

Getting Your Money's Worth

From An Electronic Services Librarian

by Lisa Mecklenberg

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 Carol Avery Nicholson at 919/962-1199 or carol_nicholson@unc.edu.

In last month's issue of *AALL Spectrum*, you read Judy Meadows' article detailing the process she went through to establish a new position (electronic services librarian) at the State Law Library of Montana. Well, I'm the individual who was fortunate enough to be hired in this newly created position and this month it is my profound pleasure to share with you my view from the other side of the "electric" fence.

Let me begin by saying that I have come to discover electronic services librarians are a rare breed. By the very nature of our work, we are required to blend together, in a hopefully harmonious manner, those instincts that label us as "librarians" and those occasionally conflicting traits tagging us as "technology geeks." For instance, it is an electronic services librarian who must balance the librarian's concern with the content of information, with the geek's concern with processing information. Similarly, librarians think about sharing information while geeks worry about controlling it.

Thankfully, not all of an electronic services librarian's day is spent warring with these opposing sides of his/her personality. The librarian and the technology geek share enough of the same characteristics to enable them to exist in harmony (most of the time). Both are concerned, either directly or indirectly, with providing accurate and timely information to others. Both do a great deal of behind-the-scenes maintenance to ensure the availability of the resources to do this. Both are essentially service professions dedicated to helping others accomplish their goals. And finally, the clincher, *the jobs of both are often only noticed when something goes wrong.*

What kind of skills does an electronic services librarian need? Having served as an electronic services librarian for the last year and a half, I realize now that the

skills required for a position such as this are not always immediately obvious to the casual observer. Roy Tennant wrote a wonderful article ("The Most Important Management Decision: Hiring Staff for the New Millennium," *123 Library Journal* 102, Feb. 15, 1998), in which he lists the skills, or traits, important in a "technology" librarian:

Electronic services librarians are required to blend together those instincts that label us as "librarians" and those occasionally conflicting traits tagging us as "technology geeks."

The capacity to learn constantly and quickly. Can the electronics librarian learn a new technology without formal training? Can s/he evaluate a new technology and what it can, and can't do, for your law library? Can s/he stay current on recent trends? If not, the ability to do the job successfully is seriously limited.

Flexibility. As we all know, times change. What might be state-of-the-art one month could be yesterday's news the next. Your electronic services librarian must be able to adapt and change as technology changes. You want someone who thrives on change.

A commitment to public service. How often have you used a Web site and said to yourself, "This is a confusing mess. Who designed this thing?" Any law library will benefit from having staff members who understand the needs and wants of its users, and will work to fill those needs in the most user-friendly way possible.

An appreciation of others' efforts, and the ability to work with them effectively. Building your electronic collection is a team effort. Though your electronic services librarian may lead the charge, others need to be in the cavalry. Your staff will need to work together, regardless of seniority and rank.

Skill at initiating and maintaining change. Since change is inevitable and constant, you will need someone who not only handles change well, but embraces it. This person must be able to communicate to others the need for the change, as well as how the change will best be accomplished. This person should sense when to advocate and when to compromise.

Has the ability, and desire, to work independently. Your electronic services librarian should be able to balance and prioritize diverse responsibilities while immersed in several projects at once. Most effective professionals will both want and be able to work with little or no supervision. Best advice to managers: Help get them the needed resources and then get out of the way!

I would add to this list of traits three more essential items: Communication skills, political skills, and ability-to-admit-you-don't-know-what-you're-doing skills (my personal favorite). Communication skills are necessary at two levels—to discuss technology issues with those more "techie" than you, and to talk with those at the opposite end—lay people, trainees, or those who may be computer illiterate. *You must be able to interact effectively with all law library patrons.* Likewise, political skills are a necessity in most law library jobs, but are a definite plus in the face of an irate patron who wants to know why his tax dollars are being spent on a CD that he doesn't want or know how to use, rather than the book he's "always used." Not only do you have to explain the reasoning behind your decision to switch

A Desktop Learning Opportunity

media, but you also have to show him how to use the CD, often accompanied by much grumbling on his part and practiced political politeness on yours.

Although experience and skills with a particular technology is always a plus for an electronic services librarian, it is not essential. In fact, I was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a “techie” when I came to this job. Most of my technology skills have been acquired since I got here. But that’s okay, because technology changes, and what your electronic librarian knows today may be obsolete tomorrow. Instead, look for an individual who exhibits the traits mentioned above—s/he will be able to pick up whatever skill or experience is deemed necessary.

What does an electronic services librarian do all day? This is obviously going to vary depending upon what type of law library said electronic services librarian is working in. Because I work in a court library, I spend a small portion of my time working with the seven Montana Supreme Court Justices, assisting them with various online computer questions and desktop applications, and a great deal of time with their law clerks, who do the bulk of their research. Most of it is done online and, being fresh out of law school, the 14 clerks are still quite familiar with searching techniques for LEXIS and WESTLAW, so they don’t need much help there. But I do assist them with searches on the various CD products available on their desktops. And I serve as the legal research liaison to the Court, letting everyone know about new products and setting up training, distributing handouts, etc.

An electronic services librarian is responsible for the law library’s computer hardware and software. The degree of responsibility will vary, depending on whether you have a separate IS department or whether you *are* the IS department. But undoubtedly, you’ll be setting up PCs, troubleshooting PCs and all related accoutrements, upgrading PCs, and perhaps maintaining a network or Web server. You will be responsible for the library’s software needs, including selection, installation, and maintenance.

You may have responsibilities for day-to-day operations of the computer and teaching labs. Creation and maintenance of the law library’s Web page will often fall into your realm, as will such management issues as computer-based technology planning (both long- and short-term), and budgeting. For example, last summer the State Law Library of Montana negotiated contracts with both WESTLAW and LEXIS, allowing access to these services across the state at reduced pricing for state agencies, district courts, and city and county attorneys. For a rural state like Montana, this is a real bonus we were able to offer our users. Billing for this project, both incoming and outgoing, is my responsibility.

Of course, training of faculty, staff, attorneys, judges, clerks, the public, and students in the use of all facets of computer technology will fall within your realm. This will include training on CD, Internet, online services, and probably e-mail and word processing as well. The creation of user-friendly guides and pathfinders to assist staff and patrons with electronic resources will likely also fall to you. In addition, plan on doing some reference work, both in the library and electronically. This may include, among other things, answering questions through your Web page, as I do.

Seek out a “techie” judge, or a computer-savvy firm partner or law professor who understands the importance of technology, and garner their support.

Because the State Law Library of Montana has a small staff (7.5 FTE), I personally do some things which may not fall under the umbrella of electronic services. Case in point: I engage in quite a lot of what I call public relations work. The reasons for this are twofold. One, I like it. And two, I think it’s important to get the word out to our users about the services we can

provide. I maintain a listserv for Montana attorneys, conduct Internet training sessions, make bulletin boards, celebrate special events, and draw chalk body outlines on the floor by the circulation desk (April Fool’s Day). These things are certainly not in my job description (okay, maybe the chalk outline was), but I do them because they are enjoyable for me and I believe they boost the morale of the library’s users.

SO...THE MONTANAN’S ADVICE FOR THOSE WHO ALREADY ARE, OR ARE SEEKING TO BECOME, ELECTRONIC SERVICES LIBRARIANS

Don’t be afraid to ask questions or admit you don’t know something.

Be open and ready to learn. You’re probably going to be faced with something new everyday. Don’t let yourself become frustrated with this constant learning curve. Instead, look at it as, “Wow, a new day, a new idea. Lucky me, to never be bored with the same old thing.” Keep abreast of trends in technology and how new “inventions” can expand your library’s offerings to your users.

Teach yourself. Become intimately acquainted with your manuals. Many simple questions can be answered just by reading the book, without having to call on anyone else. A related tip: whether you find the answer yourself or have to consult someone else, write the solution down. I guarantee the same question will come up again and you’ll be only too glad you had the foresight to jot down the answer the first time. (Of course, this entails remembering where you put the answer.) Join professional listservs. This has been invaluable to me. There’s a listserv out there for any area you’re interested in. I find the technology/Web listservs particularly helpful.

Take advantage of every opportunity to network. Serve on a technology committee or a working group. Get involved with libraries at a local level. Volunteer for activities at the national level. Don’t be afraid to contact people, locally or

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nationwide, for information. I do this often, and no one, not one single person, has ever been anything less than courteous and helpful. It's amazing what you can learn from your peers and mentors.

Find out what your users need and give it to them if you can.

Find a mentor/spokesperson higher up in your organization who will go to bat for you. In my case this was easy, as my boss is Judy Meadows. Most of you know Judy as Past President of AALL and staunch supporter of new technology. If she can find money for it in her budget, Judy is willing to incorporate the latest electronic resources into her library. She is committed to making technological advances in the legal field available to all. In that sense, I've been lucky as I have support for new electronic acquisitions all along the way. But even if you aren't fortunate enough to have a Judy of your own, seek out a "techie" judge, or a computer-savvy firm partner or law professor who understands the importance of technology, and garner their support.

Seek out a liaison. For those of you in a larger library setting, it always helps to have an individual who can bridge the gap between technical staff and everyone else. This person may be either a technically oriented person on your staff (other than yourself) or a technical person who doesn't live and breathe computers. S/he can be invaluable to improving communication between your library staff and the technology department.

Make yourself invaluable.

Be flexible. There is one constant with technology: change. Change with it. If you don't succeed the first time, try again. If the first person you ask doesn't know the answer, ask another.

Be enthusiastic. Go the extra mile. Get excited about technology and all the great things that can be done with it. Channel your desire to learn into becoming an expert in all aspects of information technology as they relate to law libraries.

Be willing to try anything within reason. Be resourceful, innovative, and tenacious. Only the brave who gently prod those in

power get results. The key word, though, is *gently*. Just like employers must treat electronic services librarians with respect and a somewhat hands-off approach, so too must the electronic services librarian recognize his/her boundaries. Not everyone feels as enthusiastic about change as you do.

Be helpful. After all, that's what you're there for.

Working as an electronic services librarian has certainly been a challenge for me. The fact that, in my situation, it was a newly created position further enhanced the challenge. But it's been fun. I enjoy my job immensely and it is the variety that keeps it fresh. There is probably no other position in a law library that enjoys such varied duties and unusual tasks as that of the electronic services librarian. And the big selling point? You get to be both a librarian and a geek. Who could ask for anything more?

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