

Redefining the Law Firm: New Realities and New Roles for Law Librarians in the Legal Marketplace

Program Inspires Law Firm Librarians to Take On Role of Change Agents

by Stephanie Godley

Program A-2, "Redefining the Law Firm: New Realities and New Roles for Law Librarians in the Legal Marketplace," proved to be a superb way to start off the 2001 AALL Annual Meeting and Conference. Correlating to the theme of the conference, this invigorating program discussed the evolving role of the library and the librarian within legal practice.

Kingsley Martin, the chief information officer of Kirkland and Ellis, started the session by asking the audience if they believed that the role of the library will change substantially in the next 10 years. Hands went up and there were nods of agreement from the audience. The next question, however, caused a drastically different response. Martin asked how many of us had some sort of plan — any plan — in place for handling this change. This time, no one could raise his or her hand in agreement.

With these two questions in mind, Martin launched into a discussion of the realities of law firms in this environment of change. As we know, law firms can be very resilient to change. Yet our clientele is changing rapidly — they are going global, moving into new practice areas, and using new technologies. Law firms today are facing competition from consulting and accounting firms. Forms of communication are changing rapidly. So many of these changes are driven by technology. Yet this is not only an issue for IT departments. Information professionals must also face these challenges head on and play a leading role in helping guide firms through these changes.

So what roles can librarians play? What functions should our libraries perform in order to move our firms along in this age of change? While recognizing that playing the role of change agent in a law firm can be very difficult, the three speakers

said it was an essential responsibility for librarians to take on, and most important, that it can be done. Martin outlined a number of key strategies for librarians:

- Focus on core technologies, and get it right the first time.
- Build internally: Create systems where information can be distributed in-house.
- Create an extranet.
- Create external systems that are revenue generating.
- Do it all at once!

Develop an all-inclusive system that can serve as a single source of information, a portal, Martin said. Portals should be fully integrated workspaces, available both internally and externally. They should be customizable to meet the needs of individuals, teams and work groups. The development and growth of portals should be joint efforts between information professionals, lawyers, technology staffs and even clients.

After setting out this framework, Martin opened the discussion to the two panelists, **Jean O'Grady** from Wilmer Cutter and Pickering and **Dennis Hauptly** from West Group. Martin first asked the panel what the role of a librarian should be. Hauptly noted the danger that occurs when projects aimed at meeting the changing needs of law firms become technology projects rather than information projects. O'Grady pointed out that librarians are "uniquely qualified" to work on these issues; they have the variety of skills needed to create successful knowledge-management projects. Information professionals understand the needs of their patrons and have knowledge of indexing and cataloging techniques, she said. All three speakers continually expressed the importance of focusing on the needs of end users. Librarians must make sure these knowledge-management projects and portals are user-friendly and are presented through a logical interface to the user group. Ideally, they should be able to search these systems both internally and externally. As Hauptly noted, people want 100 percent return and 100 percent accuracy! Although law librarians recognize this objective as extremely difficult to achieve, it should obviously be the goal.

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The question was raised of how law librarians teach research and encourage attorneys to use our libraries and intranets. Librarians can build these great systems but need to ensure that users both know how to use them and use them actively. The goal is to save the attorneys time: They should know where on the system they need to go to find what they are looking for. Clearly there needs to be support for these projects across the board. Attorneys should attend training on their first day at the firm. Attending practice group meetings was mentioned as one way of gaining access to attorneys during time they have already set aside.

Martin left the attendees of program A-2 with questions most of the attendees carried with them throughout the conference and back to their firms. What is the library going to look like in 10 years? Who will work there? What services will the library deliver? We must be "flexible to deliver change," Martin said. These questions and their answers are vital to the survival and success of the library.

This was an excellent program — both inspiring and useful — and I commend all three speakers for their work and presentations.

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