The New Librarian

Knowledge Management:
A Strategic Role Change for Legal Information Professionals
by Steve Lastres of Debevoise & Plimpton LLP

For anyone who attended the recent AALL annual meeting or ILTA’s annual conference, it is clear that the business of law has changed irreversibly.

The keynote speeches at both events, given by two dynamic yet very different authors — Richard Susskind, author of “The End of Lawyers?” and Frans Johansson, author of “The Medici Effect: Breakthrough Insights at the Intersection of Ideas, Concepts, and Cultures” — had eerily similar messages. The world of technology is changing rapidly, and this change is having a dramatic impact on the delivery of legal services. In order to adjust to this new paradigm, IT professionals, KM professionals and legal information professionals will need to learn to work together to create the perfect intersection of cultures to help our law firms and lawyers deliver excellent client service more efficiently and cost-effectively.

As clients demand more efficiencies, law firms must operate more leanly. As a result, the billable hour model is under attack and alternative fee arrangements are becoming more common. As firms reduce lawyer headcounts, routine tasks are being assigned to nonlawyers. Legal information professionals can be an invaluable asset to support many knowledge management initiatives that directly impact not only the practice of law, but the business of law as well.

The Role of the Legal Information Professional Has Changed
The current economic downturn is challenging law firms in unprecedented ways. Knowledge management can offer firms a competitive advantage during these tough times. Law librarians have been moving away from their traditional roles of providing research to support strategic knowledge management services by applying their expertise to support a new leaner and more strategic model of law firm practice.

Librarians have been at the forefront of cost-cutting measures since the recession started in 2008. They have been forced to rethink the basic assumptions about what products/services the law library delivers and reexamine the library’s value proposition given the new digital world and the “new normal” business climate.

With the inexorable rise of electronic content and the decline of print, the law library’s physical footprint has been shrinking for more than a decade. The library’s physical space is no longer relevant. As a result, a new business mantra has evolved: Libraries are a service, not a place. Librarians understand that they are running a business unit within their law firms. They sell a product/service (knowledge and information) to a market (lawyers) that needs to be serviced effectively (custom product/service),
Librarians Have the Skills for KM

Law librarians have become increasingly involved in KM projects due to their unique skills and competencies. They are well-positioned to manage KM initiatives, create and maintain expertise databases, and support research needs.

KM Projects That Require Librarian Competencies

There are myriad knowledge management projects uniquely suited to the core competencies librarians possess.

- **Intranet Content Development**: As librarians have become embedded in practice groups, they understand the internal and external information needs of the practice. They can create well-positioned content for lawyers with a well-designed virtual community to support their research needs.

- **Expertise Database Creation**: Whether tracking expert witnesses, outside counsel, alumni or other individuals of interest to the firm, librarians can use their skills to manage expertise databases effectively.

- **Database Development and Maintenance**: As SharePoint becomes the standard ECM platform within law firms, librarians play a pivotal role in SharePoint development and maintenance, tasks which extend well beyond managing practice group pages.

- **Taxonomy Development**: One of today’s significant pain points for digital content is developing a taxonomy, or controlled vocabulary, that provides easy retrieval of the firm’s intellectual capital. Librarians have been cataloging print content for decades and are well-versed in thesaurus development.

- **Legal Project Management (LPM)**: As LPM becomes ingrained in law firms to provide practice group support in managing alternative fee arrangements (AFAs), embedded librarians may be able to take on the LPM role. It is clear that firms are taking different approaches to LPM. While we are seeing project managers, legal assistants and finance professionals assume these roles, law librarians could be a viable alternative.

Librarians,” published in the March 2012 issue of AALL Spectrum, he identifies various roles that law librarians could play in LPM:

- Provide education and current awareness on LPM
- Assist in the RFP process
- Help develop checklists
- Help embed precedents and research into project phases
- Evaluate and train on LPM software
- Support e-discovery management
- Assist with after-action reviews
- Implement project management on internal administrative projects

Search Engine Optimization: Librarians spend their days searching hundreds of proprietary databases and Internet resources. Who is better equipped to help firms conduct search engine optimization analysis of enterprise search engines? In fact, there are a number of firms that have actively engaged their research librarians to review search engine optimization not only for enterprise search but also for the document management system (DMS). Librarians can help monitor what users are searching for on the intranet and help surface “best results.” They can also lend expertise in thesaurus development and ensure that these robust engines do not violate ethical screens or inadvertently display confidential documents/information.

Current Awareness Promotion: Pushing relevant content to the right users at the right time has become a critical need for successful lawyers. Web librarians have long been disseminating current awareness information related to their firms’ (their cases, deals, clients and industry information) and the competitive landscape (business and competitive intelligence). Current awareness systems have become quite complex. They require information professionals who can craft precise search queries to deliver smart filters, and who are knowledgeable about U.S. and international copyright laws to keep the firm safely within the bounds of fair use.

Social Networking Tool Development and Maintenance: Current awareness is no longer limited to professionally edited publications. Important current awareness can now be gathered from nontraditional sources, such as internal and external blogs and wikis. While commercial systems are available to crawl and monitor peer firm social networking activity, the legal information professional sleuth is well-suited to manage this activity.

Knowledge Support Services: As an extension of the virtual reference desk that has been under the purview of the law library, law librarians are apt to connect lawyers with key KM resources, such as exemplars, models, forms, and expertise and matter information.

Strategic Cost Recovery: While there has been a trend by institutional clients to refuse to pay for computer-assisted legal research services such as Lexis and Westlaw, recent surveys show that most Am Law 100 firms have cost recovery policies in place to pass along some of the cost of these services. Law librarians can play a vital role in drafting a measured policy, managing costs and moving the firm to nonmetered alternatives. Proactive monitoring of the firm’s information services helps reduce the firm’s online data spend. Further, a cost recovery system managed by the law librarian can lead to further efficiency benefits by providing lawyers with seamless password authentication; tagging research sessions to valid client/matters; prompting users to access pro bono menus that reduce the firm’s costs, and generating detailed...
usage reports that can be used to negotiate new lower cost license agreements based on the actual usage and not the size of the practice group.

**Librarians As Value-Adding KM Professionals**

Law librarians and legal information professionals are transforming themselves into value-adding knowledge professionals. They are able to leverage their expertise to enhance accessibility of information and to promote a strong collaborative relationship with their customers including lawyers, clients and other professional staff members. They can make a strong contribution by strengthening the knowledge flow within the organization, offering value-adding services and training users on the effective use of these services to enhance not only practice support, but to further the business of law.

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This article was first published in AALL/ILTA’s October 2012 white paper titled “The New Librarian” and is reprinted here with permission. For more information about AALL, visit their website at www.aallnet.org. For more information about ILTA, visit their website at www.iltanet.org.