ASK ELLEN – applying for a job when you have less than required years of experience

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Q: I just wanted your opinion on the “experience” aspect of the “job requirements” portion of job announcements. I keep coming across job postings that look promising and for which I meet all the criteria until I get to the part about minimum years of experience in the archives field. I have been working in a public library setting for two years but am currently looking to move into the field of archives and special collections. So despite several months of internship experience in archives/spec.coll. and [my] current job, I do not have the years of experience required.

Should I just not bother applying if the job posting is that specific about years of experience in a particular aspect of archives librarianship, or should I apply anyway knowing I only meet some but not all of the listed requirements?

A: The situation you describe is a common one for new grads and anyone switching careers or from one specialty to another within a field. It is part of a job hunting dilemma most people face at one time or another: how to get the job without experience, and how to get experience without the job?

To decide whether to apply, which I would do on a case-by-case basis, look at each position from the hiring manager’s point of view. This is the person you will have to convince, with usually just the resume and cover letter for starters, that you are a good candidate for the job. Here is the question in the hiring manager’s mind: “With many other applicants who have the experience I am asking for, why should I consider you for this position when you have less experience?”

You are asking the hiring manager to take a risk on you here and depending on the position, it might be a big risk. Experience isn’t everything (although it is very important!) and someone might have the required years of experience and meet every other stated requirement, and not work out at all in a certain position for a number of reasons. You will have to sell yourself effectively, specifically, for that position, in order to convince him/her to take that risk on you.

If you really feel you have a strong case as a candidate for that position, then go for it, but understand you are starting out at a slight disadvantage at least, in an already tight job market.

A couple of other caveats: A smart hiring manager will not count someone out just because he/she has a bit less experience than is ideal. At some workplaces, though, for one reason or another, they might not be willing or able to consider someone who meets anything less than 100% of the requirements, or a particular hiring manager may know that for that job, that particular requirement (the stated years of experience) is crucial. This is why current students are encouraged to get as much experience as they can while in school. If the employer is
specifying many years’ more (3 to 5 years or more) experience than you have, then it is probably not going to be worth it to apply until/unless you have that much experience.

In your resume and especially in your cover letter, you should emphasize the experience you do have that relates directly to the responsibilities of the position in question. Acknowledge that you have less experience than stated in the job description, and give examples of projects you have worked on that demonstrate that you have the skills and can do the job. Show what you know about that employer: the work that is done there (the collections they have, for an Archives), their mission, current challenges, etc. Consider the library skills you have that are transferable to archival work. It is also a good idea to convey that you are a fast learner and can pick up new skills quickly and “hit the ground running”. This may help to allay the hiring manager’s fears that as a less-experienced hire you might need extra hand-holding in your first weeks and months on the job. Be positive and enthusiastic and confident – that will make your case that much stronger, and those are traits most employers value in any employee.

While you are applying for these jobs, do whatever you can to get more experience, including volunteering and unofficial (not for credit) internships and/or part time jobs. Aside from what you write in your cover letter and how you tailor your resume, remember that networking is always your best bet for getting a job or an interview. A strong recommendation from someone who knows you and what you are capable of, and who knows the hiring manager, can help you get a foot in the door.

More tips for applying when you don’t meet all of the qualifications, from AskAManager:

My “Ask Ellen” Q&A about switching from one kind of library work to another:
http://palmerblog.liu.edu/?page_id=4531

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Thank you and good luck!

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