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VAM White Paper

Museum Careers: Fit, Readiness & Development



Virginia Association of Museums

The Resource Network for Museums

Serving Museums in Virginia and DC

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Museum Compatibility Quiz

Well, you've probably tried online dating, now how about an online compatibility quiz for museums? Take this quick quiz to find out how well suited you might be for a career in the museum field, and where in the museum you might start looking. Choose a rating for each statement, and then check your score at the bottom of the page.

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Attitudes & Mindset

	Strongly Disagree		Strongly Agree	
	1	2	3	4
1. I don't mind working flexible hours, including some weekends and evenings.	1	2	3	4
2. I need a living wage, but salary takes a back seat to other factors when I think about what is important in a job .	1	2	3	4
3. I need to feel passionate about what I am doing in my job.	1	2	3	4
4. I want to make a difference in my community.	1	2	3	4
5. I enjoy working with other professionals in a team environment.	1	2	3	4
6. I want to stay in my current city; I'm not interested in moving.	1	2	3	4
7. Continuing education is something I'm looking forward to.	1	2	3	4
8. I enjoy connecting with other people doing jobs similar to mine.	1	2	3	4
9. I'm willing to chip in, even if the task has nothing to do with my job.	1	2	3	4

Your answers to the above questions can help determine whether a museum career is right for you.

Score of 27-36: Welcome to the museum field! You have a lot of the attitude and mindset that it takes to thrive in a museum environment.

Score of 20-27: I wouldn't rule out a museum career yet, but give it some serious thought. It can be a difficult road to choose if you have doubts and aren't totally committed to it.

Score under 20: Based on your responses, a museum career is probably not right for you. If you are still excited about museums, try volunteering or interning to see exactly what would be expected of you as a museum professional.

Areas of Skills and Interests

	Strongly Disagree		Strongly Agree	
	1	2	3	4
1. I want a job where I'll be challenged intellectually.	1	2	3	4
2. I don't mind asking people for money, if it is for a good cause.	1	2	3	4

3. I really want to specialize in a particular topic or subject area.	1	2	3	4
4. I really enjoy talking to people, and don't have a problem with public speaking.	1	2	3	4
5. I like to do research, and study art and objects.	1	2	3	4
6. I'm a good writer.	1	2	3	4
7. I'm very good at planning, and love to put together events and parties.	1	2	3	4
8. I love working with children.	1	2	3	4
9. I'm a natural storyteller, and love to create narratives.	1	2	3	4
10. I'm more of a jack of all trades—I can do a little bit of everything!	1	2	3	4
11. I really have a comfort zone, and prefer not to venture too far outside it.	1	2	3	4
12. I'm an organizer; I love keeping things in order, and making sure everything is where it is supposed to be.	1	2	3	4
13. I'm a creative person; I love to do art projects, build things, and display things artistically.	1	2	3	4
14. I can keep my head in any crisis, and never lose my cool.	1	2	3	4
15. I like dealing with numbers and sticking to a budget.	1	2	3	4

Curators

If you answered 3 or 4 to questions 1, 3 and 5, and 1 to question 4 and 8, you might be most suited to a curatorial position at a museum. Curators do not generally interact with the public, though they do occasionally speak at public programs. They spend their time with objects and documents, and are the primary caretakers for the collections owned by a museum.

Educators

If you answered 3 or 4 to questions 4, 7, 8, 9 and 13, you might be best suited to the job of Museum Educator. Educators in larger museums often specialize in a particular age group or type of program, but most educators need to be able to create and implement programming for every age of museum visitor. They often run programming, and need to be creative as they coordinate state learning standards, the museum's collection, and visitors' interests, into a potential program or event.

Marketing

If you answered 3 or 4 to questions 4, 6, 7 and 14, you could be a great Marketing Director. This is another position that doesn't exist in smaller museums, but in larger museums this job

can include working with the media and tourism organizations, planning exhibit previews and member events, and serving as the voice of the museum in a crisis.

Finance

If you answered 3 or 4 to questions 12 and 15, you might make a good Finance Director at a museum. While this job does not usually have much interaction with the public, or with the museum collections, it is essential to the success of any museum. If numbers are your thing, and you love museums, this might be the perfect job!

Collections Manager/ Registrar

If you answered 3 or 4 to questions 5 and 12, check out openings for Collections Managers or Registrars. These museum staff members need to be extremely well organized, and dedicated to keeping deeds of gift, inventories, collection catalogs, and loan forms in order. You also get to work hands-on with the museum collections, and you often help the curator take care of those collections.

Development

If you answered 4 to questions 2, 6, and 7, you might have the skills you need to be a Development Director. Development staff don't appear in every museum; it is usually mid-size and large museums that can afford to hire a staff person specifically designated to write grants, plan donor receptions and go after donations. In smaller museums, this is often left to the director or members of the Board of Trustees.

Exhibit Designer

If you answered 3 or 4 to questions 5, 6, 9 and 13, you might make an excellent Exhibit Designer. An exhibit designer needs to be able to write label copy, graphically pull together an aesthetically pleasing display of objects and information, and be able to build the exhibit itself. This job isn't found in every museum, so it can be hard to break into this as a career. However, you might look at exhibit design companies as an alternative—they aren't museums, but their clients are!

What's for you – A Small or Large Museum?

Small Museum

If you answered 3 or 4 to questions 1 and 10, and a 1 to question 11, you might do better in a small museum. Because there are not a lot of staff members in these museums, everyone plays multiple roles, and chips in on museum-wide projects.

Large Museum

If you answered 3 or 4 to questions 3 and 11, you might want to look at jobs in larger museums. Larger museums (with a budget over 1 million a year, normally) have more staff, and can hire people with specialized skills and interests. For instance, a small museum will most likely have one or two educators who run all programming. A large museum, on the other hand, is more likely to have a Tour Coordinator, School Programs Coordinator, Adult Programs Educator, and a Director of Public Programs who is in charge of the whole education department.

More about Finding the Right Match

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.

Building Your Museum Resume

If you are interested in a museum career, it is never too early to start working toward that goal. The museum field is not for everyone, and the most important thing to remember is that a museum wants to know you are committed to the eccentricities of a museum career before they will invest a lot of time hiring and training you. They will look for evidence that you have

done your homework by completing internships, volunteering at museums, and starting to build a museum-based network.

So, how do you make your resume stand out?

Internships

What Does an Internship Do For You?

I can't repeat this enough. Internships are key components to any entry-level museum resume. Doing an internship provides you an opportunity to see what exactly goes into running a museum, what a museum professional's daily tasks are, and whether you fit well into the museum environment. A completed internship on a resume tells your prospective employer that you have learned the basics of working in a museum setting, and that you have taken the first step in learning how to put your classroom knowledge to practical use.

A successfully completed internship also gives you two benefits that will help in any job search:

1. A new network of colleagues from the museum in which you did your internship
2. A professional reference you can hand to a potential employer

How do you find an internship?

If you are a current student, your professors should have listings of local museum internships; you can also check with your local museum association or call individual sites if there are some you are particularly interested in. Some are paid positions, but most are not. You can find internships that offer credit, and run during the school year, or you can search for a summer internship.

If you are not currently in school, but are thinking about entering the field, it is still possible to find internships at museums. You will need to do more legwork, and explain to your potential internship supervisor why you want an internship instead of a volunteer position. You can always check the VAM job board at www.vamuseums.org for internship opportunities too!

Are All Internships Created Equal?

No way. As an intern, you need to be willing to work at the tasks assigned, be a team player within your museum, and follow the guidelines set forth by your supervisor. However, you do have some power in this equation. While a good internship will help prepare you for your future career, a bad one can hurt your chances, or even sour you on museums in general.

You have the right to talk to your supervisor at the beginning of an internship and make sure that your experience will be rewarding for both sides. Ask up front what tasks you will be assigned, and how those tasks are contributing to the success of the organization. Invite your supervisor to give you critiques, and to train you in different techniques that she has found helpful over the years. During your internship, if you feel you are not getting the feedback or experience you need, let your supervisor know—it may be she only needs a nudge to remind her why you are there. If that doesn't help, talk to your professor. Don't wait

until the end of the internship to voice your concerns. Getting a bad review because you were bored, underused or too quiet will not help you.

This is not to say the museum should never ask you to do a menial task—most museum professionals make copies, clean the galleries, or set up coffee service for a visiting group on a daily basis. Balance is the key word to keep in mind. If you are asked to clean the galleries as a part of your job, but are also able to help with labels or tours, or work with kids, you are well on your way to understanding exactly what museum professionals do.

For guidance on ensuring that your internship will be a positive experience, [click here](#).

Volunteering

What is the Difference between Interning and Volunteering?

Interns fill a role similar to that of an apprentice. Their tasks are designed to help them gain on-the-job training and build practical skills they can use in future employment. Interns can receive college credit or stipends, and their performance is evaluated in some structured fashion. Volunteers play a less structured, but no less important, role at a museum. Their tasks do not need to be geared to acquiring new job skills, and they are not evaluated or reviewed as formally as interns. This difference provides a volunteer with more freedom within the museum; they can change departments if they get bored with a task, they can set a more flexible schedule, their jobs tend to be more open-ended, and they generally are treated more as a peer than a colleague.

Does Volunteering Help Me?

Volunteering, like interning, will show your potential employer that you are dedicated to museum work and have actually completed tasks in a museum setting. However, volunteer roles generally won't carry as much weight on a resume. Internships, for an entry-level resume, would be listed under Professional Experience, with specific tasks and achievements for that internship listed underneath. Volunteer roles, on the other hand, are generally considered Community Involvement. You have less resume "real estate" for these personal entries, and they are seen as extras, rather than the primary factors that help you get a job.

Volunteering should be on your checklist of things to add to your resume. It shows a commitment to the nonprofit sector and a willingness to use your free time to do good things for your community, and it provides a potential employer with more proof that you know what the museum world actually looks like. However, volunteering should come AFTER internships on that resume checklist. Do not give up on doing an internship because you already have volunteer experience under your belt.

Building a Network

How do you do this?

It does seem a bit like a catch 22—you need a job to build a network, but you need a network to get a job, right? First of all, networks come in many shapes and sizes. Graduate programs in museum studies have very strong networks made up of alumni and instructors. Different museum disciplines have their own networks—curators, educators, directors. And different types of museums also build their own networks to better communicate with each

other—zoos, science centers, history museums. But there are also more general networks that you can become a part of before you even have your first job.

The best of these general networks is your state or regional museum association. Most (including VAM) have special student rates that make joining the association affordable. Once you are a member, you have something to add to your resume under Professional Affiliations, and you have immediate access to a well-established network of professionals. The more member events or conferences you attend, the more people you will meet within the field.

Another way to establish a network for yourself is to be proactive when you are working on your internship. Talk to everyone in your museum or department; ask them to introduce you to their colleagues at other museums. Keep in touch with all these people after your internship is over, and you are well on your way to your own personal network.

Developing Your Career along the Way

Continuing Education

Museum professionals never stop going to workshops, reading new publications, and attending conferences – it's the only way to keep abreast of new trends, technology, issues, and to maintain your professional network. For those just starting out, having a couple of workshops or programs on your resume before you even get your first job will go a long way to showing a potential employer that you are committed to the field. For those who have been in the business a while, it demonstrates to your current or future employer that you value lifelong learning and the nurturing of your career.

In this area, your state or regional museum association can again be a great resource. VAM even offers a Virginia Certificate in Museum Management as a part of their professional development programs. Find out more at www.vamuseums.org.

Taking Advantage of Leadership Opportunities

For those of you who are established in your museum career, it is always important to take advantage of opportunities to develop your leadership skills. Doing so results in greater poise and confidence, and develops your standing and recognition at your museum, and in the greater museum community. This is important both as a way to give back to the community and as a way to extend your career beyond the walls of your museum.

By being an active part of VAM or another dynamic professional organization, you will be able to present a project or session before your peers, author an article, serve on committees, be part of projects to help museums, and – in the case of VAM membership - be eligible for election to our governing Council. These are all ways to “sharpen the saw” and keep your skills honed while also networking with your colleagues.