



STRIKING THE RIGHT WORK/LIFE BALANCE

Law librarians discuss personal and professional challenges and opportunities.

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Constant technological change, shifts in the legal profession, increasing financial challenges for our parent institutions, and growing educational debt are contributing to anxiety among law librarians. This article takes a 30,000-foot view of the profession. How do law librarians feel about their jobs and their career prospects? What work/life balance and long-term career challenges do law librarians face in 2017? What are some of the trends that go unnoticed as we go about our everyday work lives?

We interviewed 17 law librarians—from different library types at different career stages—to gauge their thoughts and feelings on their career trajectories in addition to the challenges they face, or have faced, personally and professionally as they navigate to find a work/life balance. Our conversations suggest that a law librarian entering the profession today can expect high satisfaction with day-to-day work, but may encounter financial, personal, and professional challenges that make advancing in the profession more complicated.

Financial Aspects of Work/Life Balance

EDUCATIONAL DEBT The librarians interviewed for this article all share a concern regarding restricted opportunities for salary growth. Results from a 2004 American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) survey, “Generations in Law Librarianship: Results of AALL Survey,” which garnered more than 800 responses, found salary to be the most important job benefit for respondents (view the survey at bit.ly/AALLGenLaw). Currently, newer law librarians can expect to make between \$50,000 and \$80,000 until they become senior managers, according to AALL’s *Law Librarianship by the Numbers 2014* report (view the report at bit.ly/AALLLawLib2014). Couple these salaries for entry-level academic, government, public, or firm librarians with exponentially increased law and graduate school costs, and a glaring problem comes to the forefront: Law librarians, for at least the first 10 years of their careers, often resign themselves to a significant monthly student loan bill stripping away 10 to 35 percent of their monthly take-home income.

To be a law librarian in the twenty-first century (with the increasingly required JD), expect to have \$100,000 to \$180,000 in student loans, but do not expect your salary to keep pace with your debt ratio. According to an October 2015 *New York Times* article, the average law school graduate’s loan debt is \$140,000. The American Bar Association puts the average school loan debt from those graduating from state law schools at a more modest \$84,000. Master’s degrees in librarianship or information science are not necessarily a bargain either. Tuition alone for the information schools at Drexel, University of Texas, University of Washington, University of Illinois, and University of North Carolina ranges between \$32,000 and \$55,000 to complete the degree.

This picture may not be as troubling for law firm librarians who suggested

to us that their path was still open to those without a law degree. That said, more of their colleagues were earning or coming in with law degrees, especially those seeking top leadership positions. In other words, high student debt may soon be a reality for law librarians at all library types, if it is not already.

Educational debt is a factor that was not part of the job equation in years past. According to calculations from Paul Campos in *The Crisis of the American Law School*, a law graduate considering library school in 1985 may have paid a mere \$4,000 per year (in 2011 dollars) for law school as an in-state resident. One newer law librarian we spoke with mentioned the frustration she feels when those who have been in the profession many years state with pride that they were able to work during the summers to pay for law school. With current ABA restrictions on law student employment and median resident tuition at public schools running approximately \$20,000 per year, it seems almost impossible for new law librarians with law degrees to avoid student debt. In discussing finances with a mid-level academic law librarian who considered relocating to a more expensive area of the country to broaden his professional expertise, he explained that he could not make the move given a moderate pay increase that would not effectively mitigate moving costs and his monthly student loan bill. In a similar vein, one newer academic law librarian we spoke with felt “stuck” waiting for a management position that would paradoxically pay enough to justify (1) moving her family and (2) covering her husband’s temporary job loss, but not so much that it would significantly increase her student loan payments, which she pays on an income-based repayment plan.

HEALTHCARE COSTS Higher-level and retiring law librarians also face financial disruption that affects their work/life balance. In particular, these law librarians are facing ever-increasing

healthcare costs. The Kaiser 2016 *Employer Health Benefits Survey* released in September found the average family will pay more than \$18,000 annually for health insurance—that is an unbelievable \$1,500 per month. We found from conversations with law library directors that the profession is well aware of this financial strain and works hard to make sure health benefits are one part of the law librarian compensation package.

CHILDCARE As beneficial as strong health insurance options are, our conversations with entry- and mid-level librarians suggest that some sort of employer-sponsored childcare support would also be valuable. More and more, the decision to have children is influenced by modern-day

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financial pressures on law librarians. While student loan debt is one factor, childcare costs are a major concern for many law librarians. A 2010 report from the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies noted the average cost of preschool for one child is between 11 to 45 percent of a two-parent family’s income. That cost increases for infant care. Relatedly, *The Care Index* made headlines in September 2016 with the alarming news that in 33 states, the cost of infant care is higher than the cost of college tuition. Ironically, many academic law librarians have a dependent tuition assistance benefit that they may not use if they feel they cannot afford to have children.

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Work Projects and Career Progression Issues

JOB SATISFACTION For the law librarians we spoke with, day-to-day job satisfaction was incredibly high. Getting paid to help others, confront intellectual challenges, and solve problems is rewarding. But the struggle to figure out a way to earn more and grow as a leader is common. Along with huge student loan debt, newer law librarians expressed frustration that the path to higher-paying positions is more complex than it has been in years passed. This was true for both academic and law firm librarians.

For academic law librarians, Michael and Sarah Slinger's *Law Library Journal (LLJ)* article, "The Career Path, Education, and Activities of Academic Law Library Directors Revisited Twenty-Five Years Later," confirms this perception. Historically, academic law library directors were one of the few (if not the only) librarians with both a JD and an MLIS. That in part explains why, in 1986, it took an average of five years of professional law librarianship experience before a law librarian took his or her first directorship. In fact, most directors became directors (and began earning director-level pay) at the age of 33 in 1986. The Slingers' article further found that by 2012, the time it took the average academic law librarian to have the necessary experience to become a director doubled to ten years, and that advancement timeline came with slightly more moves from library to library than it did in the past.

So what do academic law librarians do with a decade (or more likely two decades now) between their first law librarianship position and the customary financial and professional apex of a

directorship? In the 1980s, a law librarian with a JD often started as an assistant director and rapidly moved into a directorship. These days, the path to a directorship requires more gradual steps up the administrative ladder. However, newer law librarians expressed anxiety that just as law schools are expecting more experience from a director candidate, middle manager positions are disappearing. With the financial disruption law schools are facing, some law schools seem to be forgoing a costly large-scale search and instead are promoting from within. This would be good news, except that for the time being, those now-vacant middle management positions are not always filled, leaving fewer opportunities to advance one's career and earning capacity.

Law firm librarians aren't immune to this trend. One newer law firm librarian we spoke with indicated that unless one is at a huge firm or in a very big city, there are rarely entry-level positions that have salary step-ups to the director's spot. Moving from firm to firm within a smaller city does not necessarily improve your position. Instead, staying put and simply putting in years—perhaps decades—of service may, frustratingly, be your best bet to move into a law firm library directorship.

Are upper-level law librarians moving toward retirement or is that a myth? Many of the highest-level librarians we spoke with were certain that many in the Baby Boom generation were on the cusp of retirement, while at the same time acknowledging they had very happy employees who had no plans of leaving even after the age of retirement. According to the Slingers' *LLJ* article, in just over 25 years, the average age of sitting directors has increased from 45 to 57, and the age group most

represented among directors is 58 to 64 years old, suggesting a wave of retirements is imminent. However, according to a May 2016 *Bloomberg* article titled, "I'll Never Retire: Americans Break Record for Working Past 65," almost 20 percent of Americans 65 and older are now working.

One experienced librarian we spoke with noted that several of her peers were still somewhat shaken by the financial turmoil that rocked retirement accounts in the mid-2000s. We also learned from interviews that law librarians, especially law librarians in the senior echelon, love their jobs and find their work incredibly meaningful. Moreover, we believe they have significant experience to offer to their parent institutions and their libraries and staff. It makes it difficult, though, to describe a standard path for advancement in 2016 for a newer law librarian when the future market for upper-level positions is uncertain.

Conversely, becoming an academic law library director today seems to come with more responsibility and fewer rewards than even 20 years ago. Several notable law library directors explored this very topic in remarks published in the 2015 *LLJ* article "Nowhere to Run; Nowhere to Hide: The Reality of Being a Law Library Director in Times of Great Opportunity and Significant Challenges." Directors these days are tasked with administering the law library, teaching substantive law courses, developing a research agenda, publishing, and participating in professional service activities. One director we spoke with suggested that these days the role, rather than the status, is the primary reward. Directors historically had higher status and, consequently, greater remuneration. Even if pay rates are constant, modern academic law library directors regularly assume additional administrative roles related to information technology, communications, and student services. As the Baby Boom generation does retire, it is conceivable that the nature of the new directorships will change, which will lead to more uncertainty for those seeking to advance.

Family and Friends Matter

RELOCATING Perhaps a counter-intuitive point we gleaned from our conversations is this: Moving from town to town for career advancement is challenging for every law librarian who has done it, regardless of whether they were single, had a stay-at-home spouse, were married with no children, or had spouses and children to consider.

Law librarians all have different family circumstances, and no employer can accommodate all of our specific family needs or desires. Yet, the modern employee with children, according to 2012 data from *The Rise in Dual Income Households*, a Pew research study, often must be part of a dual-income household to handle costs, which leads to worker family-care concerns that U.S. employers are beginning to notice. Many modern law librarians who may have to move to advance have child-care concerns as well as the competing employment needs of a spouse or partner to consider. One experienced law librarian emphasized that moving with a family or working spouse has always been challenging, while a newer director posited that because director positions may come with less status and more responsibilities than ever before (as suggested by *Nowhere to Run; Nowhere to Hide*), the reward for uprooting one's family may be diminished.

Moving with "just" a spouse or partner is not any easier, particularly when that spouse has a specific career path of his or her own. As one mid-level librarian put it, once one decides to move up, there is constant guilt between being a good librarian and being a good spouse. Asking a working spouse to give up or adjust his or her career path is tough, and it has always been tough for librarians of all generations. But to ask a following spouse to move to a new city because it has one of the few middle-management opportunities that exist so that you can get the necessary experience to then move again in four to six years is challenging. One newer librarian we spoke with shared a challenge that may be increasingly common: asking your following attorney-spouse

to sit for the bar examination in multiple states as you move to advance your career. If you work in a state with extensive reciprocity options, this may not be as problematic, but reducing consideration to only law schools within those states does limit the law librarian's career path.

Similarly, moving with a stay-at-home spouse is not any easier. One law librarian explained that if he moves to advance (his only option), his stay-at-home spouse has to uproot from her community and will not have the ready-made connections in a new town like the librarian who at least has workplace colleagues with whom to connect. He must be absolutely certain he will be happy in the new workplace and certain it is the right fit in order to make the huge upheaval seem worth it to his spouse.

Finally, it may seem easiest of all for a single law librarian with no children to move between libraries to advance as soon as opportunity arises. However, that is not always the case. Law librarians we spoke with in this position indicated that at least when one moves with a partner, one has a built-in support network. Especially if you move to a city away from extended family, the move can be lonely and isolating. If you make friends or develop a community in the new city, additional moves simply become harder.

In short, no particular type of home life makes moving to advance easy. Most law librarians are geographically restricted, whether for family or financial reasons. This leaves the seemingly endless options for advancement falling far short of the expectations many had when entering the profession.

Where Do We Go from Here?

We do not want to end our conversation on a note of gloom. After all, we are a profession comprising creative, hard-working problem solvers. Despite the stereotype that librarians avoid change, we are, for the most part, adept at identifying trends and responding accordingly, if not rapidly. This article is intended to open a path for discussion within the profession about

possible paths to long-term work/life balance for all law librarians.

Having begun a conversation on the work/life balancing challenges many law librarians currently face, we plan to continue the conversation in 2017. To further our goals, we have created a five-minute survey we hope you will complete. We intend to expand on this discussion with an updated article based on survey results in late 2017. We also hope to deepen our investigation of work/life balance into library departments within the larger law librarianship fields. Law librarians dedicate their careers to helping patrons; we hope this article inspires the profession to take a fresh look at how we can help each other better navigate our personal and professional lives. ■

EXTRA

Take the short, five-minute work/life balance survey at bit.ly/JF17survey.

READ

"The Career Path, Education, and Activities of Academic Law Library Directors Revisited Twenty-Five Years Later" from the Spring 2015 issue of *Law Library Journal* at bit.ly/LLJSP15.

"Nowhere to Run, Nowhere to Hide: The Reality of Being a Law Library Director in Times of Great Opportunity and Significant Challenges," from the Winter 2015 issue of *Law Library Journal* at bit.ly/LLJWinter15.



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