

Walking with Librarians: A Unique Journey

Law librarians have watched their roles expand and now are seen as indispensable assets to firm operations.

BY MARK GEDIMAN

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MAXIMIZING THE POWER OF THE LAW LIBRARY COMMUNITY SINCE 1906



I love watching the “Walking with Dinosaurs” programs on the Discovery Channel with my kids. I think what makes it fascinating television is the personal nature of the re-enactments. With that in mind, come walk with me on my journey along the path of law firm librarianship.

Law firm librarians are a special breed of librarian. We don't just spend our days in quiet isolation pointing the odd patron toward some treatise. Historically, librarians performed two functions in a law firm: 1) support the practice of law within the firm and 2) make sure the collection was inventoried and current. The prevailing attitude among law firm librarians was, “They know what I do, and they know where to find me if they need it done.”

I got my first law firm job in 1987. The firm had 20 attorneys, a very small library, a red Ubiq Lexis Terminal, and a Westlaw WALT Terminal. Each secretary had a Compaq computer with an amber monitor and could share files only by putting them on 5.5-inch floppy disks (called that because they were indeed floppy) and walking them to someone else's computer. The Lexis and Westlaw terminals each had a dedicated phone line and a noisy continuous feed printer attached. Although the Lexis and Westlaw representatives were always happy to provide training, I was the only person in the firm who consistently took

fingertips. Library staff became the guides to this new world of information. We added a new weapon to our research arsenal and remained confident of our value to the firm.

However, in the mid-1990s, all of that changed. The Chicago office of a large national law firm summarily laid off all of its librarians and replaced them with a contract service. Did they think that librarians were, to put it in economic terms, fungible?

After much hand-wringing and soul-searching by the law firm librarian community, the reason for this event became clear. A law firm library is unique as an administrative department. Called the “black hole” by some and the “money pit” by others, it is often perceived as a drain on resources as well as occupying large swaths of billable office space. Yet, to have a properly staffed library was recognized as a necessity for the practice of law. Most law firm libraries at this time were not forced to operate within the constraints of budgets, creating spending monoliths without any controlling mechanisms.

I consistently hear that the library is one of the best-run departments in the firm. Every decision maker, attorney, and paralegal receives something of value from the library virtually every day, and we support every operational department of the firm.

advantage of it. I then became the “go-to person” for electronic research. Prior to that, my duties consisted of reshelving and updating the library materials.

In the early 1990s, I went to work for a Los Angeles-based intellectual property law firm that had a three-person library. In addition to having the usual coterie of services, we also had access to the Internet through a service called Serfnet. We immediately had access to all kinds of information (although nothing like we have today) at our

Next for me came a stint as a Research and Information Specialist for the Strategic Planning and New Business Development Group at Edison International, a Fortune 500 Utility Holding company. (Try putting that on your business cards!) While there, I produced market analyses, briefing packs on competitors and slides for Board of Directors presentations. I was also responsible for the department's research budget.

While I was at Edison, something happened that

reinforced the lesson I took away from the Chicago event. During a budget meeting inside Southern California Edison, the CEO saw a line item on the budget for the corporate library and asked, “We still have a library?” Nine months later, it was gone, and the three librarians who worked there were either let go or re-assigned. If they don’t know you’re there, they don’t know you have value.

And then came Best Best & Krieger (BBK), where I work today. When I arrived at BBK, one person was responsible for the libraries in the firm’s four offices. My predecessor was overwhelmed by the demands of the mail and unable to leave the headquarters library. As a result, the branch libraries had not seen a librarian in several years, if ever. With raising the visibility of the library as my goal, I implemented the following initiatives:



In the late 1980s, law firm librarians had precious few technological tools at their disposal. Common at the time were Westlaw WALT Terminals like this one.

Firm librarians can no longer be content to toil day in, day out in relative anonymity. Rather, we have a new reality to contend with. This reality requires that firm librarians must compete for limited resources with other administrative departments.

- I set up a monthly schedule of office visits that not only reminds them I’m here to support them, but also lets them know that their issues will get a fair hearing. This creates goodwill for the department.
- The library implemented a daily news clipsheet for each practice group that consists entirely of general circulation news stories that would be of interest to that group, giving them some exposure to discussion outside of the legal arena.
- I met with my counterparts in administration and asked them how the library can support their operations.
- After consulting with the Managing Partner, Executive Director and Executive Committee, the library added a Competitive Intelligence function to support firm marketing and strategic initiatives.
- A librarian sits in on every practice group meeting.
- We contribute regularly to every practice group’s professional development program.
- We became an integral part of both the new hire and summer associate training process.

- We created a logo for the library that incorporates the firm’s logo.

Regardless of problems or issues, I consistently hear that the library is one of the best-run departments in the firm. Every decision maker, attorney, and paralegal receives something of value from the library virtually every day, and we support every operational department of the firm.

Among our responsibilities:

- We have provided IT with briefing packs for background on firm RFP responders.
- We collaborate closely with the marketing staffers on “competitive intelligence” and let them know if we get work outside of their new client process.
- We do confidential research about once a week for the Human Resources department.
- We do regular tax research for accounting.
- We keep the firm’s executives abreast on developments in the legal industry.

And, most importantly, we have needed to expand our department from one person (me) to six staff members, including three full-time librarians to meet the increased volume of work.

Although my path may not be typical, I think these conclusions are inescapable. Firm librarians can no longer be content to toil day in, day out in relative anonymity. Rather, we have a new reality to contend with. This reality requires that firm librarians must:

- Compete for limited resources with other administrative departments;
- Develop an internal brand to remind people of the source of the high-quality work product;
- Proactively remind internal clients of how you can help them do their jobs better;
- Be integral to the firm's business development; and
- Constantly add to our catalog of indispensable skills and products.

By embracing this new reality, firm librarians will be integral parts of their firms and not go the way of the dinosaur. ♦

about the author

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ABOUT AALL



The American Association of Law Libraries was founded in 1906 to promote and enhance the value of law libraries to the legal and public communities, to foster the profession of law librarianship, and to provide leadership in the field of legal information.

Today, with more than 5,000 members, the Association represents law librarians and related professionals who are affiliated with a wide range of institutions: law firms; law schools; corporate legal departments; courts; and local, state, and federal government agencies.

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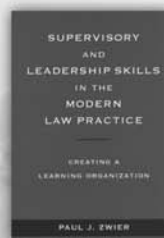
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