

SEVENTY FIVE PERCENT?

Sutherland's Washington, D.C., Library goes virtual to tackle a major space reduction challenge

By Sarah Stephens

August 15, 2007, was a fateful day for Sutherland's Washington, D.C., Library staff and its users. On that day, Facilities Manager Vickie Armstrong informed Library Manager Sarah Stephens that a group of partners wanted to appropriate 75% of the library's space to use for file and work rooms. At that time, Sutherland's Washington, D.C., Library encompassed approximately 3,400 square feet and 3,000 linear feet of shelving. The library and its five staff members were the main resource for 300 lawyers and paralegals in Washington, D.C., and New York, as well as a secondary resource to employees located in offices served by the Atlanta Library.

An Opportunity in Disguise

Rather than fighting to preserve a small space just to have it cut again in a year or so, library staff decided to turn this request into a chance to make the library and its resources ubiquitous by replacing physical space with virtual space.

Momentum had been gaining to "go virtual" for many years, and several factors went into the decision. Over the last few years, Sutherland's library had been stealthily transforming its collection into an electronic state. The most important resources were available electronically as well as in print, and the use of electronic resources was steadily increasing across all practice groups. Electronic access was already a fact of life in the New York office where the library consists of only two print titles and research supplied by Washington librarians. While telecommuting is not yet common across the firm, several partners spend part of each month working in distant locations and need resources wherever they are.

Finally, as part of a larger knowledge management initiative, a legal technology consultant recommended that Sutherland take the plunge publicly and

irreversibly by moving the library into virtual space. To do this, the physical space would not be given, but instead sold back to the firm in exchange for the leadership support needed to attain the vision of a virtual and physical library that could provide research and resources anytime, anywhere.

Even though Sutherland's library learned about this request to reduce space in late summer, there was no timeline for the start of construction. Knowing there would be little notice before construction began, Stephens and the library staff began to reorganize. They knew that asking firm staff to become more reliant on electronic resources required making those resources easier to find and use. The first step was to assign one

research, and one dedicated to legislative research. The new objective was to give each practice group or subgroup a page focused on its research resources. Previously there had been no link between electronic resources and the catalog; creating these links became the most time consuming part of the electronic expansion. In addition, there would be an improved legislative page, a page for non-practice-specific library resources, and a page providing overviews of content and contracts for each database or resource. Staff also used the renovation as an opportunity to weed the collection, bar-code books, and upgrade the integrated library system.

Challenges and Solutions

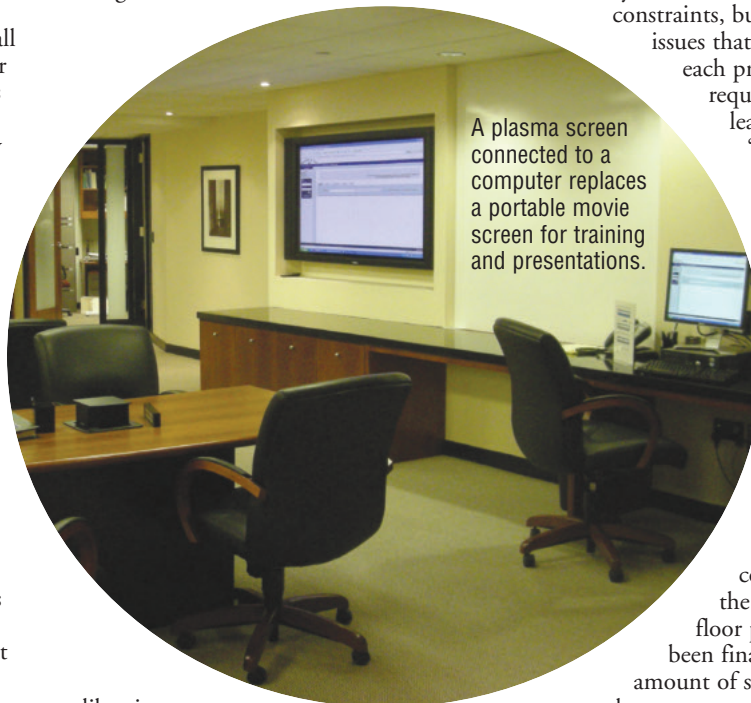
Weeding the collection proved difficult.

Library staff faced not only time constraints, but also political issues that arose when

each practice group was required to give up at least one set that it "had to have." The decision was also made to keep as many treatises on the shelves as possible and convert materials containing discrete pieces of information, such as articles or case decisions, as well as second or third copies. Adding to the difficulty, the floor plans had not yet been finalized, so the final amount of shelf space was

unknown.

Sutherland worked with a space designer who, while not a specialist in library design, listened carefully to the staff and created a design that married form to the functional needs of the staff. For example, libraries need work space



A plasma screen connected to a computer replaces a portable movie screen for training and presentations.

librarian to electronic services and hire a temporary librarian to assist with research.

At the beginning of August, the library had only three intranet pages—one focusing on library policies, one on

for visitors, though not necessarily tables. In the final design, table space was lost, but a counter was gained. Stephens also decided to give up some shelf space in order to add office space for another librarian.

Several discussions focused on how to make the space welcoming without including a traditional reference desk. Giving up shelving space for research librarian offices helped with this, as the offices are located very near the main entrance and have windows positioned to face into the main library space. The windows are frosted in the middle with clear glass borders to provide privacy while still allowing librarians and patrons to see each other.

Each staff member provided input as to his or her workspace need, and that input was incorporated into the plan. To maximize the use of space, modular furnishings were custom designed for each office. The legislative analyst, for example,



photo by Rick Skippon

Library staff at Sutherland's Washington, D.C., location serve lawyers and paralegals in Washington, D.C., New York, and Atlanta.

who relies heavily on books and bill files, received file drawers, shelves, cabinets, and an extensive work surface. Research librarians' work, on the other hand, is not as paper-based; rather, they often work closely with visitors to the library. With this in mind, they were given small file cabinets topped with a cushion, allowing the cabinets to double as seating and fit under desks when not in use.

The library occasionally functions as a space for vendor demonstrations and research training, but in the new design there would no longer be space for several tables and a portable movie screen. To compensate, the new layout included space for a large plasma screen connected to a computer. A countertop serves a dual use as overflow workspace or a display area, and the three work tables complete the high-tech theme with hidden power outlets and network jacks.

Change of Plans

While attending a manager's retreat in Atlanta, Stephens and Armstrong learned on Friday that the partners behind the renovation wanted to see movement immediately. That meant that the move would begin the following Monday upon

their return to Washington, D.C., a mere three weeks after they had learned of the restructuring.

The plan soon changed, however, to move books to space at 1201 Pennsylvania Avenue and give the staff offices at 1275 Pennsylvania Avenue (Sutherland's main location) during the restructuring. While the two buildings are adjacent, Sutherland employees must go outside to get from one location to the other, which created an unacceptably large separation of staff and resources. Therefore, the move to this interim space was delayed another week while offices were prepared at 1201 Pennsylvania, and the extra time was used to hire temps to box the books being sent to off-site storage.

A Lesson in PR

Despite some problems with delayed equipment and a disorganized collection, research was not disrupted to any significant degree while the library was at its temporary location. Each staff member also found reasons to go to the main building each day so they remained visible, and, despite the inconvenience of going outside from one building to another, almost every day brought a visit from at least one associate, partner, secretary, or paralegal.

Staff members spent considerable time and effort publicizing the transition to a more electronic library. This included reassuring attorneys that their concerns were understood and that library staff wanted to make the transition as easy as possible. Librarians had many conversations with other staff members explaining the change and soliciting opinions. As part of the grand re-opening in mid-December 2008, the library hosted four days of demos on the new intranet pages and the catalogue, as well as the process for checking out books and offerings from vendors.

Library staff also learned many lessons during this process, the most important being how to market a potentially unpopular change. They talked of little else for several weeks, so the department's view of the coming benefits was well known. At the same time, they learned to listen to what patrons *weren't* saying; to communicate the message effectively, they learned what the unspoken fears were and addressed them head-on.

There were several surprises during this process, from the sudden acceleration, to delays, to the stress of separation from the rest of the firm. The

biggest, and certainly the most pleasant surprises, however, were the steady stream of visitors to the temporary library location and the support from legal staff. Senior partners almost unanimously said that while they personally didn't like the changes to the library, they understood the rationale, saw the benefit, and accepted that their work practices might have to change.

Everyone learned to embrace change and live with uncertainty. While Sutherland's library staff is not generally afraid of change, this change was so big that it pushed even them to the boundaries of their comfort zones. Each had moments of resistance to, or anger at, the loss of space but those moments were few, brief, and only shown to library colleagues. The united front presented by the staff helped the attorneys adapt to the change by reassuring them that it was done with their needs and concerns in mind.

Back in Business

Almost a year and a half later, Sutherland's new library is back in business and functioning better than ever. Library intranet pages are clearer and better organized, anecdotal evidence shows that usage of those pages is up, and electronic resources are linked from the catalog. Of course, adjusting to the physical space included a few hiccups. Sound travels too well into some offices and not at all into others. Power-saving light switches didn't function as planned, and signage must be improved.

Nonetheless, users are happy with the new space. For weeks, returning users would arrive, express pleasure that the reference desk had been



Each worktable in Sutherland's renovated library space features hidden power outlets and network jacks.

removed, and remark that the space seemed bigger. Counsel Jim Briody, a regular library user, says he has found "many positives to the renovations made to our library." In particular, he appreciates the upgrades to lighting, work tables, and staff offices, adding that the improved offices give staff "a better environment for working on specific assignments while making the general work area for attorneys quieter without sacrificing the library's friendly atmosphere." For the library staff at Sutherland's Washington, D.C., office, that is the surest sign of success. ■

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