

HIRING AND TRAINING FOR EXCELLENCE

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I strongly feel that the programs produced by a great many planetariums do not meet the needs or expectations of their communities nearly as well as they could. One of the major reasons for this lack of quality is the lack of training and the questionable hiring practices that are current in the profession.

The object of training for a career is to advance one's skills to a level where it is possible to demonstrate to a potential employer that the job offered can be performed. By this standard, someone seeking a planetarium career must be able to show an employer examples of scripts, special effects, artwork, photography or administrative work, depending on the position sought. The opportunity to gain planetarium skills outside of employment at a planetarium are limited; however there are a growing number of internships at planetariums noted for their production quality. There are also a few opportunities to develop production skills at colleges with planetariums.

I personally respond to the several serious enquiries that I receive each year from people seeking a planetarium career by recommending the internship route. I also emphasize that both internship openings and career opportunities are rare. In addition, planetariums are fickle in their hiring practices. As a result, it is essential to have alternate career plans should a college course, internship, or entry-level staff position not be available. Some of my enquirers are rather taken aback to find that even an advanced astronomy or education degree is not, in itself, suitable preparation for planetarium work. In fact, my experience and observations indicate that previous career training in these areas mitigates against a successful production career, since both educators and astronomers are inculcated in patterns of thought and expression unsuitable for planetarium audiences.

All too many planetariums, especially new ones, fill professional staff positions with inexperienced or inadequately trained personnel. The powers that be assume that their new dome has something to do with astronomy and so they hire an astronomer to run it. Or if it is a part of a school system, a teacher with some astronomy background is pressed into service. As a result, the planetarium blunders along for several years until, hopefully, the staff figures out what the planetarium business is all about, and how to put shows together.

Good hiring practices are so obvious that it should not be necessary to state them; however, they are so generally flouted that I feel compelled to lay out the basics:

1. Plan staff positions that reflect what actually needs to be accomplished in terms of the institution's goals. This is especially important in new planetariums. For example, don't hire a staff astronomer unless you have a flush budget to spend supporting what an astronomer does- research. Definitely hire a staff publicist or a staff member who can devote a substantial fraction of her/his time to marketing and publicity. If shows are not vigorously marketed no one will come and pay admission. The planetarium will starve, becoming drab and unattractive in its offerings.
2. If you are unclear about the staff needed to operate a planetarium, consult with the director of a planetarium that serves its community to the same standard that you envisage yours being served.
3. Prepare detailed job descriptions for each position. Look at the approximate hours each week that you expect the person to spend on each activity listed in the description to ensure that it is reasonable.
4. Advertise widely in the planetarium community. Make use of the IPS employment directory maintained by the Strasenburgh Planetarium in Rochester, New York.
5. Hire the person who can demonstrate, based on training and experience, that s/he can fulfill the terms of the job description.
6. Do not hire people with little or no planetarium experience unless you plan to train them at your institution or arrange for training elsewhere.
7. Insist that existing staff at all levels improve their techniques and broaden their creative approaches through attendance at conferences, courses and study trips to other planetariums. Lack of interest in professional improvements should be seen as a lack of interest in staying employed in a planetarium.

I know that a few planetariums already follow guidelines like the ones above. It is easy to pick them out. Their staff members are enthusiastic and innovative, working at the forefront of the planetarium business. These planetariums generally have good community support, from the audiences that flock to their shows to the politicians that grant their funding.

Planetariums that don't measure up are usually saddled with some unproductive staff who were hired in violation of these basics. It does cost more to staff a planetarium appropriately; however this extra cost is invariably repaid through increased community support. On the other hand I can cite examples where unwise staffing has driven planetariums to drabness or financial ruin. In my opinion there has been too little attention in the pages of the *Planetarian* to the overall aspects of the planetarium operation that promote the success of the medium. I would like to see some letters to the editor commenting on the above piece or perhaps illuminating other topics.