

LEADER PROFILE

FINDING THE RIGHT FIT



The field of law librarianship continues to evolve, and Saskia Mehlhorn believes librarians should be leading the charge. As machine learning and artificial intelligence become more commonplace and librarians' roles began to shift, it will be more important than ever to stay ahead of the technological curve.

Born and raised in Germany, Saskia Mehlhorn grew up with a passion for law. After earning her law degree in 1993 from the University of Hamburg, Germany, she began her work as a lawyer at a law firm in Hannover, Germany, in 1995, before coming to the United States with her family in 1997. "We came to the U.S. for two years before moving to Norway for another two years, and then finally moved back to the States in 2001," said Mehlhorn. Once she was sure her family wouldn't be moving again anytime soon, she began thinking about her next career move. Deciding against a career as a lawyer, but still wanting to satisfy her passion for the law,

Mehlhorn opted to attend the University of Houston Law Center's LLM program. "I very much enjoyed practicing law when I was in Germany, but it was different in the U.S., and so I chose a different path," she explains.

While pursuing her LLM, an acquaintance who owned a filing service in Houston asked if she had ever considered law librarianship, as she had a client that was in need of a temporary law librarian. "I had no idea what a law librarian's job duties were—in Germany their responsibilities are different—but I thought it was really interesting," she said. "You get to do a lot of things that I enjoy, such as legal research. You can try out new tools

and different databases, and you're not charged for using them." After meeting with human resources at the law firm, she began working with their domestic team the next day. Mehlhorn stayed with the firm for about a year, working part-time while she completed her LLM.

"I did everything from loose-leaf filing to translating contracts from German into English, which I can do very well because of my legal background, and I assisted with administrative tasks," she recalls. "Even now, I find those experiences to be very useful, especially the loose-leaf filing, because I got to know a lot about the different treatises that are on the market."

Mehlhorn obtained her LLM in 2007 and earned her MLIS from the University of North Texas in 2010, specializing in law librarianship and legal informatics. She began her career as a law librarian at Fulbright & Jaworski L.L.P. in 2008, before becoming a visiting foreign and international law librarian at the University of Houston Law Center. In 2011, she returned to Fulbright & Jaworski (now Norton Rose Fulbright) as a research librarian, before being promoted to manager of library and research services in 2013. In August of 2015 she became the director of library services, and in 2016, she became the director of knowledge management and library services for the U.S.

A member of the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) since 2008, Mehlhorn has served in a number of association groups, including the AALL Annual Meeting Program Committee as a team leader (2016–2017 and 2017–2018) and as a board member of the Houston Area Law Librarians chapter (serving as vice president from 2010–2011 and as president from 2011–2012).

“The profession is not dead, but it is changing.

Always strive to be the conductor and not the passenger.”

– Saskia Mehlhorn

Here, she advocates for innovation, work/life balance, and using knowledge management and artificial intelligence tools to provide solutions.

You are from Germany and you also lived in Norway, how have those experiences helped shape you professionally?

When living in a European country, the prevailing mind-set is that work is not everything. You need to have a good work/life balance.

SASKIA MEHLHORN

- DIRECTOR OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT & LIBRARY SERVICES, U.S.
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This is true whether you work in Germany, Norway, or France. There isn't this notion that employees need to work for hours on end to accomplish something, and that they should put in time 24/7 because otherwise they aren't perceived as dedicated employees. Working all the time doesn't make you happy and it doesn't make you more productive. Taking off time to recuperate will make for a more focused employee during the workday.

Taking time off doesn't make you less professional either, and it doesn't make you look lazy or not suitable for a management position. I think you are better off having a well-rounded person that is excited about their job who can focus when necessary and get things done. In Germany, you typically work 35- to 38-hour work weeks, which I actually think makes you more productive than someone who works 50 hours a week. As a manager, it really is up to you to set an example for your staff. Don't call people when they are on vacation and don't send an email when you know they are out and doing something with their family. It shows you appreciate they are living their life. I also find people enjoy coming back to work more when they are able to have that balance.

Describe a typical day?

There really is no typical day, but I do have certain routines that I follow. I always start my day with a cup of tea and I also take the bus to work. While I'm on the bus, I am able to start my workday: I go through all of my email alerts. I've got somewhere between 30 to 40 email alerts set up; I'm not reading all of them, but I do skim them and if I find something interesting, I will send it to myself to read later in the day. By the time I arrive in the office, I have been through my first batch of emails. I also try to read *The Wall Street Journal* in the morning, which is not necessarily my favorite newspaper, but it is certainly important. From there, all bets are off and I'm going between meetings and presentations. I have biweekly one-on-one conversations with all staff members and I also work on new initiatives. At the end of the day, depending on what I send myself in the morning, I might send emails to firm leadership about things that came up throughout the day. Instead of sending them an automated alert, I create an email myself so I can tailor what I send based on their interests.

QUICK HITS WITH SASKIA MEHLHORN



ebooks or print?

No preference; as long as it's slightly intriguing, I will read it.

iPhone or Android?

iPhone

Favorite film or TV show?

Occupied—it's a Norwegian series on Netflix.

Favorite travel destination?

If there is a natural science museum, I'll visit. I would say Washington, DC or Berlin are favorites because there are lots of great museums there.

Favorite type of take-out?

Thai

Guilty pleasure?

Buying cookbooks.

Words to live by?

"Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently."

—Rosa Luxemburg from *The Russian Revolution*

and typically contain great programs. I enjoy getting together with my peers to exchange ideas and opinions on what others are trying at their own institutions.

Why is a comprehensive knowledge management system important for firms?

Any law firm, whether it is a solo practitioner or a 4,000-lawyer global firm, has within its systems a tremendous amount of collective knowledge. So instead of asking why it's important, we should ask, "Why not make use of that knowledge?"

A comprehensive system is a key to the holy grail. All knowledge that has been accumulated is readily available for retrieval and allows law firms to work efficiently and consistently at a high level for their clients.

How has knowledge management changed over the years and how do you anticipate it will continue to change?

Knowledge management hasn't really changed all that much. When we think of knowledge, it's really to communicate past experiences—we transcribe them, preserve them, and then make them available. That is how we still handle it today. In the past, it was oftentimes all about the books. Someone would go to a book shelf, grab a book, get the knowledge out of the book, and move on. Now we aren't constrained to use only the printed format, because everything is also available online, which makes it easier to retrieve the knowledge. As we move forward, we won't be solely relying on the ability to retrieve knowledge and make results come back faster. In the future, we will be able to use systems that combine knowledge that is available in any given repository with ideas, thoughts, and concepts, whether they are articles or seminars, so you are better able to find a solution to whatever problems arise.

You are presenting a program at the 2018 AALL Annual Meeting on building a chatbot. What do you find most exciting about its potential? Any challenges or surprises?

I'm most excited about the use of chatbots when it comes to carrying out tasks that are critical but also very time-consuming. In my department, we are currently working on a chatbot that could replace the reference interview. The reference interview is something that is necessary—oftentimes because people don't

How do you stay abreast of changes in the field?

I receive several technology emails. I usually focus on research institutions, whether it's Fraunhofer Applied Sciences Institution or business schools. Oftentimes, especially when it comes to technology, there might be articles that include insights and trends outside the legal realm, but those can nevertheless be applied to aspects within the legal field.

I also enjoy attending webinars, especially on new technologies, because I find it very helpful to see how something works and not just read about it in theory. I especially find vendor-run webinars to be helpful since you can actually see the database tables they have created or a new system in action.

I don't attend every annual meeting out there, but I have been to the last couple of AALL Annual Meetings; I find one or two larger meetings a year is more than enough. I like to attend webinars such as ILTA (International Legal Technology Association), AALL, and the Private Law Librarians and Information Professionals Special Interest Section. These webinars are straightforward, not too expensive, or often free. I also attend local Houston Area Law Librarians meetings because they are usually only a few hours long

necessarily know what they want and they need you to guide them through the process—but it's a time-consuming process. As we move forward with exploring this chatbot technology, we will develop a number of solutions that allow us to transfer time-consuming tasks to a chatbot, so that the information professional who works behind the chatbot can work on more intricate issues at hand.

The biggest challenge I have come across is actually finding the time to work on the chatbot. While there is a lot of potential and time-saving capability with the creation of this chatbot, it takes quite some time to concentrate on it to make the project successful. The hardest part is freeing up available time: We have so many requests to respond to throughout the normal workday, that finding additional time to create a time-saving chatbot is time-consuming in and of itself.

How was your office impacted/and or prepared for Hurricane Harvey?

Being in Houston, we are always prepared for a hurricane. Our firm has a business continuity plan that prepares us for daily operations of the firm in case of disaster situations. As soon as we realized that the Houston office wouldn't be able to function at its normal capacity, we were able to divert business segments to offices located outside of Houston.

As far as business operations, we were very well prepared and there were no hiccups. However, while we were well prepared when it came to the business operations of the firm, it was still difficult on a personal level because many of us knew people who lost their homes.

After the hurricane, the city needed to open up the levees and that's when parts of the city were flooded, and it took weeks to get the water out. What is amazing is that, in the U.S., whenever something catastrophic happens, everyone is eager to lend a hand and help clean up, even if they weren't affected.

How has participation in AALL impacted your career and/or leadership capabilities?

Since the beginning of my journey into law librarianship, AALL was very useful. While trying to determine whether this profession was the right fit for me, I found many great online workshops and materials on AALL's website. I also found that whenever I contacted someone for more information, everyone was

very helpful. That was the one thing that has really stuck with me. AALL members aren't just smart; they also want to help others succeed in their journey, which is rare. It must be a librarian thing.

The Association supports librarians and legal information professionals at all stages of their careers. There is the Conference of Newer Law Librarians (CONELL), the AALL Leadership Academy, webinars, and educational programming. AALL also encourages participation, and helps you develop presentation and marketing skills.

What career advice would you give to newer law librarians?

Just enjoy it! The profession is not dying or dead, but it is changing. Always strive to be the conductor and not the passenger. Don't underestimate the need to market your department and the skill sets you have. One of the things librarians often forget is that in today's world, we need to make sure that we constantly showcase our capabilities to our stakeholders. Librarianship is an evolving profession and it is one that will be around for decades to come.

What changes do you anticipate the information technology field will experience in the next 5 to 10 years?

I think many of our more traditional tasks will be taken over by machines. Therefore, we need to find a new place in the field, whether as librarians or information professionals. We need to constantly re-determine where we are going to be. We need to be leading this charge. Instead of worrying about AI taking over this part of our job, we should ask ourselves, "Where can our services be better allocated?" We know what our capabilities are and that we are best equipped to come up with solutions.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

The variety—no day is like the other, but each one always revolves around assisting professionals in their work, which always gives you a feeling of accomplishment. ■

AALL 2018 ALERT

Don't miss the session "From Concept to Deliverable: Build Your Own Law Library Chatbot," Monday, July 16 from 11:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m. For more information visit bit.ly/AALL18Chatbot.