As technology redefines law librarians’ roles, Mark Gediman, 2016 AALL Annual Meeting Program Committee (AMPC) member, says positioning research team members as valuable guides can help separate the wheat from the chaff.

Roughly three years after joining Best Best & Krieger LLP, Mark Gediman discovered that some of his colleagues were not aware of which research resources the nearly 200-attorney firm subscribed to, while others were conducting time-consuming searches on multiple websites and platforms because they weren’t sure which one to check first. So Gediman came up with a solution—a customized web portal that echoes the experience of searching for information in a library.

Instead of looking up a title or topic in a card catalog, firm members start a search by opening a subject-based tab where a list of titles, drawn from multiple sources, is produced. In addition to the most relevant item, users can view related resources that may be of interest, just as they would on a library shelf.

The portal has helped maximize use of the firm’s three-person research staff, which serves attorneys in nine offices, and its significant investment in content provider services. Since its implementation in 2003, the number of titles accessed online from existing subscription-based

LEADER PROFILE

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services has increased from 15 percent to more than 70 percent.

“I like when attorneys call me with research questions, and I like creating tools that help make research easier,” says Gediman, the firm’s director of information services.

Gediman has spent nearly 30 years in the information service industry, starting with volunteer positions at his junior high and high school libraries that were followed by a work-study job at a regional interlibrary agency in college. After graduating from the University of California-Riverside with an English degree, he held library assistant and firm librarian roles at two California law firms and later worked as a research and information specialist at electricity provider Edison International.

A 16-year AALL member, in addition to his AMPC duties, Gediman is an active member of the Private Law Librarians & Information Professionals Special Interest Section (PLLIP-SIS) where he co-founded and is co-chair of the Competitive Intelligence Group. He has also been an active leader in the Southern California Association of Law Libraries serving as president, vice president, and secretary.

We spoke with the Riverside native about legal tech skills, e-books, and how technology enables law librarians to serve as necessary guides to help separate the wheat from the chaff.

How has information technology changed since you entered the industry?

Although the physical library collection is shrinking, it hasn’t disappeared. There are still some books and resources that are easier to use in print because people know them and are used to them, or they’re only available in print so you have to have a place to house that material. But the library has always been, in my way of thinking, a storehouse of information—whether that’s on servers, in the cloud, or on a shelf.

How has it stayed the same?

We’ve rebranded our department at my firm; we’re now Information Services. But the work isn’t really any different than what reference librarians did in the 1980s or even in the 1700s. If you’re looking for something, we are here to help. When I was in college, that’s what a reference librarian did. You’d have large libraries with books, microfilm, and microfiche, and would need to try and figure out the best search method. Now, those same skills apply to the virtual environment.

The basic function of the library hasn’t changed. The librarian’s task is to help people find the information they need, whether it involves guiding the requestor to the right resource or conducting the research on their behalf.

Do you feel the legal industry has been quick to adopt technology?

It really depends. I work at a firm that’s very forward-thinking when it comes to technology. We have virtual desktops and advanced tools to leverage our document management system and a phone system that allows everybody in the firm to work from home, or from any location, if necessary.

Many of the firm’s managers and directors are in different locations. That’s a good thing—it allows for offices outside of what used to be the main office to participate in the management of the firm.

Do law firms have any specific information technology requirements or needs?

Client and business development is different from the business sector. Law firm growth happens through personal relationships and problem solving. In a company, you just try to sell more products. In a law firm, it’s a service you’re selling, and it can be challenging...
to identify where and to whom you can sell your services and who your competitors are. That's where librarians can help. Researchers are up-to-date on the best tools for identifying and monitoring trends that can be tailored for specific businesses and business needs. Librarians also understand their firm's culture and strategic goals and use that understanding to produce relevant research. Such research helps attorneys increase business. For example, they can proactively identify challenges that clients within a certain industry may be experiencing and offer them help without being asked. This emphasizes how concerned and involved an attorney is in a client's success.

Are there ways you feel the legal industry may not be using technology to its fullest potential?
Attorneys are focused on getting the information they need, when they need it. Technology can assist that process. The attorney's time is a precious commodity. If you're sending an attorney 15 news clips a day, he or she is going to lose interest. Information professionals within the firm have to tailor information delivery to attorneys' specific needs—and use whatever model they work best in, whether that's email or a dashboard they go to every day, being mindful of data overload. This holds true for research results as well as information retrieval. The insight and analysis the information professional can add is an extremely valuable asset.

Technology isn't going to replace the need for librarians/researchers. Librarians know the firm, know the clientele, and they understand the way attorneys work. I wouldn't have created our portal app at a different firm because that firm would have a different way of doing things. Sometimes firms are still getting their arms around scalability and technology—it doesn't have to be one size fits all.

Do you find any common misconceptions about technology use?
The biggest challenge is the whole idea of e-books; you have to go to each individual attorney and show them the advantages—they don't have to carry a 25-pound book anymore; they can make it work just like they used to, saving bookmarks, marking pages, and writing comments. They can also work when they're off the network. In most cases, explaining these advantages melts away any resistance.

What basic skills should attorneys starting out today possess?
Attorneys, in general, are comfortable with technology. They don't care how many bells and whistles the system has, they just want to be able to quickly find their answer. The Google mentality—the instant gratification one seeks from getting the right answer right away—is challenging, and it risks obtaining information that has not been properly vetted for quality. Does Google Scholar, for example, have the most current cases? Maybe or maybe not. Part of my role is to be an advisor when it comes to getting the most out of the online services and tools, paid and free, at their disposal.

What changes do you anticipate the information technology field will experience in the next 5 to 10 years?
It's likely going to become a more interactive environment. Everybody's coming out with a way to have verbal interaction. Online service security will be more biometric based—fingerprints and that sort of thing, instead of memorizing several hundred passwords. The evolution of research in the legal industry isn't a bad thing; it represents an opportunity. No one understands online vendors' systems and the user base like librarians do. Bridging that gap between the two is where the true value lies—being able to better deliver resources and information is an area that is natural to us.