

# Law Librarians' Role in Developing Associates

Law librarians fulfill a vital responsibility in bolstering the research skills of a firm's most expensive and critical resource: its associates.

BY BARBARA CORNWELL HOLT



*American Association of Law Libraries*  
MAXIMIZING THE POWER OF THE LAW LIBRARY COMMUNITY SINCE 1906



Professional legal managers serve multiple roles within law firms, and law library managers and law librarians are no exceptions to this rule. Law librarians acquire and provide access to research content. We perform research and ferret out elusive facts. We provide background research and competitive intelligence on clients, potential clients, and peer law firms. Law librarians also perform a key role in developing the research skills of a firm's most expensive and critical resource: its associates.

A juris doctor degree from a respected law school does not guarantee that the lawyer who earned the degree has sufficient legal research skills to be a cost-effective and thorough researcher. The demanding law school curriculum often offers minimal credit hours and a pass/fail option for the required legal research class. Savvy students tend to focus on classes that have a greater impact on their grade point averages and class standings. Further, law schools cannot introduce more than a small fraction of the costly and highly targeted print and electronic resources that their students will rely on if they join firms that practice in complex areas of law. Freshly minted attorneys will need to supplement their law school legal research skills. Librarians know it. Partners know it. Within a few weeks of their start dates, most associates know it.

- **Attorney (and client) priorities tend to trump plans for professional development.** New associates are eager to perform tasks and projects that will highlight their value to the firm. No small portion of their success will be based on their abilities to focus on completing critical tasks and providing first-rate client service.
- **In firms with multiple offices, distance is a barrier to effective instruction.** As with most firms that have multiple offices, only our largest offices have on-site library staff. The lack of regular "face time" in a local office may limit local attorney participation in training programs.
- **Incoming fall associates often do not have common start dates.** Arrival dates of individual associates may

Librarians continue to seek out new ideas and strategies for skill development. Every tour, class, or phone session opens the door to a working relationship between our research professionals and our attorneys.

The librarians at Perkins Coie LLP recognize the value of providing a solid legal research curriculum. However, we have discovered that the law firm environment offers significant challenges to offering a legal research curriculum:

- **One size does not fit all.** There is little common ground in the research skills that are required across the range of practice areas in a large law firm. There is little commonality among research tools for three associates who are assigned to, for example, patent prosecution, corporate transactions, and product liability.

range from August through December. By the time the last new associate has joined the firm, the first arrivals may be too involved in client projects to attend class sessions – and they would have done without this guidance in their first months. A multi-session curriculum would necessitate multiple repeat sessions, which would be a costly use of staff resources.

We have responded to these realities by building a practical training model that offers a variety of brief,

digestible experiences presented over an extended time period. Our model offers multiple opportunities with minimal cost in staff and attorney time, and it can be adapted for firms with small library staffs.

### **STEP 1: TEACH ASSOCIATES BEFORE THEY BECOME ASSOCIATES**

At our firm, summer associate start dates range from late May to early August. In offices that have library staff, summer associates receive a tour of the office's library and instructions on library tools and services during their first week.

All summer associates are invited to a 75-minute research skills session. Those located in or near our headquarters office attend in person, and others attend via Live Meeting. We offer sufficient sessions to ensure that every summer associate may attend within two weeks of arrival.

Our sessions offer topics that are not well addressed in law school:

- **The reference interview.** What do you need to know before you start your research? We list basic legal questions (jurisdiction, legal issues) as well as practical

questions that matter in the law firm setting (client matter number, how many hours this project should require, how results should be presented, etc.).

- **Secondary sources.** We describe how secondary sources (online or in print) can save time and increase research precision. We describe the added value offered by each type of resource, from the big picture overview of a legal encyclopedia article to the targeted case identification provided by an annotated code, to the analysis and synthesis offered by respected experts in topical treatises. We do not offer detailed instructions on the use of specific sources in this single session, but summer associates learn that they can call on our reference staff to receive one-on-one, "just in time" guidance on their summer projects.
- **Advice on determining when research is complete.** "Real world" legal situations are sometimes not adequately addressed by existing laws, regulations, or case law. Librarians can help associates to minimize the time they spend in fruitless, circular research.
- **Basic tips about cost-effective searching in fee-based online services.** In law school, Lexis and Westlaw are free; this is not the case in law firms. We help reduce the need for write-offs on client bills for inefficient online searching.
- **Accessing resources.** We show how to access the library catalog, electronic subscriptions, and guides that are provided on our intranet pages.
- **The world of information beyond our library.** We describe the many kinds of research that librarians can provide and how to get help from our library staff.

### **STEP 2: WHEN NEW ATTORNEYS ARRIVE, SHOW THEM THE LIBRARY**

In offices that have library staff, all incoming attorneys attend a library tour during their first week. We show how to find library tools and content and how to get expert help from the reference staff. Because new hires experience information overload during their first weeks on the job, we follow up with additional opportunities.

### **STEP 3: TAKE NEW ATTORNEYS ON A VIRTUAL TOUR OF LIBRARY RESOURCES AND SERVICES**

Shortly after their arrival, new associates, lateral associates, and lateral partners receive invitations to attend a 30-minute Live Meeting. Offered twice each month, this session targets three key things that all attorneys need to



know: how to rely on reference staff to support their research and practices; how to identify and access the key print and electronic resources specific to their practices; and how to maximize value while minimizing the cost of fee-based online research.

#### **STEP 4: OFFER TRAINING FOR KEY SUBSCRIPTION AND FEE-BASED ONLINE SERVICES**

Librarians arrange for one-on-one, group, or Web-based sessions with vendor representatives for the electronic subscriptions and fee-based services required by each practice area. Resources range from Westlaw to Courtlink to 10K Wizard. For fee-based services, we stress cost-saving search techniques. Periodically, we coordinate with vendor representatives to offer more in-depth skills training.

#### **STEP 5: SUPPLEMENT NEWLY GAINED EXPERIENCE AT A NEW ASSOCIATE RETREAT**

Our firm brings members of each fall associate class together for several days of in-depth training to help prepare them

to meet the challenge of building their practices in the highly competitive, fast-paced firm environment. The retreat's research skills session provides additional guidance on several of our most popular electronic resources, as well as how to find news and information about our firm's clients. We raise awareness of the costs of fee-based online research by providing each associate with a personal usage cost report for the online service that supports his or her practice. The resulting increase in library reference desk calls and visits during the weeks after the retreat demonstrate the session's effectiveness.

#### **STEP 6: PROVIDE FAST AND FOCUSED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES ALL YEAR**

Attorneys and staff want and need to learn about new research tools and research features, but the demands of providing excellent client service leave little time to attend classes. To address this reality, the librarians in our largest office developed a pilot program of "Research Refreshers." Once a month, we provide two 15-minute sessions to help

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“Real world” legal situations are sometimes not adequately addressed by existing laws, regulations, or case law. Librarians can help associates to minimize the time they spend in fruitless, circular research.

practitioners, paralegals, and support staff get more value from readily available resources. Many of these sessions are geared specifically to legal support staff to further the same goal as with attorneys: to maximize our firm’s ability to serve our clients.

Among the resources explored are PACER, the federal court dockets research database; CorporateAffiliations.com, a database of financial and business facts about major clients and their competitors; and Hein Online, a massive library of legal journals. We are considering expanding access of selected sessions to all offices via Live Meeting.

#### STEP 7: EXPLORE ADDITIONAL METHODS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHING AND TRAINING

We librarians are investigating how to offer brief, recorded sessions on targeted content. These five- to eight-minute sessions would provide step-by-step instructions for specific activities or resources. Such tutorials will be a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, time spent with a librarian.

Librarians continue to seek out new ideas and strategies for skill development. Every tour, class, or phone session opens the door to a working relationship between our research professionals and our attorneys. The research tip that is learned in the informal, one-on-one exchange between an associate and a reference librarian is the one most likely to be remembered. All of these training steps combine to build a practical and essential research foundation for the developing lawyer.

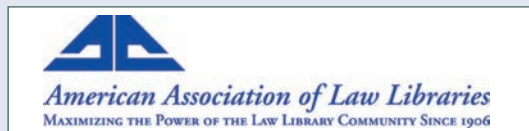
Ultimately, law firm librarians are key players on the team of legal professionals who support law firm partnerships. Law librarians collaborate with professional development directors, office administrators, client relations departments, practice groups, and others to develop meaningful and sustainable programs that help associates develop a broad range of proficiencies to help them serve our clients and to strengthen our law firms. ♦

#### 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.

#### For More Information

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