

The Next Chapter in Your Career?

The Flexibility of Freelance/Independent Law Librarianship

by Ruth Bridges

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.

At some point, particularly after a long and successful career as a law librarian, you may want to step back and take an objective look at your life to review your career needs against lifetime goals and issues. Issues that have been on the back burner during moves from one library to the next and up the ladder of success may now need to take precedence.

Perhaps the need is for more flexibility in the work schedule. During the climb up the ladder, most librarians long ago gave up any options other than the traditional schedule of a 9:00 a.m./9:30 a.m. arrival and 5:00 p.m./6:00 p.m. departure (or until the work is done!). Maybe the issue is being able to work part time and leave every day at 2:00 p.m. to be home for the children after school. Longer days with every other Friday or Monday off (at the same income) might be appealing. A truly innovative, modern, creative work environment may allow for any of these options, but for a law library head—particularly in a busy firm or corporate environment—this might not be as easy. Many experienced law librarians have a

level of responsibility that makes such flexibility difficult, if not impossible.

You may have always wanted to go back to school to study a completely new discipline but lacked the time. Starting a small business was your goal, but there just was not enough time. You longed for extended vacation breaks—longer than the two-week vacation you have been able to eek out for the past few years. (Can anyone really “do” Europe in two weeks?) Taking the summer months off might better fit your lifestyle.

You may find your career has leveled off and reached some plateau. For some, this achievement brings peace. The top job in a library brings a certain satisfaction from having met and mastered the challenges. It feels especially good to know we could compete effectively for our jobs if we had to all over again. It is comfortable to sit in the office and just “manage” the library. Problems—and their solutions—are familiar. Your last job title is essentially the same as the current one and the next one will essentially be the same.

Some law librarians need more: the flexibility to work differently; the freedom to do what we do best; new challenges; the opportunity to bring the past experiences to a new set of circumstances. After a time, just changing to head another law library is no longer the answer.

One option being employed by a host of law librarians all over the country is choosing to work as an independent law librarian. This option is creative, challenging, and great fun. The first reality is that working as an independent law librarian offers greater flexibility in the workplace. Finally, you really are the boss. You can accept assignments or not if they do not meet your needs. Bringing many, many years of experience to the table allows you to “hit the ground running” on most assignments—which feels great.

The first step on becoming an independent law librarian is a self-assessment. You must be sure that you know your strengths and weaknesses.

Expanding Careers: Terminology

The terms independent librarian, information broker, and freelance librarian are often used interchangeably. All of these terms describe a type of working relationship: independent information providers who charge clients for services rendered. While these terms overlap, some basic distinctions exist. A “freelance librarian” is a contract employee, generally used for specific projects or to cover staff absences. An “information broker” is a fee-based information provider who responds to on-demand research needs, usually for an organization that does not have a research library or cannot handle the volume of information requests. An “independent law librarian” (as defined by the AALL Private Law Libraries Special Interest Section) is an inclusive term for information professionals who are freelancers, consultants, and information specialists who work with law libraries and legal materials in more than one permanent full-time position. What all of these positions share in common is the use of professional knowledge and skills to provide high-quality information solutions.

A Desktop Learning Opportunity

(Don't forget: Offering your services as an independent law librarian is a business. You will be in it for the return on investment: an income.) It is equally important to know what it is that you love to do because you are sure to bring tremendous enthusiasm to the environment by doing what you are good at and when it is what you love to do.

Working on site at a library can be satisfying because your presence relieves the head librarian of tasks s/he does not have time to handle effectively. You know what she is busy with and are happy to help. You may have developed a special skill or knowledge that the head librarian may lack. Having you on board for a while to teach the advanced Internet classes s/he knows should be offered by the library can be very helpful. If reference is your special skill, covering a reference desk—knowing confidently a lot of the questions have been asked of you before—is extremely rewarding for the independent and helpful to regular library staff.

Independents will find that each new assignment increases their own self-worth. Just continuing to move to new law libraries, and being able to quickly add value, creates a new confidence in the independent.

One independent library consultant I know specializes in moving law libraries. Her skill lies in her long hours of advanced planning. Handling this time-consuming process is just not always realistic for a head librarian, giving all the other tasks that remain at hand, even though the library is moving. With each move, my friend gains more experience and knowledge. How can she fail to do a better job than the harried head librarian or other less experienced staff who may have never moved a law library before?

In a really good situation, the independent law librarian complements the head law librarian. S/he knows her library; you can become his/her clone. You will get to know him/her and handle some aspects of the professional work that must get done in the manner in which

s/he would have handled it had s/he had the time. Some independents enjoy knowing that they are helping another librarian for whom time management alone can no longer provide the solution.

Working as an independent is also a great time to completely shift gears. A reference librarian might like to work in technical services such as acquisitions. Maybe you (unlike me, who never quite got a handle on AACR2) wanted to do more cataloging, but there was not enough time. Working as an independent law librarian may provide that golden opportunity.

Finding work as an independent law librarian presents its own set of challenges. Several techniques can help get the business needed to survive. Volunteer for local and AALL professional associations. Name recognition is still a major asset in business. Sign up with all the library service companies in the area; insist that you are interested only in professional assignments at an acceptable rate of pay. Talk to former colleagues and let everyone know you are an independent. Let former coworkers know that you are available, what you can do and how you can help them in their libraries. Make sure that other independent law librarians know that you are available to take assignments that they are too busy to handle or that fall into your specialties but not theirs.

We get one career as a law librarian, but it does not have to be vertical or deadend. Stretch. Try something new. A different way of working may bring the challenges that have been missing from your work and/or the time to meet your personal life needs.

Following a career of almost 20 years in academic, law firm, and corporate law library environments, Ruth Bridges (rbridges@shb.com) branched out to join the ranks of independent law librarians in July 1998. She is currently working on a myriad of assignments in private law firms in the greater Washington, D.C., area.

Resources:

The American Association of Law Libraries PLL-SIS Independent Law Librarians' Group —
<http://www.aallnet.org/sis/pllsis/independents.html>

The Independent Law Librarians' Group produces an annual directory. The Independent Law Librarians' Group will be meeting at the Annual Meeting and Conference in Washington, D.C., and presenting a program on "Strategic Alliances" on Monday, July 19. Ruth Balkin, the current Chair, can be reached at rbalkin@servtech.com.

Association of Independent Information Professionals —
<http://www.aiip.org>

AIIP is an international association of owners of information businesses providing such information-related services as online and manual research, document delivery, database design, library support, consulting, writing, and publishing.