The hiring of an executive director is certainly a momentous occasion for any museum. In children's museums, the strength of the organization and its ability to thrive lies in any specialized collection and more in an approach to thematic interpretation based strongly on the museum's mission and vision. Thus the search for an executive director directs the board to consider the needs of the museum's directors and staff. Where a fine arts or science museum may focus on, respectively, Dutch oil painting or the geology of the Americas, a children's museum might be expected to explore both topics and scores of others, tailoring the content of exhibitions and programs for a vitally important audience—the new generation, not yet born or who are just entering the school system. Museum directors and staff, as professionals, benefit from and enjoy working with a variety of people who share common interests and challenges. The need to fill the position of executive director may be pressing, but should also be expected as part of a museum's regular cycle of growth. Considering where your museum is at this stage of its development—eighty years of operation or five years since opening—can be a useful level-setting exercise. If there are more people than ever currently visiting your museum's exhibits, it may be time to expand the board shape the characteristics it is seeking in a new director.

Establishing the Search Parameters: When Profiling is a Good Thing

Establish a board search committee consisting of no more than five people who can devote considerable time and effort to this process. The committee, which might include the chair, members of the executive committee, or others representative of the major issues or milestones facing the museum, should then begin to create a profile of the ideal candidate. Input from key staff, donors or other major stakeholders will not only help create a more objective profile of the ideal candidate, but also will help identify the most effective approach for attracting the desired candidate. Likewise, many resumes may suggest new ideas and alternatives previously unconsidered—experience with different approaches to education and experiential learning. If a board decides to hire an outside firm to conduct the search or to seek the help of a firm's director or mentor, they will have the potential of strengthening the board itself. Establish a budget for the search (including expenses for candidates' travel, if necessary) and other related costs.

Seek and Thee Shall Find

Once the position profile has been established and a job description finalized, create a strategy for getting the word out in an advertisement or announcement for both print and electronic media. Place a ad in ACM Forum or on the American Association of Museums’ new online service Museum Careers are standard ways to let the field know of an opening and to reach potential candidates in the industry with your specific requirements. There are other industry-specific, low or no-cost avenues such as posting the announcement on various museum list servers, such as Museum-L, or Children’s Museums, or with regional or national museum associations. Don’t forget to ask the staff for the names of potential candidates they have worked with in the past. At the same time a letter from the board chair seeking applications for the director position might be circulated among other children’s museums and other educational institutions with the understanding that they are unencumbered by a search firm. A letter from the board chair can help ensure that resumes come from directors and candidates who are not otherwise interested in the position, as well as from members of other museum boards. Speak to many people about the museum and the search, since the adage of “six degrees of separation” is particularly true for the museum field. Choose a deadline for accepting resumes and credentials and incorporate it into these announcements and letters.

Do-It-Yourself or Get Help!

At this point, the museumboard should be prepared to interview the candidates and to narrow the field. Whether or not a search firm is engaged, a board interview process can be both effective and innovative. With a large number of strong candidates, the board may find it better to interview the candidates and to make a second round of interviews. In this case, the board should be prepared—to a degree—to both refine and refine its original job requirements. No one resume is likely to cover all of the ideal characteristics previously agreed upon. Likewise, many resumes may suggest new approaches previously unconsidered—experience with programs, or other programs that may be useful for the museum’s future plans. The previous pre-search assessment that considers the status of the museum and where it is in its life cycle is particularly important at this stage of the search.

In children’s museums, the strength of the organization is apt to lie in any one specialized collection and more in an approach to thematic interpretation based strongly on the views, talents and communication skills of the museum’s director and staff.

Hiring Your Most Important Employee: The Quest for an Executive Director

Geri Thomas and David V. Griffin, Thomas & Associates, Inc.

After the deadline has passed, review the incoming resumes and referrals from all sources and select up to several candidates. Establish a list of the criteria and conduct interviews with key representatives of the firm, the staff, significant contributors, or other members of the community. Whether this is accomplished now or later after the final selections of one or two choices, it is important that significant stakeholders in the museum and the community have an opportunity to meet the candidates.

With the museum’s director/founder, the volunteer director/founder brings the mission and vision to the museum’s future plans. The previous pre-search assessment that considers the status of the museum and where it is in its life cycle is particularly important at this stage of the search.

Interest in Position: Why do you want to be the executive director of the children’s museum? How does your background relate to this position and how does it fit into your long-term career goals?

Leadership and Vision: Do you have a clear vision of what type of museum you want to develop and how you will attract and keep the support of the community?

Programming Experience: Can you define programming and programming philosophy? What type of programs do you want to develop and how do you plan to implement them?

Fundraising/Planning Experience: Describe your involvement in developing plans (long-range, strategic, etc.), policies and procedures for the organization. Our capital campaign is still underway, and we need to raise $5 million of new capital. Describe your experience in fundraising and communications.

Management and Team Building: Describe your management style. Provide examples of how you have been instrumental in developing staff. How do you define “energy” in an organization and how would you go about building it and keeping it high?

Call the selected candidates to confirm their interest and conduct phone interviews. Initial telephone interviews are an excellent way to assess interest, whether the candidate is interested and engaged, and what is motivating the person to seek the position. If the board is conducting the search on its own, phone interviews should be conducted and the same questions should be asked in each of the interviews in order to rank candidate responses. Be sure to ask each of the applicants their current salary requirements and explain the range of compensation that has been decided upon. All too often this important question is overlooked, causing confusion and disappointment for all parties later in the search process. After narrowing the candidate pool to four or so, plan to bring them in for face-to-face interviews. Provide them with all of the materials necessary to understand the museum and its issues in depth: a current annual report and organizational chart; written information and brochures on the museum’s programs, membership and fundraising efforts; collection information about long-range, strategic or other plans or studies; and other information about the city, the state, housing, etc. Prepare an agenda for the candidate and develop members of the committee and the same questions should be asked in each of the interviews in order to rank candidate responses.

As responses to your efforts come in, look at resumes and cover letters from candidates that demonstrate clarity and conciseness and that balance achievements with ambition. A good resume suggests consistent focus on the part of the candidate and a steady advancement in her or his chosen field, characterized by innovation and a willingness to initiate new programs. As resumes come in, no one resume is likely to cover all of the ideal characteristics previously agreed upon. Likewise, many resumes may suggest new alternatives previously unconsidered—experience with different cultures, for example, or work with both children and adults, or involvement with corporate campaign, fundraising, or programming, or other programs that may be useful for the museum’s future plans. The previous pre-search assessment that considers the status of the museum and where it is in its life cycle is particularly important at this stage of the search.

Who are You and Where Have You Been?

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obvious strengths of dedication and thorough knowledge of the museum’s initial culture to the table, but can also be blinded to problems both new and longstanding by enthusiasm for and familiarity with the organization. Generally, although this person may be readily considered as an applicant, it is in the interests of the museum to compare him or her to other talent and possibilities uncovered by the search.

Obtaining and calling references needs to be handled adeptly, as it is important not to jeopardize the candidate’s current position. Ask the finalists for the names of people who can speak about their abilities and accomplishments. This could include former and past directors and senior staff with whom the candidate has worked or supervised and whom the candidate is comfortable with you calling at the pre-offer stage. If the candidate has been a director of a museum, once they have accepted an offer of employment, ask them if you can contact the chair or members of the board where the candidate has been employed to assess how the person will work with your board. An offer is often made contingent on the outcome of this and other references, background checks, or required drug testing if that is the museum’s policy.

Once the search committee has made a selection, work out how the candidate will be endorsed by the full board and how the appointment will be communicated to the staff and community. Review suggestions and requirements from the candidate concerning the employment contract, which should include compensation, increases based on agreed-to goals or museum benchmarks being achieved, benefits package, moving and housing allowances and other relevant contract issues, including the criteria of how the executive director’s performance will be assessed and reviewed. Regular reviews of performance are a chance for the board not only to review the new executive director against their original expectations, but for both parties to identify strengths and possible new approaches to issues and opportunities that the museum and staff will encounter.

The process of transition is as important as the search and hiring process. The board should have a clear plan for orienting the new executive director and helping that person to become acquainted with the board, staff, building, collections, donors and the community at large. And celebrate! Have the board chair and/or members of the search committee greet the new director at the museum on the first day. Arrange for a combined staff and board breakfast or some other social gathering to celebrate the success of finding a new executive director and all of the new opportunities ahead for museum.

Geri Thomas is the President of Thomas & Associates, Inc., and David V. Griffin is a Senior Associate in the same firm. Thomas & Associates, Inc. is based in New York City and offers staffing, consulting and professional development training to museums, nonprofits and art businesses nationwide.