

## **Questions to Ask Yourself When You are Considering a Museum Career**

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### 1. What do I want out of my career?

When asked why they went into the museum field, many museum professionals say that they want to make a difference in their communities; many more went into the field because they are passionate about a particular subject, type of artifact, or even about museums in general. Having one or both of these sentiments is not required, but it does help. Passion and commitment can help you get through the frustrations and limitations you will face as a museum professional.

### 2. How much does salary matter in planning for my future?

If salary is the most important factor in your decision about which career to follow, museums are not for you. While the directors of the largest museums in the country may earn salaries in the 6 figures, the reality is that most museum professionals are lucky to make even a fraction of that.

Benefits are also an important consideration in any job. Museums are better than they used to be, and most full time museum professionals do get some sort of medical coverage, as well as sick and vacation time. If you are looking for a full medical plan that includes dental, disability, and vision care, museum plans are generally not going to meet your expectations. And retirement plans? Almost non-existent.

### 3. How important is a 9-to-5 schedule?

Museums are not generally known for the 60 hour work weeks that law firms with young staffers have made famous. Most museum professionals value their personal time, and work very hard to maintain a balance between work and home. However, the nature of museum work does mean flexibility is important. If you are a Development Director, you can expect to include evening receptions, dinner parties, and early morning breakfast meetings with donors into your work schedule. For educators, evenings and weekends are often not your own, as that is the most popular time for families and adults to go to museums to learn. Curators are more able to keep to a 9-to-5 schedule, but they might also be called upon to speak at the educator's adult program, or make an appearance at the donor reception.

#### 4. Can I work successfully in a team environment?

This question is really key, and you need to think carefully about it. While museums, especially larger ones, have different staff members who focus on specialized areas of daily operations, the fact remains that a museum's staff cannot work in a vacuum. The curator needs the educator to help write exhibit labels that reach the different audiences of the museum, the development director needs the finance director to help complete the budget sections of a grant application, and the marketing director needs the volunteer coordinator to help find and supervise volunteers for that special media event.

#### 5. Am I willing to move to find the job I want?

It is true that some people land in one city or one museum and stay there for their entire career. However, this is not typical. The nature of the beast is that there are a limited number of museums in each area, and most of the museums in any area are very small with only one or two staff. If you are interested in a specific type of museum, like Contemporary Art or Civil War history, you are even more limited. If you are willing to move to another city or region of the country, you open up your options a great deal.

#### 6. Am I interested in continuing education?

If you consider yourself to have all the education you need once you've got that college degree, museums might not be for you. One of the most important things museum professionals can do for their careers is continue their education. A resume without workshops, classes, or conferences on it isn't very strong if you are looking to move up the ladder in the museum field.

#### 7. How good am I at keeping to a budget?

Museums are always on a budget. No matter what department you work in, no matter what your role within that museum is, you will need to know how to stick to a tight budget. An educator gets a certain amount of money to plan and implement a new program, a curator gets a limited sum to purchase archival supplies for the collection. Going over budget and making it up later is not usually an option. If you aren't a good budgeter, don't despair! Take a budgeting course to improve your skills, or, once you have that first museum job, work with your new boss to get better at this essential ability.

#### 8. Am I willing to complete tasks that are outside my areas of expertise/ interest?

You may be hired as a museum educator or curator, but museum professionals all wear multiple hats. While this is more common in smaller museums, even the biggest museums do not have enough staff to do everything they want to do. This means everyone pitches in where needed, even if it isn't in your official job description. In my first job as Director of a small historical society, I found myself not only balancing the books, supervising staff and writing

grants, but also shoveling snow off the roof, cleaning the toilets, and helping teach school programs.

9. Would a small museum or a large museum be better for me?

*The key to success at a large organization is working your way up the ladder, and that can be frustrating. Entry-level jobs at these institutions may be limited to very specific tasks that prevent creativity or intellectual activity, such as filing and data entry. At a small museum, you may find yourself spending three hours stuffing envelopes for a membership campaign, but you are also running the campaign yourself and can enjoy all the challenges and rewards of the project. Working in a highly specific job at a larger museum can also produce a myopic perspective on how the institution runs as a whole. For example, if you are the elementary school tour coordinator, you may never interact with anyone in the Conservation Department. But at a mid-sized museum, you might collaborate with a conservator to create programs that teach local collectors how to care for their own antiques or art collections.* Elizabeth Schlatter, from her book *Museum Careers: A Practical Guide for Novices and Students*

#### LARGE MUSEUM

- You have the opportunity for a more specialized position, and the ability to focus on a particular topic or role that interests you.
- You would benefit from the presence of senior staff members from whom you can learn.
- Salaries tend to be better.
- The museum is more likely to be part of a group health plan and offer other fringe benefits.
- There is a possibility of moving up to a new, higher position within the same museum.
- There is often more funding for professional development.
- A larger institutional budget means more money for planning and implementing exhibitions and education programs.

#### SMALL MUSEUM

- You could benefit from the small staff size by having the opportunity to be a “jack of all trades”, to fulfill multiple roles within one organization.
- You have a greater possibility of making a name for yourself and heading projects and programs on your own sooner. This can look very good on a resume.
- You have a chance to form very close relationships with community members and staff of other small organizations.
- Often staff has more direct contact with the Board of Trustees; this gives you the ability to build the skill of working with Board early in your career.
- You often have more flexible working hours (though sometimes longer overall hours).
- You are given more independence in choosing projects and being creative.