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United We Change | Careers 2016

by [Jennifer A. Dixon](#)

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CAREERS

Writing employee job descriptions is one of the most challenging projects for library managers. Well-written job descriptions attract the right candidates, guide the decisions of those doing the hiring, and help employees understand their responsibilities—factors that are increasing in importance as technology causes significant shifts in roles and expectations for library professionals. Crafting job descriptions in a union environment can add an extra layer of complexity.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTRACT

Every library work environment is different, and managers must tailor their approach to job descriptions to their own unique situations. According to Courtney Selby, associate dean for information services, director of the Law Library, and associate professor of law at Hofstra University's Maurice A. Deane School of Law, Hempstead, NY, "There is no cookie cutter when it comes to talking about whether or how a particular group of employees is unionized."

One important first step for a person going into union negotiations is to obtain a copy of the governing collective bargaining contract and read it closely. Misunderstandings of the contract can lead to conflict. Jessica Schomberg, nonprint cataloging librarian and associate professor at Minnesota State University, Mankato, explains, "Sometimes people will get offended about [negotiations] happening in a certain way, and sometimes if the contract isn't well understood, there can be a contract violation," making it "necessary to work with a union representative to resolve that dispute."

Human resources (HR) departments can also provide invaluable insight into and support on how collective bargaining agreements at that institution have historically been interpreted and applied. For library professionals who are stepping into union management without prior experience, Selby, author of the article "Librarian Director as Manager of Union Employees" (*Academic Law Library Director Perspectives: Case Studies and Insights*, edited by Michelle M. Wu, William S. Hein, 2015), advises finding a mentor in the relevant field of librarianship who has worked with unions. "Librarians are really good about crowdsourcing for best practices," Selby says.

STICK TO THE STANDARD

One such best practice is for library managers to familiarize themselves with the current state of job descriptions and the language that has been used and approved in the past. Standardized language across comparable positions in the same grade is a useful tool for keeping all

interested parties on the same page. When making changes in job descriptions, Selby notes, “Language is critical,” and it is helpful to “work closely with HR and make sure that the work you are adding to a job description or taking away...is consistent with other positions” in your institution—even those outside of the library.

According to Boston Public Library (BPL) director of library services Michael Colford, who participated in a recent restructuring that changed many job descriptions, it is useful to standardize job description language wherever possible. “Using standard descriptions across positions that are in the same grade” makes the process “a lot easier,” Colford tells *LJ*. Indeed, he explains, problems can arise where revised or new job descriptions depart from familiar language. A failure to pay attention to previously approved language can raise questions about the departure from prior practice.

In addition, having clear standards in place is valuable for structuring discussions between management and unions. At Minnesota State, according to Schomberg, there are “policy statements for different kinds of changes” in job descriptions. These are “written down and agreed upon beforehand,” providing a preapproved road map for the negotiation process.

KEEP THE LINES CLEAR

Many libraries employ both professional librarians, who hold MLS degrees, and technical staff. The distinction between the duties of these two types of employees is not always readily apparent, and library managers must ensure that job descriptions do not blur this line. Any manager responsible for crafting job descriptions must know what type of work is appropriate for employees at a given bargaining level and in a given category of employment. Colford describes past experiences when management created a job description that didn’t unequivocally fall into a single category and so offered it to both unions (professional librarian and technical staff), allowing the unions to make a case for where the position should fit.

Managers must also be aware when certain groups of employees are unionized while others are not. According to Selby, “The potential for [blurred lines] between union and nonunion work is there. You have to be particularly careful about how you identify or assign work.” To “protect all employees” it is useful to have a “clear delineation between whose work is whose.”

Selby also emphasizes the importance of considering the different grades of union employees when revising job descriptions. This presents an opportunity to guarantee that “your employees are getting the benefit of the work that they’re doing,” she says. If an employee whose job

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description has not recently been reviewed is doing work that corresponds to a higher grade, that employee may be eligible to apply for a position audit, which can result in reclassification of the job.

CONTINUOUS COMMUNICATION, COMPROMISE

As a practical matter, negotiations over job descriptions and restructuring can be both expensive and time-consuming. According to Colford, the recent BPL restructuring was necessary in order to “match the kind of services we provide in today’s world in libraries” to staff responsibilities and reporting structures. “The challenges are greater when you are taking someone’s job and eliminating it and creating something new, not just tweaking the description,” says Colford. This meant considerable time was spent explaining to the union the rationale behind these changes.

Such communication is vital when making major changes. “Being patient and [continuously] talking to people is really the best practice” for these types of negotiations, according to Schomberg. It is important to note that in many library environments, making a change to one position’s job description will most likely impact someone else—perhaps by changing responsibilities or the chain of command. As Schomberg describes it, “If we have a new librarian position or if we are redesigning an old position...we might bring out different parts of a job and redistribute the work.” In these situations, it is important to “communicate as much as possible,” she says. Adds Schomberg, library union negotiations can be an exercise in “learning to be really patient and learning to value conversation as a way to manage conflict.”

Even when both sides of the negotiating table are open to compromise, contentious issues may stall discussions and slow down the process. Where topics are particularly challenging, Colford tells *LJ*, it may be best simply to set them aside—during the BPL restructuring, for example, the parties found it impossible to agree on proposed changes to collection development policies. When that disagreement stood in the way of all negotiations moving forward, the issue was tabled with the understanding that it could be raised again in the future.

In general, it is crucial for managers working with unions to create a collaborative negotiating environment and maintain open lines of communication across the negotiating table and with staff who will be impacted by the revised descriptions. As Colford explains, it helps to “keep in mind that [unions and management] have the same goals, and we are trying to work together to come up with something that supports how we think library services need to be delivered and also makes the staff feel comfortable and more successful.” A focus on working together toward a common goal, he says, is better than entering negotiations with an adversarial perspective.

Jennifer A. Dixon is a graduate student at the School of Information, Pratt Institute, New York, studying Library Science. Prior to starting at Pratt, Dixon worked as a commercial litigator and federal law clerk in New York City