

February 18, 2021 Muse-ings

Intro:

This month's Muse-ing comes from Betsy Keene, Museum Curator of the National Parks of Western Pennsylvania. Based on her own experience, she offers advice on how to apply for positions through the federal government's unique USAJobs portal. In a pandemic that has, so far, reduced public and especially federal park and museum positions less than others, we thought such insight would be helpful to many MuseWeekly subscribers.

Piece by Betsy Keene:

So, you want a federal museum job?

If you are not familiar with USAJobs.gov, the platform for government jobs, applying for a position can be a frustrating quagmire of repetitive questions, redundant forms, and unhelpful instructions. It is difficult to even get an interview without a basic understanding of the system. So, here are some tips and insights that can help you:

1. When you apply for any federal position, the first person who will look at your application is a human resources employee, not a museum professional. Unless this individual passes along your packet to the actual hiring official, that official will not be able to consider you for the job.
2. Since the HR employee does not know the museum field, your resume needs to explicitly detail your professional experience in ways that are clear to non-museum professionals. It is not enough to say "collections technician" or "education specialist." You will need to list out all of your responsibilities and projects. This means that while non-federal resumes are usually only a few pages long, federal resumes (depending on length of service) can easily run into six, eight, or even ten pages.
3. Every job listed on USAJobs contains valuable information about the expected duties for the position as well as the required skills for applicants. Tailor your resume to meet the exact language of these guidelines – wherever possible, deploy key words and phrases from the position description in your resume and responses. This will help the human resources individual see your qualifications and fit for the position.
4. Every application includes a questionnaire about your experience. You will be asked to rank how familiar you are with specific aspects of the job. This is an important, if tedious, part of the application. The questionnaire is a tool used by the human resources evaluators to quantify applicants' qualifications. Do not sell yourself short but do not say that you have more experience or skill than you do. If your assessment is not reflected in the experiences you detail in your resume, your application won't make the HR reviewer's cut (called "making the cert," or the certified list of candidates who can be interviewed by the actual hiring official or hiring committee). Your best chance comes from being honest but absolutely complete about every single thing you've done that relates to the job description.
5. Because you can qualify for the job based on several different kinds of experience, you need to be sure that you are clear about yours. If you are qualifying based on education, include your transcripts (and triple check that they were actually submitted). If you are using experience, ensure that you have exact dates of employment (day, month, year). In addition to exact dates, be sure to include the hours your job required. For example, it is not enough to say "full-time"; instead specify that it was a 40-hour per week job. Otherwise, human resources may not see your time as quantifiable and so they will not be able to confirm that you have enough hours of experience to be eligible.

Finally, as this last piece of advice suggests, remember that at its core this process is deeply bureaucratic. The time it takes reflects that, so be patient. After all, bureaucracy is the point, so there's as little chance for favoritism as possible. If you can get past the cert, interviews often work like other interviews in the museum field. Hopefully, this advice helps you get there!