manager in your library decides to retire, staff at all levels of the organization are bound to experience various amounts of anxiety, anticipation, or both.  People who report to the manager could feel disenfranchised or anxious because their manager will probably be replaced with someone they do not know. Meanwhile, library leadership works through a job description, advertises for a new manager, and makes decisions about the interview process.  To quote a colleague, "It's a real hassle."

The recruitment process begins.

No one should be surprised when a retirement occurs.  The Library Research Service's *Retirement, Retention, and Recruitment* study (3Rs) revealed that 20 percent of the respondents to their survey planned to retire in the next five years.[1]  Ask any director, manager or dean how recruiting for supervisors and managers has been going and you will hear things like "there is a dearth of applicants when we need a new person at this level."  Why is that?  Are people attracted to the library profession not as interested or predisposed to management?  Is it a personality thing?

At Douglas County Libraries (DCL), we advertised for a branch manager for the Highlands Ranch Library last year.  It took over half a year to find the right person for the job. Now our technical services manager is retiring, and we are going through the hiring process. Since we began this journey, we have read as much as we could about the current climate in Colorado libraries and asked many questions so we could find the best candidate for this position.

Some results from the Library Research Service's 3Rs study concerned us a bit when it came to interest in technical services jobs.  Cataloging is one of the specialties that will be losing more retirees than there are current MLS students attracted to this area of expertise.[2]  Will we have trouble finding a qualified field of candidates interested in working in technical services as well as managing a large department in Castle Rock?

There are other reasons to be concerned about staffing shortages in the library world.  In 2001, the American Library Association conducted a survey concerning recruitment and retirement issues in libraries. A large percentage of survey respondents (73 percent) indicated that they have had some difficulty recruiting MLS candidates during the six months prior to the survey. The major reason chosen was "lack of MLS degree holders generally" with "low salaries at your institution" coming in second.[3]

The staffing journey for our new Technical Services Manager began when Rochelle Logan talked to our boss, Jamie LaRue (our Library Director at DCL).  Rochelle told Jamie that she hoped to find strong candidates for the technical services manager job inside our own organization.  Her thought was to try to hire from within DCL to support in-house talent and to show that there is potential for advancement in the organization.  In the past year, we were lucky to have in-house personnel apply for support services positions.  For two of the three openings in 2004, Rochelle hired DCL staff from the public service side of the library.  It was easier for Rochelle and her department because these talented people already knew the culture, the automated system, and possessed general knowledge of our processes.

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Jamie Larue had some definite opinions about promoting from within DCL.  He said that we absolutely want to encourage advancement within the organization.  However, he stated that when it comes time to hire, you hire the best, whether that is an internal or external candidate. Otherwise, our people may begin to think that they are guaranteed promotions to available management and supervisor positions.  This can lead to entrenched thinking and a feeling of entitlement in a library.  Some of our best hiring has been people outside DCL who come in with positive attitudes and fresh ideas.  On the other hand, when you do hire from within—as we often have–-that tells our staff members that they really are the best person for the job.  They have earned the job through their abilities, not just due to their tenure with the district.

Knowing that supervisors and managers are getting harder to find, many libraries look for ways to cultivate homegrown leadership.  DCL is no different.  We offer much in the way of encouragement for our staff with tuition assistance, in-house training, and mentoring to bring them along in their careers and to develop more well rounded employees for the district.  Of course, one of the best ways to encourage recruiting from within is to make all available positions open to current employees and encourage employees to apply.  Often, supervisors and managers are reluctant to let their best employees transfer laterally or be promoted to other positions.  It means possibly losing the stability of the work team, having to find a replacement, training issues, turnover costs—the list goes on and on.

But isn't it the job of managers to develop their employees and provide career coaching? In other words, behind every good employee is a good manager who, at some time in the employee's career, served as an effective mentor and coach, as someone who looked out for the best interests of the employee.

Beyond simply encouraging and supporting promotions from within the organization, there are many other ways to ensure that your staff members are groomed for movement within the organization. Many library districts are realizing the positive effects of a succession planning process. It can be enormously useful to identify employees (based on feedback from their managers and performance reviews) who could benefit from special assignments, job rotation processes, and other coaching and learning opportunities.  Training opportunities should also be assessed.  These activities will help to prepare the employee for advancement within the organization while at the same time giving the organization a chance to view the employee's strengths and improvement opportunities and to offer development as needed.

The discussion about recruiting from within naturally leads to retention concerns.  What makes an organization a great place to work?  Why do some libraries enjoy a low turnover rate, while others suffer through significant retention issues?  If there were a magic potion available to make an organization a fun, intellectually stimulating, and fulfilling work environment, it would sell like an iPod at a clearance sale!

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Alas, no such magic potion exists. However, there are multiple theories and studies to consider concerning retention.

Of all the motivation theories available, Abraham H. Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs"[4] seems to be the most reliable roadmap for understanding basic human needs and, therefore, employee needs. To be sure, there is no simple recipe for understanding what motivates all employees. But Maslow's theory is certainly useful from a common sense standpoint.

As you'll recall from your Psych 101 class, Maslow's "Basic Physical Needs" (heat, air, and base salary) is an important starting point at the bottom of the pyramid for human needs and, therefore, "on the job" needs. Next is "Safety and Security" (safe work, fringe benefits, security), then "Belonging and Love" (work groups, clients, coworkers, supervisors). Near the top of the pyramid is "Esteem" (recognition, high status, increased responsibilities). Finally, at the top of the pyramid is "Self-Actualization" (training, advancement, opportunities for growth and creativity). Maslow's theory is that the lower needs on the pyramid must be satisfied before the next level of needs can be addressed. While no two employees are exactly alike, this theory seems to provide a good general road map for understanding how libraries can create a good, even great, work environment.

At this point, we should address the pay issue. Many libraries simply do not have the funds available to pay high salaries, and most cannot even approach the compensation levels of private businesses. So it is perfectly understandable that many library employees are less than happy with their salaries. As we mentioned earlier in this article, the American Library Association's 2001 survey indicated that "low salaries" was given as a major reason for recruiting difficulties. It is understandable that low compensation levels can also be a major factor for retention problems for many libraries. To combat this, libraries, like any other organization, should continuously look at their compensation levels to address market salary inequities and to address internal salary inequities. Compensation issues and pay policies should be openly and frankly communicated to library personnel. Employees will generally not be happy about compensation challenges but more forgiving and accepting if they have been given clear information about these issues. In the absence of this type of open communication, rumors will spread and employees will be even less satisfied with compensation, therefore leading to both retention and recruiting problems.

When there are compensation challenges (and even when this is not an issue), libraries can look for other ways to compensate top performers with items such as "on-the-spot" cash bonuses, gift certificates, "take the day off" awards, and other forms of compensation and recognition. In addition, considering the fact that many libraries have a large number of regular part-time employees, it is worth exploring providing them with some of the benefits that full-time employees enjoy.

Many studies have shown, however, that compensation issues alone do not necessarily make or break retention levels and recruiting efforts. A key might be for libraries to strike a good balance between

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reasonable and equitable compensation levels, while also doing their best to make their work environment an inviting and rewarding place. There are many additional factors involved in creating a great work environment, therefore encouraging a low rate of employee turnover and easing recruiting problems. We do not have enough room here to list all of the many work issues to be considered for creating and maintaining a great work environment, and again there are no easy answers. Therefore, we will highlight some of the more important issues that DCL is currently working on to improve the quality of work for our employees.

First of all, we have strived to create and communicate our district's mission and vision clearly and effectively. All work activities should support these goals, and should be communicated in a way that connects our work to these all-important goals. We continually strive to attract and retain a strong, committed, fair-minded and well-trained management staff, as well as the best non-management staff available. We are taking a good look at our hiring practices and determining what can be done to ensure that the best available talent is being hired, from our part-time shelvers up to our associate directors. We are working to provide useful supervisory and management training, as well as solid technical and paraprofessional training. We feel that a strong commitment to training for all employees is extremely important.

We have discovered that enough cannot be said about the importance of excellent communication practices within each department and between each department throughout the organization. Many communications avenues (fun and enlightening employee newsletters and an informative, attractive staff web page, for example) must be utilized, as well as making sure your staff knows how to communicate effectively. Furthermore, taking the pulse of your employees on a regular basis through employee satisfaction surveys, and acting immediately on the top issues identified in the surveys, goes a long way in giving employees a voice in the organization and showing them that you are listening. Involving employees, when practical, in decision-making processes through committees, task force teams, etc. is another way to foster a committed and involved work force.

What happens if your library is doing its best to create a great internal work environment, thus addressing the retention issues, but is still struggling with recruiting issues? Here is a quick and dirty checklist for recruiting that we have found helpful:

- Find ways to promote librarianship and, in particular, library leaders. Getting involved with the library schools at the University of Denver or Emporia State University is a great start. Also, consider mentoring college students and offering internships at your library.

- Network to find and recruit new employees. When you feel that someone would be a good candidate for a job opening, make a personal visit and encourage him or her to apply. Don't assume the desired candidate will send their resume. Ask trusted colleagues and co-workers for recommendations.

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• Promote librarianship with youth. Talk with local high schools about participating in a "Career Day" at your library.

• Provide tuition reimbursement for library science associate degrees to paraprofessionals. This could be an ideal program for employees who are not ready to commit to a higher level of education but are ready to pursue a library degree on a smaller scale.

• Look outside of the library and non-profit world for non-library specific positions such as IT, Human Resources, Accounting, and Clerical/Administration positions. There are many private industry employees who would welcome an opportunity to work in a library environment.

• Ensure that your supervisor/management training program is solid. Seek training opportunities outside of your organization through Mountain States Employment Council, for example. When hiring a new mid or top management person, create a training program that will help new managers and supervisors to adjust to their new responsibilities and give them the supervisory tools they need. Promote your strong commitment to training when recruiting new supervisors/managers.

While it is clear that retirement, retention, and recruitment issues are here to stay in the library world, it is also clear that there are no easy answers to these dilemmas. However, organizations that make concerted efforts to address the problems will be far better off than those that do not. The choice is yours!

**NOTES:**

[1] Steffen, Nicolle, Keith Curry Lance, Becky Russell, and Zeth Lietzau, *Retirement, Retention, and Recruitment: The Future of Librarianship in Colorado, a Closer Look*, Denver, CO: Library Research Service, September 2004. <http://www.lrs.org/documents/closer_look/RRR_web.pdf> 11.

[2] Ibid., 100.

[3] American Library Association, *ALA Recruitment & Retirement Survey*, December 2001. <http://www.ala.org/ala/hrdr/libraryempresources/alarecruitment.htm> 2.

[4] Maslow, Abraham H. *Motivation and Personality.* 2nd ed. Harper & Row, 1970.

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