

# JUMPING HURDLES: 'HURDLE WORDING' AND HIRING FOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION



Is your library or information service attracting an inclusive and diverse applicant pool? According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australia is increasingly diverse ([bit.ly/3x9TFGq](https://bit.ly/3x9TFGq)) yet as the *ALIA Workforce Diversity Trend Report 2019* indicates, the library and information sector is a largely homogenous profession, characterised by a white, middle-class staffing base. In terms of staffing, we may often create a workplace 'bubble', not generally reflecting the diversities of the communities we serve. But what can we do if we are not getting a diverse applicant pool to choose from when hiring?

Hiring for a diverse workplace begins long before the applicant pool is reviewed to choose finalists for interviews. It starts as early as articulating the strategic direction and core values of your organization and continues through the selection of the search committee and writing the job advertisement. Job advertisements and hiring practices represent an outwards reflection on the employer that speaks to our values and priorities and how we see our community. The wording of the job advertisement can also convey subtle cues about a specific organisation – such as what diversity and inclusion mean in terms

of the community served, but also what this means in terms of the workplace dynamics.

You will often see advertisements including words like 'we are an equal opportunity employer'. However, later in the advert you might see that applicants have to have a C-class (car) state-based driving licence. Take for example a library officer position in a central Melbourne library service. At first glance you might not think that this is not an unreasonable expectation to have a licence, but is this truly a requirement of the job? What if the applicant only has a motorbike licence? Or, what if the individual lives in Melbourne central just down the road and uses public transport and so does not have a licence? Is the applicant being hired to be the sole driver of a delivery van? Is driving a primary duty of the job? Or is this a 'just in case' request that can be waived if the applicant is a strong fit in other aspects of the job description? If it is optional, can the wording be clear that this is not a core requirement, or can it be omitted from the job advertisement completely?

Some job advertisements note that all applicants must pass a medical exam, or must be able to lift 11 kilograms. An applicant on prescription medication could feel pressured to explain a medical condition that does not affect

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their work abilities. Or what happens if the applicant can only lift 10 kilograms? Will there be a weightlifting segment of the interview? In reality, is lifting heavy weight a work requirement that is a 'deal breaker'? Potential applicants might decide not to apply – even though in reality, they may seldom or never need to lift 11 kilos by themselves!

These are examples of what we call 'hurdle wording'; wording or expectations that may appear in a job advertisement that are not related to the core requirements of the position.

We call this a 'hurdle' as this wording might prevent otherwise well qualified candidates from applying, thus reducing the number of applicants and the diversity of candidate pool. In Muir, Thompson and Qayyum's 2019 study of job ads, only 17% of the library positions advertised welcomed people with a disability and approximately 20% of library job ads appearing had some kind of 'hurdle wording'. Only 16% of ads specifically stated that people from diverse backgrounds, sexualities and ages were welcome.

Sometimes the wording might not appear to be 'hurdle wording' at first glance. For instance, a job advertisement might mention that 'reasonable adjustments may be made for the successful candidate', but it is not always clear to hopeful applicants what this includes. Does this mean that 'reasonable adjustments' can be made to the application paperwork and process? At the interview stage? Or only once the applicant receives an offer? The advertisement may not mention what a 'reasonable adjustment' is, relying on applicants to argue their case, which may be uncomfortable for someone seeking a first job or who already feels the outsider as a diverse applicant. Or alternatively, a job advertisement might require 'strong English language proficiency'. This may deter some non-English-first-language speakers from applying due to confidence or cultural factors which means that they may not see their language skills as being of a high level.

As Thompson, Jaeger and Copeland (forthcoming) note in *A Tripartite Approach to Designing an Inclusive Hiring Experience and an Inclusive Workplace*, hiring for diversity starts well before a candidate begins, and even before the position description and job advertisement are imagined.

Think carefully about whether the wording creates unnecessary barriers. Here are some recommendations for hiring for diversity and inclusion in your organisation:

- **Look at your wording.** Does the wording of the advertisement reflect the core duties, or do you have 'hurdle wording' that could create barriers to diverse applicants?
- **Think about your community.** Where are you posting the job advertisement? Can the invitation for applicants be posted on an array of social media pages or in publications hosted by targeted diverse groups?
- **Consider your language.** Is the advertisement clear, and are expectations clearly outlined? Is there jargon that might create uncertainty to new information professionals as to whether or not they qualify?
- **Speak to your vibrancy.** Avoid cliched terms like 'we reflect our vibrant community' and instead clearly outline what you do around diversity and inclusion. If you offer flexible start and finish times, clearly indicate this to applicants. Welcome applicants from broad backgrounds with wording such as 'Library XYZ is committed to creating a workplace that represents diversity of ability/disability, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, national origin, background, experience and perspective. Doing so is intrinsic to our mission and improves the civic experience for all.'
- **Avoid the age and gender game.** Language like 'fast moving' and 'guy-brarian' immediately presents an image of your organisation that may deter otherwise qualified applicants from applying. What does your language say about your organisation and your staff?

- **Learn about diversity and inclusion:** Knowing what diversity and inclusion is can impact on how we speak about and frame diversity in job advertisements and recruitment. Look at how your organisation speaks about diversity and inclusion, such as in your Accessibility Action Plans ([bit.ly/3g4ldGj](https://bit.ly/3g4ldGj)); partner with providers in your community to run information sessions; and read and engage with articles or training in the LIS profession.

We can always improve our hiring practices. The way that we frame the advertisement and the language and wording that we use can have real implications for our hiring – and through this, for our diversity in the profession.

Interested in reading more? We consider LIS job advertisements in depth in 'The Diversity We Seek': [researchoutput.csu.edu.au/en/publications/the-diversity-we-see-a-document-analysis-of-diversity-and-inclus](https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/en/publications/the-diversity-we-see-a-document-analysis-of-diversity-and-inclus)

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