

End-User Electronic Information Competencies

by Bobbie Studwell

Professional Perspectives — *Tools and Techniques of the Trade*. The Professional Development Committee encourages members to continue to explore topics after presentations at the local, regional, and national levels. We welcome your comments and article suggestions. Please contact Mary A. Hotchkiss at 206/553-4475 or hotchma@u.washington.edu.

I've always thought of myself as a competent researcher. I'm able to use paper-based legal research tools efficiently, quickly, effectively, and flexibly. Ten years of reference work tend to give anyone a feeling of confidence and competence.

Paper-based legal research tools aren't necessarily our end-users' tools of choice anymore, however. Students ask about electronic legal resources as soon as they enter the law school door, knowing that their legal career is likely to depend on what they know and how well they can use those electronic resources. They are likely to have surfed the Web, used e-mail, and scanned CD-ROM indexes long before they entered law school. But, do

they know much more than this when they leave law school? What can our profession do to help our students, attorneys, judges, and paralegals, not to mention ourselves, gain that same feeling of competence in using electronic resources?

A group of four of your colleagues posed that same question not long ago and drafted a working document to help supply an answer. Jill Porter (PLI), Leigh Semple (LEXIS-NEXIS), Faye Jones (Hastings Law School), and I drafted the discussion document you see below. It reformulates skills and values found in the McCrate Report for electronic research and takes technology-based competencies

from the book titled *Beyond Workplace 2000* and creates from them skill sets students and attorneys should master to be considered competent electronic information users.

You may also be interested in reviewing the "Compilation of Core Information Literacy Competency/ Outcomes for Undergraduates" document found in the May 1998 issue of *C & RL News*. It includes some Web sites to peruse as you consider the working document set out in this

End-User Electronic Information Competencies

Skill Sets Required Before Entering Law School

Basic Skills: Reading, Writing, Mathematics, Listening, Speaking

Thinking Skills: Creative Thinking, Decision Making, Problem Solving, Synthesizing, Active Learning, Reasoning

Personal Qualities: Responsibility, Self-Esteem, Sociability, Self-Awareness, Ethical Integrity

article. Whether you agree with the list of skills, their arrangement, or their placement within this structure or not, hopefully you agree that it's time for our profession to step up and define basic legal research competencies. The *CR & L News* article shows that we are not alone in forging forward to define basic levels of competency. Isn't it time to set out lists of electronic research competencies, among other research skills, and ask other organizations that police our profession to take note?

I'll be interested in your thoughts on this important issue as discussion groups and listservs are used to explore the topic.

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Information & Research Competency Skill Sets to Be Acquired before Entering the Profession

Information Awareness and Foundational Skills

- Familiarity with the nature of legal rules and institutions
- Familiarity with the fundamental tools of legal research
- Awareness of the diversity of information sources and technologies available
- Awareness of techniques that will reduce costs, including an understanding of how information is gathered, organized, packaged, published in cycles, and stored
- Ability to transfer skills between platforms and systems
- Awareness of the time-consuming nature of information retrieval
- Understanding of the concepts of intellectual property and other doctrines associated with information creation and provision

Assessment and Selection Skills

- Ability to formulate issues for research after determining the range of issues presented, type of answer sought, degree of confidence in answers required for the purpose, and degree of documentation of answers needed for the purpose
- Ability to determine the levels of legal research required
- Ability to use specialized techniques for reading and using research materials efficiently, including techniques related to alternative formats
- Ability to select from a range of search strategies to create a research design

Searching and Locating Skills

- Ability to choose effective search terms, phrases, and images

- Awareness of database structures and content
- Ability to perform truncated, Boolean, field, and delimited searching
- Ability to use controlled vocabulary when appropriate
- Understanding of the differences between full-text and index searches
- Understanding of how to interpret and use citation formats to locate items

Evaluation and Interpretation Skills

- Ability to evaluate a range of search strategies and choose the proper technology to produce the desired results
- Ability to monitor and, when necessary, modify the results of an implemented design or search strategy
- Ability to determine the degree of risk involved in not conducting thorough research
- Awareness of the degree of thoroughness of legal research required based on the end-user's need for the information and the client's resources
- Ability to create a design that evaluates the degree of thoroughness and time required and the feasibility of completing research in light of other time pressures and client resources
- Ability to distinguish relevant from irrelevant information
- Knowing how to determine and weigh factual accuracy, currency, authority, bias, viewpoints, and assumptions against the need for the information
- Ability to identify and/or troubleshoot problems with the technology chosen

Manipulation and Organizational Skills

- Ability to devise and implement a coherent and effective research design
- Knowledge of how to create a research design
- Ability to provide appropriate documentation of results
- Understanding of how to integrate new information into an existing body of knowledge
- Ability to organize information for practical and counseling applications, including creating documents such as World Wide Web pages
- Understanding of how and when to use document delivery to retrieve documents
- Understanding of the process for saving, downloading, e-mailing, or printing search results

Citation Skills

- Knowing the requirements for legal citation forms, including electronic formats
- Ensuring that sources are up-to-date
- Ability to double check the accuracy of research

Communication Skills

- Understanding how to articulate information needs
- Understanding how to communicate the results of research to clients and others
- Ability to present and interpret information visually using graphs, charts, etc.
- Ability to communicate using visual presentation software such as PowerPoint, WhiteBoard, and others