

**IMLS Study on the  
Future of the Library Workforce  
Panel on Law Libraries**

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## Introduction

Law libraries provide information to various sectors of the legal profession. Law librarians work in law schools, law firms, corporations, county, state and federal governments and some also work as independent consultants and information providers. We believe that the legal profession is here to stay and that the profession's need for perpetual access, rigorous client confidentiality, and expectations of individualized and prompt service will ensure that law librarians remain the primary providers of legal and non-legal information in support of their users' unique needs and demands.

Over the past ten years, law libraries have evolved from a place to access print materials to one that uses the most advanced research tools and methods to gather and disseminate information to their users' desktops. Technology, innovation and application will remain fast-paced and non-stop in the law library environment.

The duties of today's law librarians are challenging—

- Organizing information resources to meet the specific needs and interests of their organization.
- Monitoring trends in publishing and computing to effectively select and organize materials for their users.
- Managing staff, programs, information systems and databases.
- Instructing users in research skills, techniques and systems.
- Negotiating contracts for resources, services, materials and equipment.
- Performing research for public relations and marketing.
- Preparing and managing budgets.
- Directing the daily activities of the law library.

Law libraries have experienced a reduction of their physical space and print materials as virtual resources and services expanded with desktop delivery of information directly to the user. This is creating an exciting opportunity for library growth and development for both the collection and the staff.

The legal profession is seeking law librarians and paraprofessionals who possess:

- Knowledge expertise in law, business, finance, science, and medicine. MLS/JD, MBA
- Stellar legal research and communication skills.
- Financial and human resources skills to administer budgets and staff.
- Foreign language proficiency to serve distinct populations.
- Ability to combine traditional library duties and tasks with the ever changing needs of the legal profession, their users and their parent organization.

Law Librarians recognize that societal changes are affecting the legal profession and how they do business. Those changes are reflected in our library and information operations. While operational changes will require some new skill sets and some new

ways of thinking about our organizations and services, we believe that law librarianship will continue to be a viable, vibrant and robust profession for many years to come.

## **Staffing**

Law Library staffing can be a challenge for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is because our employers prefer a certain amount of subject expertise in the law. Although sometimes this is demonstrated through a law degree, and administrative positions in law schools require this formal training, formal legal training is not required for most positions in other sectors. Moreover, there are many law librarians who are not formally trained as librarians, but they are employed at the professional level. This dynamic is particularly noticeable in the private firm sector.

The law library profession places emphasis on core competencies, which can be used by employers to review and compare skills of candidates being considered for open positions. Expertise should include:

- Computer and technical ability.
- Background or expertise in financial, business, medical and scientific fields.
- Communication skills-- written, verbal and listening.
- Advanced legal research.

Most law library positions are full time, and we expect that the legal profession will demand that they stay that way. The opportunities for part time employment are most likely to be found in academic law libraries and global law firms. There is a need for supplemental coverage in:

- Academic law libraries to handle reference and circulation duties.
- Global law firms to accommodate the research needs in other countries; many offer 24/7 reference services.

Salary and benefit packages will vary especially between the public and private sectors. There is no trend to move from full time to part time positions to avoid the cost of benefits. We recognize that all employers are scrutinizing healthcare and other benefits packages rigorously and employees are sharing a portion of these costs.

The legal profession places tremendous value on information and, as resources expand and digitize, we expect additional growth in the following law library positions:

- Research and reference
- Competitive intelligence
- Instructional searching
- Database development and management
- Records management
- Finance and administration

## Recruitment & Retention

One of the biggest recruitment challenges is attracting qualified candidates. The demand for law librarians with law degrees is increasing. Law students are a target audience for recruiting. Library school students are often unaware of career opportunities in law librarianship. The most common misconception is that a JD is required for all positions.

Although the demand for law librarians with both the JD and MLS degrees will continue to grow, for many positions, the MLS is sufficient. In the law school library, both degrees are often required for reference and administrative positions. In law firms, it is becoming more desirable for reference librarians to have both degrees. For some positions, other advanced degrees may be more important than the law degree. In law schools with large international collections, language skills may be required. In a law firm or corporate library, advanced degrees in business or science may be desirable. Degree requirements will continue to become more complicated and confusing. Establishing guidelines would help employers and job seekers understand what is expected.

A close examination of law libraries in the past reveals that it was common for individuals to function in librarian positions without any degree, even a BA. For example, many people in the 1970's were hired by law firms for the sole purpose of maintaining the library collection. As firms grew and the library expanded, the people performing the maintenance role continued to learn on the job and assumed the title of librarian. In some firms today, the law library director who has been with the firm for many years, has less formal education than staff members hired later. The main reason for this is that, unlike law school and government libraries, job descriptions and standards often do not exist in law firms. Another current trend is for law firms hiring their first librarian to hire individuals with a law degree and not a MLS. It is important for AALL and the chapters to accelerate efforts to provide guidance on what librarians can do and the degrees required to do it.

Law library salaries tend to be higher than those in other types of libraries. But salary is still an issue in recruitment and retention. Geography is a key factor in determining salary. Salaries are much higher in some regions although the cost of living usually will be also. People who work in these regions cannot expect to earn as much if they relocate. One of the biggest contrasts is the difference between the salaries paid in New York and New Jersey where those working in New York often receive twice-as-much money in a comparable position. The decision where to work is often a life style choice: city, suburban or rural.

Employee benefits play a large role in attracting people to specific jobs. Law school positions may be desirable because sabbaticals are included. Health benefits are becoming both more sophisticated and competitive. It is more common for employers to offer long-term care insurance, which is important to those with many years in the

profession. Life insurance is becoming more important again as well as pension and retirement plans.

Libraries generally have the image of being kindlier/gentler places to work. Since many join the profession as a “second” career, this is a factor that attracts them. Lawyers who no longer want to practice law enter law librarianship to continue using their education in a less stressful setting. Professionals from other fields including business and IT should be attracted for similar reasons. Family considerations, from raising young children to caring for aging parents, are priorities in job selection. Technology makes it easier to work from home allowing flexibility in juggling family needs.

Major recruitment and retention challenges in the next ten years are:

Librarians

- Attract younger people to the profession by demonstrating “why it’s cool to be a law librarian” to groups including high school students and college students at career days; library school students through internships and job shadowing; law school students through courses in law librarianship and jobs in the law library.
- Attract professionals from other fields including business, IT, and science by marketing the similarity in skill sets while emphasizing the advantages of law librarianship.
- Establish mentoring programs for new law librarians

Librarians and Support Staff

- Motivate people to stay in law librarianship through higher salaries, increased benefits, educational opportunities, professional development and recognition of longevity and other achievements.
- AALL must lead the way in establishing hiring guidelines and job descriptions and disseminating this information to employers, law schools and library schools.

**Staff Development & Training**

Law libraries play a vital role in the legal profession therefore, staff development and training is critical for them to flourish. There is a need for more comprehensive training in library schools so that law librarians can enter the field with the necessary skills to provide information in the demanding environment of the legal profession.

Distance learning plays an integral role in staff development and training. It allows individuals access to low cost, self-paced and web-accessible programs that the individual and their organization can fine-tune to their needs and budget. Library associations and legal providers need to collaborate to develop local and distance learning programs. Topics, which should be covered, include:

- Search strategy
- Client interviewing
- Contract negotiation skills
- Use of software packages to manage resources

- Finance & administration
- Problem solving skills

Training barriers do exist and time, travel and cost will be determining factors when selecting programs.

Law librarians must work to change staff perceptions and attitudes which can hinder development. An organizational directive to employees advising them to keep abreast of change in their sector or to improve their skills to better serve the organization can help motivate the individual.

### **Career Paths**

The major factor affecting career opportunities over the next ten years for professionals and support staff in law libraries is technology. Books will continue to be dominant so clerical jobs supporting the physical collection will remain. Reference and research skills will become even more important as librarians increasingly take on the roles of filter and teacher. A unique strength of law librarians is expertise in using legal information. Delivery of information to those who want someone to do the research for them will become more vital. Most change may come in methods of delivery.

Advancement in the profession will depend on the acquisition of other skills and multiple degrees. Generally, advancement in academic law libraries will continue to be more dependent on multiple degrees than in other types of law libraries. The MBA will become more important for administrative positions in all law libraries. Languages or a subject-specific masters will be necessary for certain positions. Technology related degrees will increasingly be in demand.

As important as other degrees may become, the MLS will continue to be the terminal degree for law librarians. It is the best guarantee of overall professionalism in the library. Library school curriculum must continue to evolve to provide courses covering practical skills and subject specific information. Some schools have overemphasized technology skills and neglected core skills such as cataloging. Management training is needed more than ever as librarians on all levels are supervising other people. Library literature does not give enough exposure to the need for multiple management skills. More experiences in the real world through internships and job shadowing are needed. Combined degree programs such as JD/MLS, JD/MBA, or MLS/MBA could play a significant role.

A trend, which has been identified is that, a large number of academic law library directors are planning to retire in the next ten years. There is a tremendous amount of concern among academic law library directors that law librarians who aspire to these positions are not adequately prepared to assume them.

### Librarians

- Library schools need to redesign curriculum to provide opportunities for acquiring skills including managerial, financial, human resources, fundraising, public relations, communication, diplomacy, and more.
- More dual degree programs must be developed including JD/MLS, JD/MBA and MLS/MBA.
- As researchers rely more on tools such as Google, law librarians must preserve legal information systems.

### Support Staff

- Traditional clerical skills for maintaining print collections should be combined with skills in technology related aspects.

## **Culture**

Law libraries exist within larger organizations. How a law library is affected by the larger organization varies by the type of law library. Some concerns common to all types include: the position of the library within the larger organization, the way funds are allocated, the image projected by the larger organization to the public, and internal politics. Understanding the culture and how to act within it is the key to success.

Just as important to success is understanding the culture of an individual library. This is more important on the local level than the national level. The reputation of the library is a leading factor in attracting new employees. Job candidates have access to more information about specific libraries than they did in the past. This influences who applies for positions. For example, an academic law library with a poor reputation will need to widen its geographic pool to hire qualified applicants for job openings.

### Librarians

- Combat stereotypes such as, “once an academic always an academic,” by demonstrating that skill sets transfer from one type of law library to another. An academic reference librarian may need to be convinced that he can adapt to the high-pressure environment of the law firm library with demanding attorneys who need everything right away. A law firm librarian rarely moves to an academic environment. There is also a perception that employers are not as receptive to candidates from sectors other than their own. There is some cross over, but it seems to be a barrier.
- Disseminate information about the types of law libraries and the responsibilities of positions within each to attract more applicants.
- Public relations efforts are needed to emphasize unique aspects of the profession such as the key role that law librarians play in information policy.

### Support Staff

- Clarify how law libraries function within the larger organizations.

## Leadership

Leadership for law librarians goes beyond the traditional identification of leaders by title, responsibility or authority. Law librarians frequently hold positions of leadership that extend beyond the sphere of their primary responsibilities, overseeing more than the 'library' department. Law librarians in the private sector frequently oversee information technology or records departments; academics are also involved in administration of information technology; public law librarians frequently contribute administrative expertise across the court organization. Moreover, successful law librarians understand that the demands of a changing information environment require that they actively apply their knowledge, expertise and skill to analyzing the so-called 'big picture' issues facing us professionally. Effective leaders are catalysts for creative innovation and change within their organizations.

Many law librarians embrace the opportunity to provide leadership outside their institutions, and for many it is expected:

- Academic law librarians serve on university and law school committees; law librarians from the private sector frequently are asked to take leadership roles in community organizations; law librarians from the public sector often serve on court administrative committees. These activities enhance skill sets and promote visibility within the community. For many law librarians, these added responsibilities are burdensome given the intense nature of their primary responsibilities.
- Many law librarians are active in any number of international, national, regional or local associations dedicated to the support of legal information and law librarians. Leadership in this context can take the form of organizational leadership, or can be expressed through publication, presentation, or advocacy activities.

There are significant challenges to expressing leadership. These challenges disproportionately affect law librarians in the private sector, but are present to some extent across all sectors -

- Institutional bias that does not recognize the versatility of the information professional
- Time demands of legal practice that make professional contributions outside the workplace problematic
- Perceived lack of value of the professional activity on the part of the institution
- Many law librarians would like to be more active in their professional associations, but find that the rigors of their job responsibilities, or the lack of support from their employers, preclude their active participation. This is our profession's profound loss.

The rapid pace of change that the law library profession is experiencing mirrors the changes facing the entire legal industry. For law librarians to remain successful, leadership can no longer be confined to those librarians who are 'in charge'. For a law library to be fully engaged in the provision of information services to its patron groups,

leadership must exist across all levels of the organization including everyone who is involved in providing information. Moreover, data about the expectations of the next generation suggests that their style preferences will require more active participation in organizational decision-making and the design and delivery of products and services to patrons.

It is clear that leadership, as more broadly defined, will remain a key competency for law librarians in the foreseeable future. In fact, it will be even more critical to success given the environment of rapid and constant change where we once thought of leadership as the management, either of our institutions or our professional organizations, we now know that the quality of leadership is really required at every level of our workplace. It is the responsibility of our organizational leaders to foster leadership skills in all information professionals regardless of their place in their organizations.

There are significant challenges in this area that face law librarians regardless of professional sector or place within the institution:

- Ensuring that adequate educational opportunities exist to train new information professionals in the expanding requirements of leadership
- Encouraging experienced law librarians to develop or update their own leadership skills
- Encouraging law library leaders to develop leadership skills in all staff members
- Encouraging employers of law librarians to see the value in professional contributions and continuing education
- Fostering meaningful leadership opportunities for our younger generation law librarians

## **Organization**

Because of a law library's ties to the broader legal community and the fundamental differences between types of law libraries, the organization and mission of the parent institution is paramount to the organization of any specific law library. While some types of law libraries may have greater opportunities for autonomy, as far as their position in the organizational hierarchy, the desirable characteristics of a law library organization able to respond to a changing environment include:

- Flexibility
- Visionary
- Engages in an ongoing dialogue with the library's patrons and parent institution
- Encourages strategic thinking and nurtures entrepreneurial spirit at all levels of staffing
- Encourages and supports active leadership at all levels of staffing
- Encourages and supports continuous training for professional and support staff

These characteristics ensure that law library staff are prepared to take advantage of future opportunities, to resolve potential challenges and are positioned to move forward.

Threats to the future existence of law libraries, particularly, public law libraries, will continue to mirror the recent trend of merging “court library services” with an existing public library system or academic law library. This new reality, viewed as a way for government entities to reduce expenses and reallocate space, is evidenced in the closure of the Georgia State Law Library, the reduction of funding for Florida’s public law libraries, and the incorporation of the Allegheny County Law Library (PA) into the Duquesne University Center for Legal Information.

The law librarian’s role as navigator of print and electronic information sources and educator to their many constituencies is certain to expand. Yet, law libraries will continue to face competition from publishers, bookstores, Internet search engines and fee-based information providers as they seek to grow their customer base in the digital marketplace.

To retain their “market share” and promote their value, law librarians must be visible and accountable to their parent institution and those who seek their services. They must become models of increased efficiency, always looking for ways to enhance library service and respond to needs in a way that resonates with patrons. Law libraries must respond in ways that inspire patrons to automatically select the law library as their primary source of information. Generally, directors of law libraries are positioned closer to those making decisions (i.e. deans, judge, attorneys), so they have greater opportunities to influence the governing body and generate support for new services.

The administration of a law library impacts the library’s ability to recruit and retain staff. Library administration must be sensitive to the generational differences among employees (baby boomers vs. generations X and Y) as loyalty to an institution will no longer keep an employee from looking for better opportunities. Newer recruits bring a differing perspective to their role as employee; newer recruits expect to participate in decision-making at all levels of library administration and have a role in the development of new services.

### **Changing Constituencies or Communities**

Across all types of law libraries, their constituencies are changing and their primary clients range from the computer literate (“wired and plugged in”) to those with very limited computer skills and/or a limited desire or need to develop their computer skills. All patron groups have greater expectations about the nature and range of services offered by the law library, both electronic and print. All law library patrons expect faster, quicker, seamless delivery of legal information. Yet, due to differences in culture and language, particularly for those serving global patrons, the law library must be prepared to tailor collection development for particular groups and serve each client individually. Private law firm librarians must be prepared to meet the needs of a constituency that expects the library to facilitate high technology conference calls, locate and track relevant CLE course offerings, keep abreast of “hot topics” and other services not typically a part of the traditional library school curriculum.

Generally speaking,

- Public law libraries must offer services and resources to an ever-increasing number of immigrants with limited English language skills.
- Law firm librarians must be prepared to provide multi-lingual services for firm personnel located in other countries.
- The number of self-represented litigants seeking legal information at their nearest law library will continue to grow
- This self-represented litigant population will cross all socio-economic levels

In an increasingly technology-driven environment, law librarians must recognize the discrete differences between providing patron access to electronic information versus traditional means of access to print materials. Although patrons may expect the latest, greatest electronic innovations, this is coupled with an expectation that a print collection will be maintained and preserved. Despite the breadth of available electronic legal information resources, faculty and students still prefer a mix of print and electronic resources at their academic law library, and many judges still prefer print resources for in-depth legal research. Specialized continuing education for library staff serving these changing constituencies will be crucial to the effective delivery of legal information.

### **Innovation and Collaboration**

Innovation in ideas, planning and implementation will be crucial to the future success of law libraries and their services to patrons. Because law librarians are not able to predict the future with any certainty, the best way to handle “inevitable surprises” is through the development of innovative responses. Envisioning a wide range of possible scenarios forces law libraries to be innovative and creative when planning for the future. Innovation is encouraged through the ongoing support of new ideas, from both professional and support staff. Risk-taking must be encouraged at all levels and special libraries, such as law libraries, are better positioned to encourage risk-taking than their colleagues in public or university library environments.

Barriers to innovation include:

- Resistance to change, both from staff and the parent institution
- A disconnect between the vision and mission of the parent institution and the law library
- A lack of funding and resources
- Libraries’ “investment” in the MARC record – information systems need to be more flexible and user-friendly, more like the interaction patrons experience when using Amazon.com

With the challenges of doing more with fewer resources, collaboration is key to future viability of all types of law libraries. Resource sharing and consortium activities offer ways of removing the financial burden from any single law library. Collaborative partnerships provide an opportunity for the law library to benefit from the experience

and expertise of other entities within the legal community, entities such as courts, the bar, and other departments within an academic institution. Working collaboratively with these entities raises the visibility of the law library in the broader legal community. Collaboration is so important to the success of future law libraries that the American Association of Law Libraries Special Committee on the Future of Law Libraries devoted a section of their final report to a collaborative scenario. See, *Beyond the Boundaries: Report of the Special Committee on the Future of Law Libraries in the Digital Age*, at 39 (Chicago, IL: American Association of Law Libraries, 2002).

Barriers to collaborative services include:

- A need for law librarians to develop negotiating skills necessary for managing and nurturing collaborative relationships
- For municipal, state and federal law libraries, government procurement hurdles require persistence and follow-through in order for the library to work with an outside (private) group
- Collaborative activities require focus and time beyond that of the day-to-day library operation

Despite these limitations, collaborative efforts designed to enhance services and to promote the value of law libraries to the legal community will be worth the investment.

## **Globalization**

Law librarians recognize that 'globalization' is an emerging reality in their professional worlds.

- One of the mega legal publishers is outsourcing part of their core activities of digesting and indexing appellate opinions.
- The European Union is an emerging source of legal authority for the United States. Increasingly, law librarians must be conversant with new systems of international and foreign legal authority and facile in conducting legal research in these systems.
- Large law firms are beginning to experiment with outsourcing some core legal work to so-called 'offshore' locations abroad. This includes document drafting and legal research.
- Many of the private law firms are merging into ever-bigger 'mega' firms and those firms are increasingly international, multi-office concerns with locations all over the world. One consequence of this trend is the expectation of 24/7 research assistance.

Law librarians welcome the trend toward the globalization of legal practice. It means opportunities for expanding personal knowledge and expertise as well as designing creative new products and services for our patrons that will enhance services independent upon location.

Some of the challenges we see in this area include

- Familiarity with substantive aspects of international organizations and foreign legal systems, as well as legal research skills, will need to be part of most law librarians' knowledge base. Traditionally, this has been considered to be a necessary specialization for only the largest public and academic law librarians.
- Outsourcing of core parts of the legal practice is a trend that will need to be monitored. Fully one third of law librarians are employed in the private sector and it is this group that would be most effected by this challenge.
- The 24/7 reference model may be a growing trend among law librarians in all sectors.

## Conclusion

Law Librarians support all sectors of the legal profession. Law librarianship provides a large range of professional opportunities for interested librarians of diverse educational backgrounds. We believe that employment of law librarians will remain robust well into the future, but we recognize that there are significant challenges that face us.

Staffing - More data is needed on projected retirement rates for law librarians. Technology is definitely pushing how law libraries are staffed. Paraprofessionals frequently fill positions that in another environment would be filled by a degreed professional.

Recruitment & Retention -- The law library workplace provides challenging jobs in an environment offering a balance between work and life. There is a misconception among some library school students that a law degree is required for employment in a law library. This misconception should be changed.

Staff Development and Training -- There is no such thing as too much staff development or training. While most law librarians experience development and growth as on the job training, a huge need exists for more formalized continuing education opportunities from the 'experts', e.g. the information schools.

Career paths -- As researchers rely more on tools such as Google, law librarians have the expertise and the duty to preserve legal information systems.

Culture -- Public relations efforts are needed to emphasize unique aspects of the profession such as the key role law librarians play in information policy.

Leadership -- Creative leadership qualities must be developed in all law librarians regardless of place within the organization. Law librarians and their institutions benefit from professional contributions made outside the confines of their institutions.

**Organization** -- Law libraries must become models of efficiency, always looking for ways to enhance library service and respond to needs in ways that resonate with patrons and support the mission of the parent organization. As courts and municipalities look for ways to reduce costs and reallocate space, public law libraries must actively promote the value of their special skills and services to avoid severe reductions in funding, the shift of their services to another library entity, or, worse, closure.

**Changing Constituencies** -- Across all types of law libraries, constituencies are changing and their primary clients range from the computer literate to those with very limited language and computer skills. The number of self-represented litigants seeking information at their nearest law library will continue to grow exponentially and this population will cross all socio-economic levels.

**Innovation and Collaboration** -- In their pursuit of information, more patrons are seeking an Amazon.com-like interaction, yet law libraries' investment in the MARC record presents a barrier to offering innovative information systems. Collaborative partnerships provide opportunities for law libraries to benefit from the experience and expertise of other entities within the legal community, and, in turn, raise the visibility of the law library in the broader legal community.

**Globalization** -- Globalization has already had an effect on legal research and patron services. While some future trends are suggested, the full impact of this new reality has yet to be determined.

All these exciting realities require an increase in the formal education of new information professionals. Moreover, the formal education of new professionals must extend beyond traditional curricula.

Perhaps more importantly, the challenges we face require more opportunities for continuing education so that the skill sets we have identified can be developed in the workforce of today. At present, the opportunities for continuing education and updating of skills are provided by professional organizations (AALL), consortia (OCLC) and to a lesser extent the commercial sector (PLI). While there are some efforts at partnership between information schools and professional associations through specialized courses in law librarianship, both parties would benefit from initiatives that formalize and expand that relationship, particularly in the area of continuing education.

Professional associations also need to reach out to information schools to step up their own recruitment efforts. Collaboration with information schools will improve this activity. For all its challenges, law librarianship remains an exciting, rewarding career choice.

### **Relevant Literature**

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