

LEADER PROFILE

STAYING ON THE CUTTING EDGE OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology has changed the way librarians perform their jobs, both in terms of the skill sets they must now possess and through its broader impact on the profession. The technology librarians are expected to know and the services they are delivering are far more sophisticated than what they were 30 years ago. Steve A. Lastres is at the forefront of this technological change, and he warns that if you aren't developing and expanding your technical skills, you will be left behind. The goal should be for librarians to be seen as assets and innovation leaders in their respective organizations.

Steve Lastres is a technology enthusiast. His law firm is at the cutting edge of legal technology innovations, having created mobile apps and intelligence dashboards. They also publish curated newsletters and develop other tools that help lawyers practice more efficiently and the organization at large provide enhanced client services. "We distribute more than 2,000 alerts to nine offices globally to meet the organization's information demands in North America,



Latin America, Europe, and Asia. Our KMS (knowledge management systems) team onboards more than 200 lawyers every year and off-boards about 100,” says Lastres. “Law librarians aren’t always perceived as the professionals developing these technology-focused innovations. However, in many law firms, these innovations, such as competitive intelligence, artificial intelligence, and data analytics, are being driven by law librarians who are on the front lines of educating our lawyers. We show them how to use these tools and create enterprise social media systems to help lawyers better collaborate within client

he earned his MLS from Pratt Institute and a JD from New York Law School. Lastres has spent his entire career working in law firms, except for serving as a page for one day at the Association of the Bar of the City of New York. He has been in his director role at Debevoise & Plimpton LLP for the last 12 years. In addition, he has been a member of the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) since 1986, serving on a number of association projects and groups, including as the Chair of the Private Law Librarians and Information Professionals (PLLIP) Special Interest Section (SIS), the Council of SIS Chairs, as an author on the AALL Digital White Paper, “Defining ROI: Law Library Best Practices,” and as a frequent presenter at AALL Annual Meetings. Here, he talks about the essential technology and business skills all librarians should possess, the skills law students need to onboard quicker, and how technology has changed—and continues to change—the legal landscape.

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Steve Lastres

and market teams, as well as industry and practice groups.”

Lastres got his first taste of law library life through a work/study internship during his junior year of high school. He interned at the law firm of Golenbock & Barrel, now known as Golenbock Eiseman Assor Bell & Peskoe LLP in New York. “One of my first tasks was being the person who printed out cases for lawyers on something called the Lexis Deluxe Terminal, which was this huge desk that had silver foil paper and you used to have to sit there and click on the print button for each screen to scroll out before you could click on the next print button,” said Lastres. “The librarian at the time was not tech-savvy and they had me essentially spend all my afternoons doing that and learning technology. This is how I got my start in law libraries and began developing a love for all things tech.” After receiving his BBA from Pace University,

How has your job changed over the years?

We had a more traditional role when I first started out; the library was an administrative department. We were seen as a separate and distinct team from the legal staff, and it was rather traditional in terms of the services we provided, which were research and technical services. Today, it’s an enterprise-wide role. The library is no longer called the library in many private law firms and it is not perceived as an administrative department but as an integrated team that works with our lawyers and their practice teams. In many firms, law librarians are seen as the information steward of all the firm’s information and knowledge management resources. We have individuals within our group embedded into virtually every practice area at the firm. As a result, our work product and services are delivered to the enterprise to support the practice and business of law. The complexity, in terms of technology, has also changed—we not only deliver things in print, because there are partners who still want print, but we’re delivering things electronically, not only through databases, but by providing ebooks, dashboards, and portals. We even have an app that delivers current awareness and research services to mobile devices. The complexity of the operation and the different media options we serve up requires law librarians to have advanced technology skills that were not a requirement even a decade ago.

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QUICK HITS WITH STEVE LASTRES



ebooks or print? ebooks

iPhone or Android? iPhone

Words to live by?

In everyday life: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." I'm a product of immigrant parents who had very little education and I was taught to treat the janitor

the same way you would a CEO. I think this statement serves you well in life, because where you find people when you first meet them may not be where you find them later on in life. You never know who can open up doors for you.

Young people in our profession: "If you can't figure out your purpose, figure out

your passion." Your passion will lead you to your purpose.

Favorite TV show to binge watch?

Homeland or *Quantico*

Favorite travel destination?

Spain, because that's where my family is from.

Favorite type of takeout?

Chinese

Guilty pleasure?

Tech toys—I'm always looking into the latest gadgets and apps.

team to implement solutions based on the needs of the lawyers and what they've communicated to us.

The other piece of the day is contract negotiations with our vendors. I am constantly meeting with vendors to understand how their products have changed, negotiating pricing on the pieces we find valuable, and spending a huge amount of time trying to understand what new tools they are bringing to market and how they might displace other tools the firm is using. For example, our budget going into 2018 is below the budget that I presented in 2008 when I first came to the firm. That's not because we offer less resources, but because we migrated from enterprise-wide licenses to limited licenses for virtually every single vendor product except Lexis and Westlaw, where they just don't offer that. We made a dramatic change in the way we procure our resources and content for our lawyers and we budget that very closely. In short, we have become smarter consumers of legal and business resources thanks to tools that enable law librarians to granularly monitor usage and click-through rates to content, which was not possible a decade ago.

How do you partner with other institutions in leveraging technology?

I'm relatively well-known, since I've been in the profession for many years, and on the law firm side, my firm has been at the cutting edge of implementing new technologies, so I have partnered with a number of our vendors and member libraries. For example, we partnered with our ILS vendor, EOS International, to create a new product that didn't exist in the market, which enabled us to integrate with the print and digital resources of the New York Law Institute. This product allows our firm to integrate their bibliographic records into our OPAC (online public access catalog) so that our lawyers can access content we don't have on-site, but that we can get either through digital or print copies that can be delivered within two hours. We were the first to implement this system. In the last four or five years, I've been on a number of panels with academic law librarians stemming from how to better prepare law students for the practice of law. Lately, I've been getting a lot of requests from academics and even court librarians to learn more about what we've done so that they can teach some of the technologies law school students will need to adopt in practice.

Most recently, I was contacted by an AALL member from a law school in Texas who read

What's a typical day at the office like?

There is no typical day; we are a global firm, so my day starts before I even get to the office. As you can imagine, Asia and Europe are hours ahead of us so I've already gotten requests from those offices and I try to forward them onto the right people to take care of them. Once I do get into the office, one of the first things I do is conduct environmental scans: I have a number of alerts and RSS feeds that I have set up to scan what's going on that would impact our law firm, particularly the leadership of the law firm. I also look at what's happening within different practice areas—things that would be relevant to them and from a knowledge management perspective, as well as what's happening with technology and workflows. We have more than 2,000 general alerts that are set up that go out to individuals throughout the organization, but I do this as an added touch-point with the leaders of the firm, letting them know that I have found something that directly impacts their business, their practice, or the market that we're trying to grow into. I also have meetings with my own internal staff—whether it is on the search side or the digital or electronic resources side—and with our knowledge management

an article that I recently posted to *On Firmer Ground*, which is a blog I co-founded with another PLLIP-SIS member, about content aggregation tools and how we need to work smarter and deliver actionable content to the right people at the right time. He planned to teach his students about current awareness aggregation tools and I was able to provide him with samples for his corporate research class.

What's the benefit of AALL?

While a primary focus of AALL is professional development, there is no question that the opportunity to collaborate and network with others has been critical to my success and many of my colleagues. In my *On Firmer Ground* anecdote above, you have someone in technical services at an academic institution in Texas who really doesn't know me but still felt comfortable enough to reach out to me in New York to ask me questions about a blog post I wrote. There is an informality within the Association, where even junior members not in the same special interest section or geographic location can reach out and gain expertise from other members. This open collaboration is invaluable, and this type of information sharing happens all the time within our profession and Association.

How has your past work experience benefited you in your current position?

I believe in professional development as an investment in one's future; that's one of the reasons I'm still a member of AALL 30 years later. Most of what we do today requires enhanced technology skills and business acumen. I was fortunate enough to have a BBA in business administration and I've taken many other courses since, including those required for an MBA, which augment my law school education. I went back and obtained additional skills and attended many professional development programs at AALL as well as other associations, which have benefited me in my career today. I don't know how you can be a successful librarian without having some foundational skills in technology and also in business, especially in the law firm world, and I think this is becoming true in the academic world as well. You need to run your department, whether it's called "the library" or (more commonly) "knowledge management services," like you would run a business unit. That means you need to figure out how to reduce overhead and create opportunities for revenue. Thinking about your department as a

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business is critical today, as is having the technical acumen to conduct conversations about technology with your information technology staff or with a technology steering committee (every firm usually has one), or with the committee that approves technology expenditures. You need to be able to explain to them in plain English what it is you're trying to do from a technology standpoint and how that benefits the lawyers.

Being able to manage information today is no longer enough; the reality is that you need to be able to understand technology and manage the department or your role in the business. We have started to see a growth in library services out there. Outsourcing companies such as LAC and a number of others are hiring librarians to run libraries without permanent staff. We are going to be challenged as a profession to deal with these types of situations, and we need to be able to communicate effectively the value of law librarians' work as permanent staff members of the firm. Having these essential skills has helped me grow within my career, from my first position as a paraprofessional at Golenbock to a research analyst, to manager, and now to director of a 700-attorney global law firm.

Are there professional development opportunities you'd suggest for students and for law librarians starting out in their careers?

Yes, as a father of two millennials, I would strongly recommend that the new generation of law librarians become engaged and involved with their local, regional, and national library associations. There may not be funding in a private law firm to send all the librarians to an AALL conference, for example, but there are opportunities to send them to local meetings, which might be free or low cost, and there is a lot they can learn by attending those meetings. There are regional meetings as well as meetings held by our "sister organizations," such as ILTA (International Legal Technology Association),

and SLA (Special Libraries Association) that have local chapters. Volunteer—half of the time, the way you learn skills is by volunteering. As associations are grappling with the same situations that many of our employers are—trying to find people to fill roles—there is an opportunity for the young generation of law librarians to learn essential skills by volunteering for these positions.

How would you recommend law librarians continue to obtain new skills throughout their careers?

Cast a wide net. Other than learning from the associations and organizations I previously mentioned, one thing a law librarian should do throughout their career is to be aligned with what's happening within their own organization and within the legal industry. I am often surprised by some librarians' lack of understanding of the legal industry, such as how a law firm works and how it creates revenue. Understanding the business issues that impact law firms is critical. We know that ALM and other organizations offer a number of these types of programs to talk about running a law firm business, but in addition, we are now starting to see several developments in new areas, such as legal process improvement, legal project management, and pricing. Law librarians are well positioned to look at these areas, and it's important that we focus on not just their informational skills, but also on understanding how their institutions operate, how they are able to gain new business, and what their strategy is. While as an information professional you are delivering information services, you are also there to support the professionals within the organization who are going out to generate new business with clients and prospective clients, so you need to understand your role in that process.

What career advice would you give to newer law librarians?

I would tell them they need to broaden the skills they learn in library school. Those programs provide the basic foundational skills that they're going to need. I would suggest they supplement their skills, particularly in technology and business, and that they look for opportunities to volunteer in various associations. Not only can you learn new skills through professional associations, but you actually get to network with

individuals who may be in a position to find you your next job or to recommend you for a job. In today's text-heavy world, where everything is done behind a screen, it's critically important to network. A lot of these key collaboration skills are being lost by the new generation because they want to be anonymous and want to text things and work under the radar; the reality is that even today, the way you get a job and the way you advance in your career is through mentorships, from knowing someone, or someone putting in a good word for you. While it shouldn't be who you know but rather what you know, the reality is that you have to have a strong foundation in what you know while also having connections that will help open doors to get you to that next position. AALL has a great mentorship program that I don't think enough new members take advantage of.

What basic skills should attorneys starting out today possess?

This is the debate du jour that's going on within academic institutions as they try to rethink the curricula to produce practice-ready graduates who can onboard quicker at law firms. Besides traditional legal research and writing—which is fundamental—they also need to have a proficiency in technology that law firms use. Additionally, they need to know about knowledge management systems, because in the law firm world, you don't start off with Lexis and Westlaw. Typically, in a law firm, we have a platform of knowledge management work products, forms, and models that we use and repurpose for new client matters—whether it's a file cabinet with legal memos or it's digitized. There is a lot of knowledge that has been created at law firms over the last decade that sits in systems that many law school students just aren't even aware of, so that's one of the areas that law school students in particular—and certainly law librarians working in academia—can facilitate to help law school students learn about what's happening.

Students need to be exposed to new areas of practice, ones that go beyond traditional research skills, so that when they get to a law firm, while they may need time to learn the particular tools, they will have a general understanding of how the tools work, how the firm works, and what efficient processes look like. ■