

That'll Be \$500 for My Time

Informal survey finds that not only do librarians bill, but some even have quotas.

BY VIRGINIA L. SMITH

Information-retrieval professionals, also called librarians, are the gatekeepers for the vast overload of information created by the wonderful, magical, frustrating source we call the Internet. As *Washington Post* cultural reporter Linton Weeks



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once wrote: "In the non-stop tsunami of global information, librarians provide us with floaties and teach us how to swim."

What many people don't realize is that law librarians do much more than act as gatekeepers. One of the big questions in the profession these days involves billing. Should firms bill their clients for librarians' efforts to navigate the rough seas? Even more, should librarians be required to bill a set quota of hours each year? How do firms set the billable rate for their librarians? Back in March 2004, I was a recently hired director of information resources at

Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice, and these and similar questions plagued me.

IMPROMPTU SURVEY

In order to get some feedback from my law-librarian colleagues, I fired off a short impromptu survey to the listserv for the American Association of Law Libraries—Private Law Librarians. Apparently, I touched a nerve, as the replies began to pour in; I ultimately received 113 of them.

What did I find? The majority of law firm librarians do bill for their time, but they are not required to bill a preset number of hours a month. Most of the respondents bill out their services at somewhere between \$80 and \$120 per hour, which was about the range that I expected.

Here are the seven questions I asked:

1. Are the librarians required to bill for their time at your firm?
2. Are only certain librarians required to bill?
3. For those who are required to bill, what are the hourly/amount requirements?
4. If the requirement isn't met, are there repercussions or penalties?
5. Do you receive a bonus based on billable hours? Do you receive any kind of bonus?
6. What is your billing rate?
7. Where are you located, and, if you have branches, do you set rates according to the local market?

Because this was an off-the-cuff survey, there were a few flaws in the questions. For example, I failed to define what I meant by "required," and that caused some confusion. I wanted to know whether the librarians were required to bill a predetermined number of hours a year. I also wondered whether their salary increase or bonus would be affected if they didn't meet the goal. In tallying up the survey, I counted in the "not required" column those who said they were required to bill but had no specific number of hours required. In addition, not every respondent answered every question, which skewed the numbers and percentages somewhat.

THE RESULTS

I uncovered some fascinating results. For example, just nine (or 8 percent) of the librarians were required to bill and had a preset goal to reach, while 104 (or 92 percent) had no required number of billable hours. Many firms had goals or targets for billable hours, but the librarians faced no repercussions if these benchmarks were not met. In other words, most law firm librarians are expected to bill any work they do for a client, but they are not held to a predetermined "do or die" goal.

There appeared to be no correlation at all between billing

requirements and the size of a firm as reported on its Web site. Some firms with more than 1,000 attorneys didn't require the librarians to bill a certain number of hours a year, and some firms as small as 30 attorneys did have hourly requirements.

Of those librarians who had preset hourly goals, four were required to bill between 30 and 40 hours a month; two, between 41 and 50 hours a month; one had to bill between 51 and 60 hours; one, between 61 and 90 hours; and one was allowed to set his or her own goal each month. Twenty-three firms allowed all members of a library staff to bill, while 13 restricted billing to the librarians with library or law degrees. Five librarians said that their billable numbers were used as a basis for their bonuses, but 30 said that their billable numbers had no effect on their bonuses. Another 15 said they received no bonus at all.

The responses on billing rates were a bit more difficult to compile. The 75 responses to this question varied enormously. Paraprofessionals and library clerks billed at the lowest rates of \$40-\$60 per hour. The largest cluster of responses was at \$90-\$110 per hour. Another cluster was at the \$140-\$160 level for librarians with more experience or dual degrees. In other words, librarians with both a master's in library science or a master's in library and information science and a juris doctorate can command a higher billing rate. There were even three firms that charged more than \$160 per hour, and one went as high as \$210. Of course, this survey did not examine how much of the research done by library professionals and staff is ultimately written off and not billed to the client. That would be an interesting topic for another survey.

Though almost all respondents answered with the location of their firm, only 17 librarians answered the question on how the billing rates were set at their firm. Of those who answered the question, 11 said that rates were set firmwide and the other six said that rates were based on market values at the office location.

EXTRA COMMENTS

I received many very interesting comments that shed further light on the issues facing law firm librarians. I was asked to keep any shared comments anonymous. Nevertheless, they give a glimpse into the world of law librarians.

- "I have been trying for two years to get additional professional help in the library. My requests are always met with suggestions from my firm administrator that I would have a better chance of getting help if I could actually pay for another librarian's salary by submitting more billable hours. (An already overburdened librarian is supposed to add enough billable hours to pay for another position???) As far as I can tell in my firm, no other department's need for help hinges on the ability of the department head to bill enough hours to pay another salary."

- "Our bonus takes into account accomplishment of goals and objectives for the year. Overtime hours (not paid because we're exempt) and billable hours are also looked at. We do so much more than just billable hours (knowledge management, handling

the firm's intranet and Internet sites, cataloging, and all that other day-to-day library stuff) that billable hours can't be the only measure."

- "We do bill, but we have no billable requirements, and the firm really does not track how much or little we bill. We are seen as providing a service, and if we bring in a little extra revenue, then great."

- "Library staff is encouraged to bill our time, but it is not a requirement. There is no hourly requirement and no bonus or penalty based on hours billed. The feeling is that the services we provide and the quality of our research are valuable products. If we were not providing these services, an attorney would have to do it and would certainly bill for it; we are a cost-effective alternative. We have four library staff, and each of us has a billable rate which is based on our experience and job function."

- "Our generation of revenue is considered something like 'found money' for the firm. They realize that we have no power in generating business, know that we generate income only when work is given to us, and also know that, because our quality work is relied upon by the attorneys, we will generate some significant income."

I received many more comments, but I believe these were the most representative.

This survey proved to be a very informative undertaking, and I would like to build upon this data in a more formal survey in the future. I spoke with many of the respondents by phone and thoroughly enjoyed the sense of camaraderie and commiseration we shared.

ENDING THE STEREOTYPES

As attorneys rely on information specialists more and more to get a handle on the vast and sometimes frustrating world of electronic information, our knowledge and experience will become more valuable to the firm and our status will improve. No longer will we be equated with the stereotypical "librarian" with her hair in a bun, glasses on a chain, and sensible shoes.

We will finally be seen as the keyboard-rattling, multitasking professionals we all are. We will be able to bill our services at more competitive rates, thus bringing more revenue into the coffers of our firms and allowing us to be heard on issues that concern us. Requiring a set quota of billable hours each month is counterintuitive for information specialists in a law firm setting.

We should always make room for the non-billable research that every firm conducts, whether it is destined for pro bono services, marketing, or informational reading. Someone has to do it, and we are the logical ones—we're faster, we're more efficient, and using our services leverages the firm's money more effectively. It just makes good sense.

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