

The Future of SOLO Librarianship

by Judith A. Siess



What Is a SOLO?

A SOLO is "an isolated librarian or information collector/provider who has no professional peers within the immediate organization," according to the Special Libraries Association (Scope Note in *Who's Who in Special Libraries*), whose SOLO Librarians Division includes more than 1000

members, the largest group of SOLOs in the world. Other names for SOLO librarian are one-man band (in the UK), sole-charge librarian (sometimes used in Australia and New Zealand) and one-person library (used most everywhere else).

A SOLO is expected to do it all—ordering, cataloging, reference, bibliographic instruction, online searching, filing, budgeting, and so on. The SOLO may have a part-time assistant, volunteers, or, if lucky, some full-time clerical assistance. But the SOLO is the only trained librarian on the staff. In addition, the SOLO has no one in the organization doing the same job to go to for help, advice, or even a shoulder to cry on. The library is part of—but not considered critical to—the parent organization's main mission. The SOLO is probably working for a non-librarian—a boss who does not really understand what the SOLO does ... or how.

AALL estimates that 15% of its 5000+ members are SOLOs, based on its most recent member survey. This amounts to over 750 librarians. Using various studies of law librarians, I created this profile of the "average" SOLO law librarian. Comparisons to the "average SOLO corporate librarian" follow in parentheses.

- ❑ works alone, with no clerical help;
- ❑ has a collection of 10,000 volumes and 250 periodical subscriptions (has a collection of 4000–5000 volumes and 200–300 periodical subscriptions);
- ❑ serves 625 patrons (serves 3000 patrons);
- ❑ administers a budget of \$220,000 (administers a budget of \$90,000);
- ❑ earns \$43,000 (earns \$37,000);
- ❑ has dues paid by the employer (not so for corporate SOLOs);
- ❑ belongs to SLA and AALL (belongs only to SLA);
- ❑ has access to the Internet and the World Wide Web; and,
- ❑ spends 64% of the budget on electronic information.

Law librarians serving private practice or small law bar associations are often SOLOs, as are law librarians in government institutions such as courts or agencies, and some public law libraries. Most law librarians in academia and law schools, which require a library for accreditation, are not SOLOs.

The issues facing SOLO law librarians are:

- ❑ the need for rapid delivery of information, often with price insensitivity;
- ❑ the currency and accuracy of the information;
- ❑ the high degree of confidentiality expected;

- ❑ deciding the fine line between legal research and interpretation; and,
- ❑ dealing with summer interns or law clerks—temporary employees whose high expectations of librarians add to their workload.

SOLOs must also deal with broader issues not unique to law librarianship, including: timeliness, currency, accuracy, thoroughness, detail, rising costs, burnout, and an emphasis on the practical uses of information.

In a summary of several studies of how lawyers find information, researchers found that 50–60% of them do not go to librarians for help, even if they have trouble finding the information themselves. They do not use the librarian to learn how to search, only to provide the documents they identify from their own searches. This provides an opportunity for librarians and a special challenge to SOLOs, who may already be stretching their resources.

On to the Future

Before we get too deep into futuristic soul-searching, let's consider the question posed by the editor of *Electronic Library*: "Will librarians still be around in 2024, and if so, what are they likely to be doing?" Why are we asking this question? Do we ask it about teachers, doctors, or lawyers? Is it because information is becoming more available, or because we are insecure? It is probably more the latter (insecurity) than the former (the threat of technology). Librarians have historically had a poor self-image, which leads us to more introspective questioning of our future than is probably either necessary or healthy.

Tony Ferguson, writing in the April 1996 issue of *Against the Grain*, urges, "Librarians take off your black arm bands, stop the funeral dirge, cease the endless wringing of hands, stop sounding the death knell of collection development, stop moaning about the end of librarianship as we know it today. We are all going to be busier in the future than in the past.... Our shelves may be digital, but the work of filling them and keeping them filled continues to be complicated and important. Job security for the information professional is assured."

Users will need even more guidance through the "chaos" of the continually changing Internet. Collection development will take more time because digital materials need more evaluation than books. The safeguarding of intellectual property will be more complicated and require more technical competence.

Technology

Technological trends suggest growth in, and challenge for, SOLOs—much of which is shared by our non-SOLO colleagues. We cannot overestimate the impact technology will have on our future. The greatest impact may come from client/server technology—providing information at

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the desktop, with graphics, sound, video; in full text with copyright taken care of; databases of internal documents; personalized SDIs—all available from anywhere in the world to anywhere else. There is the ever-present danger of technolust—new is always better than old, the future is always better than the present. We have a tendency to assume that any and all improvements are worthwhile. In addition, there is the nerd's cry of "gotta have it now."

Barbara Golden of the Minnesota State Law Library asked State/Supreme Court Law Libraries, "Do you have a person or are you planning to add or assign a person to handle responsibilities [for information technology]?" Of the 21 responses, eight states (38%) did have such a person (Alabama, Florida, Kansas, Louisiana, Montana, Nevada, New Jersey, and Ohio) and 13 (62%) did not (Alaska, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Dakota, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, and Wyoming). Four states (Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, and Mississippi) said they use experts from their parent organizations, with librarian input. Most of the respondents recognized the importance of technical expertise and control within the library. A Nevada respondent noted, "A law library cannot provide adequate legal reference service without the assistance of information technology and has to have someone on the staff with an understanding and focus on how to utilize this new technology..." A Michigan respondent added, "In the not-too-distant future, however, librarians, including law librarians, will of necessity have acquired most of the skills we all need now to assist us in making the successful transition to an Internet-based legal information environment." (law-lib listserv, 7/11/97)

It is obvious that "technology offers more opportunity than obstacle for future generations," as Suzi Hayes pointed out (*InfoManage*, March 1994, p.5). The issue is how we will use it. We need to see it as a tool to solve problems, not an end in itself, leading us only to find new ways to use new technology. We must weigh the costs, benefits, and impact on users of any proposed innovation. We should rethink the entire service, not just automate it (and only automate what is improved with automation). We run the risk of what I call "electronic myopia." The researcher is interested only in material available online. Material that hasn't been indexed becomes invisible. And the researcher may make document retrieval decisions based on what's available online in full-text rather than what will present a well-balanced view of the issues.

Dealing with Change

Linda Appel, former Chair, SLA SOLO Librarians Division, says, "The major issue facing SOLO librarians today is change: recognizing its inevitability and the forms it may take, planning for it creatively and relentlessly, and adapting to it resiliently and ingeniously. We should welcome change, for it will test us, nurture us, and stretch us and, perhaps, lead each of us in exciting paths we would never have foreseen. We must not resist change." (*The One-Person Librarian*, May 1994, p. 4-6)

"Change is inevitable, and will continue at an ever-faster rate," noted AALL Secretary Susan Siebers (*AALL Spectrum*, May 1997, p. 8). If you keep doing what you did yesterday, you will be passed over, made obsolete. As important as technology and

the Internet are, "within our working lifetime, we will undoubtedly experience at least one other change as momentous as the Internet," added Siebers.

Andrew Stathis, a non-librarian who heads an architectural firm specializing in law offices, says in his provocatively titled article "Technology Offers Incentive to Downsize Law Libraries" (*The National Law Journal*, October 2, 1995, p. B11), that the law librarian of the future must be computer literate, more of an administrator than a data gatherer. "The presence of the librarian will be essential."

Roberta Shaffer (Director of Library Services, Covington & Burling) predicts that "Many future law librarians will have law degrees.... However, while I believe that a basic knowledge of the law is required for a law librarian, I think that more important than a law degree are the other knowledge and skill sets law librarians can bring to a firm.

"Online services will continue to grow and ... law librarians will play an increasingly vital role in helping their firms get the information they need. Time will be money even more so in the future than now, so any service that can help a law librarian expedite getting to that right kernel of information will be valuable [including the Internet].

"Law librarians will increasingly play an added-value role in law firms, finding and condensing information that attorneys don't have time to find and learn." (*LEXIS-NEXIS Information Professional Update*, March 1996, p. 37)

What's Next for SOLO Law Libraries?

We must remember that "value added" is where it's at. One of our strengths is our closeness to the customer. We will become increasingly technology driven, especially regarding electronic document delivery and remote access to "library" collections. Our role will evolve into facilitators or information advisors.

Mary Ellen Bates, a consultant in Washington, D.C., notes, "SOLO librarians can move up a notch [in the future]—their roles will be to teach consumers how to shop around and select the most appropriate information resources, train them in the most cost-effective search techniques, and support them when they need more complex research done that goes beyond the capabilities of the end-user search tools. Sometimes it's difficult to give up some of the online searching—this is the part that many SOLOs enjoy the most. But in handing over the basic tools to library patrons, SOLO librarians can build their jobs into that of information consultant and guru instead of information go-fer. And remember, patrons will still come back when they find that they're not finding what they want ... and they have a much higher appreciation of the information gathering and analysis skills of librarians as a result." (*The One-Person Librarian*, May 1994, p. 4-6)

With end-user searching, interest often wanes after the first rush—when users find that it's harder than they thought. That's where we can step in. If your users embrace end-user searching, you can still act as a filter, checking out quality, recommending sources, training, and doing the really hard searches. Chris Olson advises

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Continued on page 12

that we be honest with our patrons (attorneys), educate them, work with them, act and manage professionally, and outsource and/or use consultants (AALL Spectrum April 1997, p. 13).

In the April issue of AALL Spectrum, participants in a "virtual symposium" delved into "the harsh realities being faced by firm librarians today."

Michael Saint-Onge said that law librarians seem frustrated, unable to predict the future for themselves. While Kathie Sullivan saw a time when small private firms will not be able to afford their own libraries, Joe Stephens feared "that the librarian will go before the library" and that the small firm library will have only essentials for its own firm, relying on public libraries/law schools for the rest of its information. Even if the library does not go, there is a strong possibility of more law libraries becoming SOLO situations in the future.

Outsourcing of law library work is another possible outcome faced by SOLO and other law librarians alike. My query (on law-lib-l and law-libref-l) about the future of SOLO law librarianship drew varying responses. Dina Dreifuerst, law librarian at Clements O'Neill Pierce & Nickens of Houston, is already outsourcing. She uses a filing service and a secretarial assistant for mail, routing, and serials check-in. She still laments her lack of time—billing 90–100 hours per month leaves her little time for management or long-term goals. Richard Dengrove of the U.S. Department of Agriculture is more pessimistic about outsourcing. He forecasts that "We'll all be employed by temp agencies rather than particular libraries.... Business, and government, more and more over the years has been a matter of temporary projects rather than ongoing activities."

Susan Siebers (AALL Spectrum, May 1997, p. 9) points out that some firms allow librarians to work directly for clients, bringing in additional income. This may be a growing trend and would help keep those libraries' goals aligned with their parent institutions'. She also predicts that "there will be fewer lower-skilled positions" (shelvers, filers). Law librarians must emphasize their skills and professionalism, differentiate themselves from the support staff, expand into Web skills and improve presentation skills, and consider outsourcing (e.g., filing). They can expect and must facilitate more direct attorney access to the Internet and technology in general. She also expects law libraries to receive no additional space (maybe even less), and even more consolidation in legal publishing.

"Virtual symposium" participant Mark Estes also stressed the importance of a commitment to life-long learning (continuing education) and also suggests changing one's planning time frame to no more than three years out.

Mary Lynn Wagner (AALL Spectrum, April 1997, p. 32) urges law librarians to use more marketing, not to be afraid of it or "consider it a waste of time." She suggests MBWA (management by walking around), getting feedback from attorneys, more value-added services, and participation in professional organizations

and continuing education. I also suggest RBWA—reference by walking around. Often your presence will remind patrons of a question they might have when they wouldn't necessarily make the trip to the library or pick up the phone to ask it.

Some Final Thoughts

The future of all librarianship will increasingly depend on technology. This is even more important for the SOLO as it enables us to extend our limited resources of time and personnel. We must be sure we become the masters of technology, rather than letting it use us. We must ensure we do not let it coopt our role in the transfer of knowledge. Since it is unlikely that our current or prospective employers will jump to train us in the new technology, it remains our responsibility to obtain this training ourselves.

In order to remain part of the information mainstream—especially SOLOs who wish to remain employed at all—we must change our roles and become information and knowledge leaders, facilitators, mediators, advisors. No longer will it be enough to be passive question-answerers. We must take a proactive role in promoting information services and the importance of our role in the process. A major first step is to change our education and our image. We must be prepared for the future. We will gain respect not by demanding it, but by earning it.

It is almost certain that in the future there will be more SOLOs in legal, corporate, and other institutional settings, and probably even in public and academic settings. While some may see this as a bad thing, I see it as an opportunity for those of us who enjoy working alone. However, to succeed we need to have more contact and interchange among SOLOs. This is especially true for those of us working outside the U.S., where there are fewer opportunities to meet with peers. We also must establish and maintain mentoring relationships with students and new librarians so that they will no longer feel unprepared and alone.

Note that I use "we" throughout these thoughts. None of us can sit back and wait for the future to happen—for "them" to make changes. We all have to take an active part in making the future happen the way we envision it. We need to have the right education, the right attitude, and the right image. We need to make sure that we are experts, but in the right things. We must have the knowledge that is needed by our employers, customers, competitors, and colleagues, and they need to know what we have to offer. We have to convince them that we are the best (maybe the only) ones to help them meet their goals. We must position ourselves to become an indispensable part of their business plans. Then—and only then—we will be paid what we are worth.

We will be worth what we are paid. And then we will be able to be full partners in the worldwide information process.

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