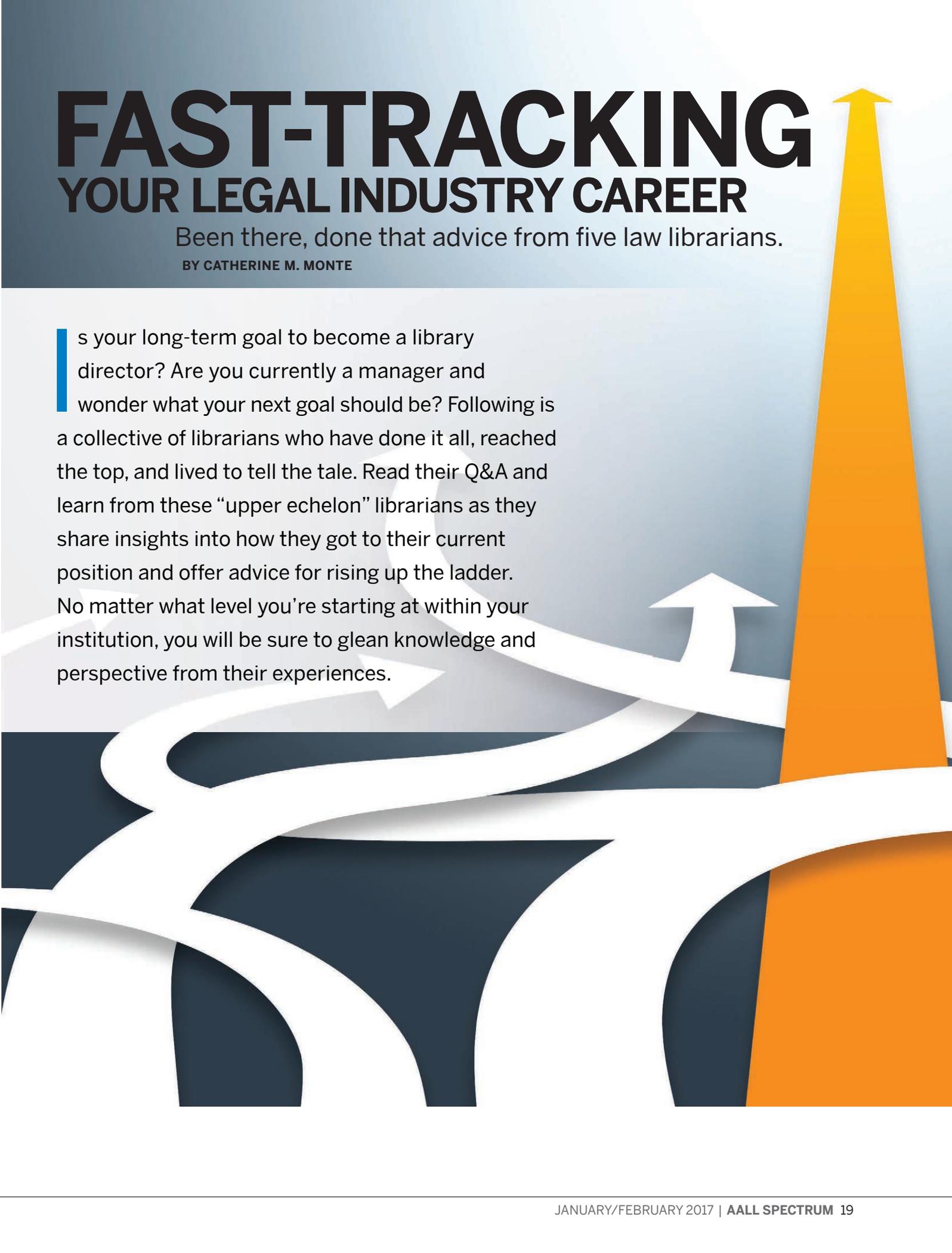


# FAST-TRACKING YOUR LEGAL INDUSTRY CAREER

Been there, done that advice from five law librarians.

BY CATHERINE M. MONTE

Is your long-term goal to become a library director? Are you currently a manager and wonder what your next goal should be? Following is a collective of librarians who have done it all, reached the top, and lived to tell the tale. Read their Q&A and learn from these “upper echelon” librarians as they share insights into how they got to their current position and offer advice for rising up the ladder. No matter what level you’re starting at within your institution, you will be sure to glean knowledge and perspective from their experiences.





**GAIL L. BERGMILLER**  
**DIRECTOR OF KNOWLEDGE**  
**MANAGEMENT AND**  
**LIBRARY SERVICES**  
 Ropes & Gray LLP  
 New York, NY

**Q Did any job or internship impact your career trajectory in a significant way?**

During my first job at InterPublic Group of Companies, Inc., I was in the marketing department and was part of a team of marketers and librarians that did research on market trends in our assigned industries. I basically put on a dog-and-pony show for prospective clients and actual clients to show them how their product was marketed in the U.S., who their competitors were, and what trends were influencing the market. It required me to do presentations to clients. I saw firsthand the impact of my research; it helped sell the firm's services. My job at AT&T introduced me to the role databases can play in managing a company's intellectual property. We wrote newsletters, produced reports, and purchased tons of research from consulting companies and indexed all of it in our own database so that the research librarians could access the information quickly.

**Q What do you wish you knew at the beginning stages of your career?**

I wish I had a stronger background in finance, statistics, and database management.

**Q What were the keys to your career advancement?**

I always said "yes" when asked to take on new tasks, even if I had never done them before. I figured if my boss thought I could handle it, I would trust his or her instincts and dig in and learn the task put in front of me and do my best. I worked really hard. I always thought of my career as being in the business of promoting access to information to help people solve problems. I did not get hung up on librarianship per se or specific roles within an organization. I did not care who I reported to or whether I was part of a traditional library.

**Q What's the greatest lesson you've learned from failure?**

Make sure you have support from the business for what you are doing. You cannot over-communicate and you cannot provide too much support. Fail fast if you can. Don't be afraid to admit that you have made a mistake. Cut your losses and move on. Take what worked well and apply it to future projects and make sure you understand what went wrong so you don't repeat the same mistake.

**Q What special advice do you have for students and entry-level staff seeking to qualify for a management position?**

Take responsibility. Volunteer to help out on projects, and take risks. Look at what your manager is working on and offer to help. Broaden your skills and broaden your mindset. Acquire as many skills as you can. Attend conferences and join professional organizations such as AALL. Also consider volunteering in trade associations—get involved and network.



**LUCY CURCI-GONZALEZ**  
**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**  
 The New York Law Institute  
 New York, NY

**Q Did any job or internship impact your career trajectory in a significant way?**

From my junior year of college through library school, I worked part-time at the law library in the Brooklyn Supreme Court where I did a bit of everything, from receptionist to filing catalog cards and loose-leaves, typing purchase orders, binding, ILL, and quick reference. My immediate supervisor was a great guy who encouraged my career path and let me tag along to Law Library Association of Greater New York (LLAGNY) meetings. I got to know many law firm, court, and law school librarians and found I really liked the people and the profession.

**Q What skills, abilities, or personal qualities contribute most to success in this field?**

Soft skills. We teach some of the basic entry-level content and technical skills in library and law school and our professional associations do a good job of offering continuing education. Academic credentials get you the interview; social skills help you keep the job and advance. But we seem to have a hard time teaching and identifying these soft social skills.

**Q What do you wish you knew at the beginning stages of your career?**

There are more than a few things I wish I'd known when I was starting out. I wish I'd understood office politics, contract and licensing negotiations, human resources and labor laws,

budgeting, and that I had gotten a faster understanding of technology.

**Q How did you get to where you are?**

I credit much of my professional success and satisfaction to my involvement in AALL, Private Law Librarians & Information Professionals Special Interest Section (PLLIP-SIS), and LLAGNY since my student days. My informal mentors have mostly been my colleagues in all types of law libraries, legal service organizations, and vendors. My career development comes mostly from association continuing education as well as my work on association boards and committees. I've been saved professionally countless times by my nationwide network of friends, contacts, mentors, peers, and mentees who have helped me informally and off-the-record with everything from vetting products, editing articles, running tough ideas up the flag pole, calming me down while they listened to me rant and rave, helping me find jobs, sharing some great meals and fun, and making restaurant and hotel recommendations. I've advanced my career by knowing the newer members as well as the old-timers.

**Q What special advice do you have for students and entry-level staff seeking to qualify for a management position?**

Recognize that as the low person in the pecking order, you have the great opportunity to observe everything. Learn all you can about your job and others' jobs, the business, the industry, and the corporate culture. Be fair and polite to everyone. Be the reliable one in the room. Be prepared to take a chance every once in a while. Don't be overly enamored with the technology—in 10 years you will have to learn three-plus newer versions and/or systems. Recognize that it's more important that the technology serves a need.



**FRANK G. HOUDEK  
EMERITUS PROFESSOR  
OF LAW**

Southern Illinois University  
School of Law  
Carbondale, IL

**Q What skills, abilities, or personal qualities contribute most to success in this field?**

I am, by nature, an organized person. This is not a trait I developed as a librarian, but one I brought to the profession. This has been beneficial to me personally, and to my employing institutions throughout my four decades in the profession, as it enabled me to efficiently work on a variety of tasks over the course of a day, a week, or a month. I think multiple responsibilities and multiple assignments are characteristic of a librarian's work, no matter what the position or rank in the hierarchy.

Communication, both written and oral, is required in all library jobs, virtually nonstop. I believe that my abilities in this regard were key to helping me succeed and advance at many stages in my career. This was especially true as I became more involved in management and needed to be able to communicate with both my superiors and those whom I supervised.

**Q What do you wish you knew at the beginning stages of your career?**

Coming into librarianship, and especially as a reference librarian, my limited understanding of the job of a librarian was that it required knowledge of information sources, research techniques, and the like. It did not occur to me that within just a few years of beginning my career, I would be

called upon from that point forward to be heavily involved in personnel management. Had I known that, perhaps I would have spent as much time on learning how to work with and/or supervise fellow employees and professional colleagues as I did on learning how to use ALR, Shepard's, Westlaw, and LexisNexis.

**Q What were the keys to your career advancement?**

While at least one "key" to my career advancement had to do with "being in the right place at the right time," I also firmly believe that the time is only "right" if you have worked hard to prepare for that moment so that you can take advantage of it. For instance, after several years at the Los Angeles County Law Library (LACLL), I concluded that while I enjoyed the reference work I was doing there, unless I wanted to be doing that for my entire career—and I realized that I did not—I needed to extend myself into other parts of library work if I were to be prepared to take advantage of future opportunities. So, although I could have continued at LACLL for several more decades, ultimately retiring from there with an adequate pension, etc., I decided to apply for a position as a librarian at a private law firm library. Although not unprecedented, it was rare for the time (1979) to have a dual-degreed firm librarian, but I knew this was my best opportunity at the time to be responsible for managing a library (and for doing other tasks such as ordering books, cataloging materials, etc., that I would never do in a library as large as LACLL).

**Q If you were entering this career today, would you change the way you prepared?**

I was fortunate to have a law degree when I joined the profession; I think it helped me in many ways. That said,



more and more institutions require that their libraries be run like businesses, so I think it's important that today's librarians come to the profession with a solid background in essential business knowledge and skills. I am uncertain whether this requires an additional—or different—degree to actually do the job, but just as having the law degree “signaled” to employers that I was “qualified,” I would imagine that having a business or related degree would do the same for today's employers.

**Q What special advice do you have for students and entry-level staff seeking to qualify for a management position?**

Be observant of those in management positions around you—learn from their successes and their failures. Look for ways in which you can participate in the kinds of things a manager is required to do. For instance, even though you are not yet in a position to manage an entire staff, is there a way you can supervise one or two employees? Similarly, look for opportunities to engage in a planning exercise; to initiate and oversee a small, self-contained project; to manage a budget, no matter how small; and to engage in written and oral communications that involve both description and advocacy.



**RICHARD A. LEITER**  
**DIRECTOR OF THE SCHMID LAW LIBRARY & PROFESSOR OF LAW**  
University of Nebraska College of Law  
Lincoln, NE

**Q Did any job or internship impact your career trajectory in a significant way?**

Law firm library runner/outside researcher introduced me to the world of law, legal research, and law libraries. I practically heard a heavenly fanfare the first time I set foot in a law firm library; I knew I'd found my home.

**Q How did you get to where you are?**

My mentor in the field of law librarianship was Roy Mersky, director at the University of Texas Tarlton Law Library. He was a tremendous influence and encouraged me to try new things; even pushing me to try things I didn't even want to do.

**Q What's the greatest lesson you've learned from failure?**

If you don't experience failure, you are (to some extent) a failure. I've never been afraid to speak my mind with unpopular views or try new things, and by definition this means that I will be right about as often as I'm going to be wrong. I've been embarrassed by some of my failures, but the ideas, issues, and “things” can't be tested without trying them. I usually learn from failure, forget it happened, and move on.

**Q What special advice do you have for students and entry-level staff seeking to qualify for a management position?**

Don't forget where you came from. Most of my management decisions

are made based on how I was treated and by rules I was saddled with earlier in my career. The things that made me unhappy then will likely make the people I supervise now unhappy, and job satisfaction is very important for building strong relationships with staff and making the library function more efficiently.

**Q What part of this job do you personally find most satisfying?**

Working with highly intelligent people—libraries are organic entities in which everyone in the library contributes to the library's mission as well as its work and function. Directing people to function in harmony in a productive way that brings answers to our patrons is highly satisfying.



**CAMILLE REYNOLDS**  
**DIRECTOR OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT**  
Fenwick & West LLP  
San Francisco, CA

**Q Did any job or internship impact your career trajectory in a significant way?**

I think every job I have had has impacted my career in a significant way. I was one of those kids who was interested in everything, so a field that is the ultimate interdisciplinary field was a good fit. During my college summers, I worked as a temporary office worker for a large national staffing agency. That experience gave me

a lot of exposure to different kinds of organizations, including academic/government, legal, and real estate. One of my most interesting assignments was to proofread state statutes for a large legal publisher in Virginia. At the time, I thought I wanted to go to law school, become a lawyer, and eventually become a federal judge. After spending a summer reading state statutes, I started rethinking that career path. I realized post-college that while I loved the idea of being a lawyer, I could still make an impact being part of the legal marketplace and use my skills for greater impact through a more interdisciplinary career path like research, and eventually knowledge management. I headed off to graduate school instead of law school.

**Q What skills, abilities, or personal qualities contribute most to success in this field?**

I think having a combination of intellectual curiosity, an ability to see the big picture, and a desire to solve problems and help make an organization better than how you found it is a powerful combination. To be successful, you also need to be comfortable with seizing opportunities instead of waiting for them to magically appear. I think especially in a field that is numbers-dominated by women, we need to encourage each other and jump into projects at work even if we think we don't have the skills to contribute. If I had waited until I felt like I knew what I was doing with absolute perfection, I'd still be pulling medical journal articles for expert witnesses (information job #1).

The age of sitting at our desks is over. The work in any field today is complex and requires a diverse range of perspectives and skills, and the legal industry is no different. We have an opportunity to make an impact, but we can't do it by ourselves. We need to team with our peers in other departments to innovate the delivery of legal services.

**Q If you were entering this career today, would you change the way you prepared?**

Eighteen years ago when I started in law firms, I didn't have a grand strategy or plan. I'd say I was just very opportunistic and optimistic that I could help with just about anything. Some would call that naïve, or worse, arrogant, but if you combine that approach with genuine collaboration and respect it can work really well. I looked for ways to apply my strengths to every firm problem. I can't solve anything alone, but in combination with others, anything is possible. That collaborative, practical problem-solving approach has served me well. There have been times in my career when I've wished I had more background in software engineering and coding. I'm fortunate at my present firm to work with brilliant programmers and engineering leaders, and have learned so much from working with them.

**Q What's the greatest lesson you've learned from failure?**

Everybody fails. Nothing productive comes out of beating yourself up over failure ... seriously, stop that. I'm very "type A" and this has been one of the hardest lessons I've had to learn. Each failure contains at least one lesson to grow from, and usually contains many. It's OK to fail. Actually, it's really beneficial for both your growth as a professional and for your organization. Take the lessons learned and you'll succeed at a given challenge that much faster. One note though, if you keep doing the same things and keep failing, stop doing those things, figure out what's causing the failure, and remember you can't control how others react but you can control how you react to outside input.

**Q What special advice do you have for students and entry-level staff seeking to qualify for a management position?**

Figure out what your strengths are and look for roles and organizations where your strengths will be complementary to others. No one, including attorneys, is an expert at everything. Figuring out your strengths can give you a big advantage when looking at positions or firms to match up growth opportunities and to be able to make an immediate impact. Be flexible. Sometimes the best opportunities aren't clear from a job posting. Interview a lot, join a professional association, and volunteer. My first two law firm jobs were directly related to me being involved in my local chapter of AALL or Special Libraries Association. Volunteer in your community to sharpen your skills. Does your kid's school need help implementing a fundraising database? Things like that give you great experience both in working with lots of different people and perspectives as well as getting on-the-ground technology experience. Don't single track yourself. The skill sets of information professionals are broadly applicable to many roles in a law firm or legal organization. Be brave and go for it. Even if you don't land that job or role, the process of going for it will teach you a lot. ■



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