When I accepted the job as a librarian in a medium-sized law firm in Kuala Lumpur in 1996, little did I know what I was signing up for. I knew that I had been entrusted to manage a law firm library, but I had no clue whatsoever of the pitfalls ahead of me.
Previously a corporate librarian in the shipping and banking industries, I had no prior experience in law librarianship. There was no specific job description, except for a brief introduction to the library. In Malaysia, law firm librarians are mainly hired for generic tasks, such as purchasing and arranging books, updating statutes, and the general gopher role of locating books and resources for lawyers. It is often the case in Malaysia that a law librarian's qualification is earned day-to-day in the running of a law library.

The image of a law librarian as a mere “keeper of the books” is a common impression among lawyers here. Few attorneys recognize the value of an experienced librarian as an astute custodian of knowledge and, hence, fail to fully utilize this resource in their practices. Sadly, that perception has led many law firms to hire poorly trained or professionally unqualified law librarians for the job. It does not help that much of what is tasked to a librarian generally is clerical in nature and that there may not be a system in place to quantify the services of a law librarian vis-à-vis revenue generation. When a law firm begins to recognize that some of a trained librarian’s time can be billed to a client, the value of a librarian starts to be properly realized and utilized.

The general segment of Malaysian lawyers do not understand the value a librarian brings, although they may be aware of the importance of having someone to take good care of their libraries. Despite the growing need for the expertise of law librarians in Malaysia, the number of qualified librarians is rapidly shrinking. Many of our professional law librarians are unable to sustain their interest, due to lucrative offers in other sectors or being ill-equipped for the job. Even for those who want to excel and develop themselves, there are no formal training courses in law librarianship available in Malaysia. There is also a very limited circle of law librarians to turn to and from which to seek advice. Loss of interest due to these reasons and many other factors are commonplace among the professional law librarians here.

It is a continuing challenge for a librarian like me to create an impact on the job without professional guidance. How can one convince others if one is not even convinced oneself? Becoming a member of the one and only professional association of librarians in Malaysia is of limited help. The association itself is too small and ill-prepared to cater to many facets and interests possible within the profession. Many of my curiosities in law librarianship were left unanswered. But I was determined not to have an outdated impression of the profession while others are out there making their marks.

AALL Fills the Void
This situation prompted me to look outside the country for guidance and the possibility of emulating others in the hope of improving myself professionally. I found contacts for several leading associations of law librarians on the Internet, and one of these was AALL. After some soul searching, I chose to join AALL, as it was the oldest and largest association. AALL also seemed to have an abundance of educational resources in law librarianship. Though I may be too far away physically to enjoy the splendid activities offered by the Association, much of the information can still be accessed through its various publications. Many of my questions were answered when I received brochures from AALL outlining the benefits of membership. I am still very excited to be associated with an organization that is so relevant and pertinent to our common cause. AALL has provided an alternative for me and has helped to fill the void.

Psychologically, AALL has boosted my professional confidence. Just the thought of being accepted in the largest professional organization of this kind has changed my attitude towards the profession itself. I no longer feel alone and professionally isolated, knowing that I can share my enthusiasm and learn a great deal from the best in the profession. I value all the information I have received so far and have also started to purchase more material for my own reference purposes. My presence in the firm is more visible now; my role and contributions to the firm have been steadily recognized.

In my current projects, I am preparing articles for the Australian Law Librarian Journal on the accessibility of law in Commonwealth countries in Southeast Asia from the Malaysian, Singaporean, and Bruneian perspectives and for the Malaysian Journal of Library and Information Science on computer-assisted legal research in Malaysia. I am grateful for the relevant guidance that was available through the various publications of AALL, which has assisted me in no small way on my writing projects. I find many of the AALL articles on legal research to be very encouraging and an eye-opener in enhancing my knowledge of the subject. Teaching legal research is not a common practice for law firm librarians in Malaysia. I have begun giving legal research training during library orientations for our new lawyers and pupils (fresh graduates undergoing training prior to being called to the Bar). Some of our lawyers are foreign graduates who may be unfamiliar with Malaysian legal terms. These foreign-trained attorneys recognize the value of an experienced librarian as an astute custodian of knowledge and, hence, fail to fully utilize this resource in their practices.

AALL Inspires Professional Growth
From the time I started at my firm, Tay and Partners, my traditional role has evolved into one with a multitude of roles to meet current needs. I am more fulfilled by being an experienced librarian as an astute custodian of knowledge and, hence, fail to fully utilize this resource in their practices.
Award Box.” These little acknowledgments have proven effective.

3. Make Their Day
“...The playful way they do their work allows us to find creative ways to engage our customers,” say the fish market personnel in Fish! “That’s the key word: engage.”

Try to find ways to engage your clients, customers, and patrons in your work. “Focusing your attention on ways to make another person’s day provides a constant flow of positive feelings,” advises Fish!

In the law library, it is important we look approachable and not too busy to help our patrons.

4. Be Present
Be present, fully engaged in your work. Make your customers or patrons wonder if you would ever want to be any place else. Be present and focus—focus on your patrons.

In my library we opened a Faculty Reference Desk on another floor where most of our student carrels are located. Of course, Averett was the one behind this concept.

Another way to implement some of these ideas is to divide up the staff in your departments for brainstorming sessions. Try to come up with different ways to incorporate your modules and goals. And remember, we can all do what we love for our life’s work ... if we have the right attitude.

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A New Challenge
Currently, I am involved in developing our documents/precedents management system. My understanding about knowledge management concepts through various articles in AALL’s publications has helped me tremendously to contribute input on the project. I am now responsible for managing internally-generated information, which I hope to model after the management of externally-generated information in the firm library. I am also helping the firm in its marketing efforts by ensuring that all materials about the firm and lawyers in various publications and Web sites are updated. Perhaps all these tasks are common among law librarians in America, but, for us in Malaysia, these experiences have taken our traditional role into a new dimension and have made the profession more challenging.

The influence, motivation, and inspiration that came with the knowledge gained through my association with AALL has heightened my passion for my work. Even with my passive participation in the organization, I believe myself to be an example of how AALL has succeeded in reaching beyond its spectrum in pioneering the development of law librarianship worldwide.

It is satisfying to me to have the full support and confidence of the partners of my firm, who fully sponsor my membership. They are confident that the benefits of AALL membership will manifest themselves in both tangible and intangible ways for the firm. Membership in AALL has provided me with a different perspective on law librarianship that I have in turn tried to project on our legal community here. I have no hesitation in recommending AALL to those wishing to expand their horizons in the profession. AALL has been a rewarding choice.

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