

AALL Spectrum

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Whether Anticipated or by Accident, Change Comes: Be Ready

by Mark E. Estes, mark.estes@hro.com

Some change, like the seasons, comes regularly. New students and new associates arrive in the fall. Some seek our counsel, while others must be sold on what librarians can do for them.

Regardless, their arrival alters the institution, infusing it with new energy and new ideas. We learn from these new ideas and replenish our energy reserves with their enthusiasm.

Other change, like the weather, can be predicted, yet it still surprises us on occasion. New technology predictably changed librarianship in many ways. Typewriters ended the teaching of catalog handwriting and made the catalog easier to read. Databases in turn changed the card catalog cabinets into storage devices for things other than 3x5 cards. Google and Amazon changed library users' expectations about finding, locating, and searching for books online. Librarians responded with online catalogs that are intuitive and much easier to use.

Predictably, physical book stores also changed to compete with online stores. Surprisingly, though, libraries changed to compete with bookstores. Neighborhood libraries now boast full-service coffee shops and have dropped the classification arrangement in favor of a more retail-like arrangement.

Predictably, technology changed legal publishing—reducing production lead time and moving content from paper to databases. But surprisingly, some license agreements that replaced order forms dramatically changed purchasers' legal rights to use or rely on the “book” or database. Some of those changes limit the rights of the end user.

Some changes come unexpectedly with unexpected consequences. In the fall of 2006, Congress failed to reauthorize subsidies to rural economies. For the Jackson County (Oregon) Library System, that meant slashed funding and closed libraries. Later, the county outsourced library operations to Library Systems and Services (LSSI), the country's largest private operator of public libraries.

We must accept that we can neither avoid nor prevent change. So, we might as well be change-makers and prepare for it. Plan your continuing professional education for 2008—not just the meetings you want to attend but what you need to learn to remain nimble and agile in your job. Pull out the Competencies of Law Librarianship and make a realistic self-assessment: Just how solid are your skills in those areas?

Law librarians offer more to our employers and to society than mere rote tasks. We make change when we seek new ways to get needed information to our users faster, better, and cheaper. We make change when we work to ensure that all Americans have access to information. Bob Oakley (page 10) was such a change maker. His work as the AALL Washington affairs representative helped change information policy decisions to further democracy and access to justice. He is, and will continue to be, missed.

Be a change maker: Read about information policy issues. Better yet, write a letter to the editor or an elected official about it. Stand up at school board or library commission meetings. Your voice and opinion are worth sharing. Volunteer in a political campaign. Or, heck, run for office yourself.

Articles in this issue address some of the changes we all encounter as individuals or as members of the larger law library community, from changing the type of libraries we work in (page 16) to changing others' lives by teaching them legal research (pages 6 & 8). The “Member to Member” question, “What strange, silly, or embarrassing situation happened early in your career?” (page 34) generated many humorous and instructive responses.

The Grand Canyon did not appear suddenly, but over time. Small changes, consistently applied, do make big changes in the world. ■