What exactly is embedded librarianship?
While it means many things to many people, the key element of embedded librarianship is to move librarians out of the traditional library setting, whether physically or virtually, and into a new framework for providing library services. It shifts the emphasis from reactively answering research requests in a vacuum to developing a unique understanding of what customers need and delivering proactive results.

Embedded librarianship allows for a more focused approach, and for librarians to become fully engaged in the work of the team, group or department they inhabit. As they build stronger relationships with their customers, embedded librarians develop highly focused, targeted, specialized research and information results, often moving beyond what a library traditionally provides and toward a more integrated, analytical approach.

The Building Blocks of Embedded Librarianship
How do you go about creating a successful embedded librarianship initiative? David Shumaker of Catholic University of America’s School of Library and Information Science identifies four keys to embedded librarianship:

• Build strong relationships with members of a specific information user group.
• Focus on understanding their work and information needs.
• Share their goals and actively contribute to the achievement of those goals.
• Become an integral and indispensable member of the group.

Each of these steps is important individually, but they are also interrelated and need to be addressed in precisely that order; skip one or leave it undeveloped, and embedded librarianship cannot flourish. One step not included on this list, but critical for success, is support from the organization’s leadership. Embedding librarians should be seen as a strategy for strengthening and refocusing the library’s presence within an organization and demonstrating librarians’ added value.

One way to do this is to frame and promote embedded librarianship as a method for championing the library’s role as the
Embedded Librarianship: The Library As a Service, Not a Space

sole provider of information resources and services. As demands increase on law firms to be more efficient and provide increased value to clients, why wouldn’t firm leadership want to have embedded librarians who have the knowledge and understanding of the specific needs of a practice group?

It Comes Down to Relationships
As it is with any new initiative or program, embedded librarianship all starts with building relationships and developing trust. Librarians have the advantage of having already developed strong working relationships and trust with their individual users, so in implementing an embedded librarianship initiative, librarians just need to translate these qualities to the team, group or department level.

In organizations where library services are decentralized, there could be some initial tension between the newly embedded librarian and other librarians. For instance, what happens when a traditional librarian wants to take a reference request that should go to the embedded librarian instead? If an embedded librarianship initiative is to succeed, the library director needs to take responsibility for communicating the details surrounding individual duties and workflow procedures to make sure everyone in the library is informed of and committed to them.

In most situations where one or a few librarians have been successfully embedded, there will be a subsequent increase in demand for their contributions or for an increase in the embedded librarian staff. To effectively address any increased demand, it is important for the library as a whole to continue to function as one cohesive unit.

One of the ways to continue to foster collaboration within the context of an embedded librarianship is for library directors to focus on developing bench strength, ensuring that other librarians have the training and skills to step in and take on embedded assignments as needed. Also, as one embedded librarian’s role or duties change, this might require the passing off of work and transferring of relationships to new staff. No matter how successful the initiative, embedded librarians need to function under the umbrella of the library, and their ultimate goals must align with those of the rest of the library team.

If You Build It, They Will Come
Once the groundwork of relationships and trust has been established, embedded librarians need to then immerse themselves in the interests and needs of their customers. Most often, embedded librarians learn on the job, participating in meetings and calls, joining email distribution lists, and having individual conversations with their customers. If a librarian is embedded in a practice group, for example, the librarian needs to gain a strong understanding of that area of law, including not only what practice-specific resources are available, but also how to use those resources to deliver information on emerging issues and trends in that practice area. Armed with this information, embedded librarians can open a dialogue with customers to determine what they need and then produce results that meet those needs.

This cycle of learning, observation, communication and feedback is one that continues throughout the life of any embedded librarianship program. As the cycle repeats itself, and as the embedded librarian demonstrates the ability to provide focused, targeted information and results, eventually the embedded librarian becomes an integral team member and valued contributor, and is considered indispensable to the team going forward. One thing to remember when undertaking or even considering an embedded librarianship initiative is that no two libraries or organizations are the same, so no two approaches to an embedded librarianship initiative will be the same. Embedded librarianship has a spectrum of possibilities — an initiative can be tailored to fit any organization’s needs.

All in a Day’s Work
The specific tasks and duties of an embedded librarian will vary depending on both the organization and customer base. In a survey conducted by "3 Geeks and a Law Blog" earlier this year, respondents identified the following tasks and duties of embedded librarians:

- Research
- Product assessment and recommendation
- Cost-effective research education
- Analysis and summarization of research findings
- Development of contribution to current awareness streams
- Research project management (schedules, checklists, calendars, best practices, etc.)

Other tasks that could potentially be added to this list might include competitive intelligence, knowledge management and database development/management. The successful embedded librarian is one who has the ability to discern what tasks and duties will have the highest customer benefit and then develop and implement them.

Advantage: Embedded Librarianship
The role of librarians in law firms continues to evolve to keep pace with changes in the legal industry, and librarians continue to seek out new ways to create value for their firms. Embedded librarianship is one way to help the library remain — and be perceived as — relevant, further strengthening librarians’ positions as key players within the organization.

Before taking on an embedded librarianship initiative, organizations need to conduct a thorough assessment of how to implement it given the constraints of staff, time and budget. However, as library initiatives go, embedded librarianship might be more attractive because it can be tailored to the firm’s staffing needs and can be launched on a smaller scale if necessary. Then, once it produces tangible benefits, management can be approached to ask for additional staff to expand the scope to other teams, groups or departments.

In the survey conducted by "3 Geeks and a Law Blog," survey respondents were asked about what benefits their firms have experienced from making use of embedded librarians. Some of the benefits identified by survey respondents included building stronger relationships with their respective groups, developing a better understanding of that group’s research needs and what research products can be used to meet those needs, cross-training of the library staff, improved workflow management, and a higher profile or increased recognition within the firm.
Toward a True Partnership

With traditional models of reference service no longer the norm in most organizations, libraries and librarians need to find ways to make changes that will allow them to continue to provide relevant, focused information and resources to their various user groups. In recent years, librarians have been moving away from the concept of the library as a space and toward the idea of the library as a service. The goal of embedded librarianship is to take this one step further — from a service to a true partnership. Being an embedded librarian takes time, but it is time well spent and, regardless of how many librarians an organization embeds or where they reside, an important relationship is always created. It is this relationship — a new kind of partnership — that will demonstrate the library’s dedication to finding innovative ways to continue to add value and align with the continuously shifting needs of our organizations.

Holly M. Riccio is the Northern California Library Manager for O'Melveny & Myers LLP. In addition to being responsible for the library, Holly is a member of the knowledge management team and leads the firm’s Management Mastery Program, an internal leadership and professional development initiative for managers and supervisors. She can be contacted at hriccio@omm.com.

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