

Law Librarians Must Redefine Their Roles in the Era of Information Technology

by Daniel R. Campbell

As technology continues to evolve, the roles of law librarians and information technology support staff are beginning to overlap and blur. Information technology professionals continue to focus on technology rather than users. As a result, many of the tasks once thought to be purely technology-oriented have now become the responsibility of library professionals, partly because it is their users who usually need the support.

Prior to the technology revolution of the past 20 years, librarians were primarily the “keepers of the books” and other print materials. They mainly instructed library users on how to best use print resources. Computers in the library were limited to certain statistical databases and, in cutting-edge libraries, an online catalog. Librarians generally relied on technology support staff to maintain nonprint information resources.

Over time, more and more information became available to users in electronic format. Information professionals initially processed the print format themselves into an electronic version. As a result, for the most part, the electronic information was presented in the same general structure as the printed version.

Over time, however, technology became more sophisticated. Technology professionals began to format the information in a manner they deemed appropriate, much to the dismay of library professionals.

As it became clear that electronic information needed to be better organized and easier to use and access, librarians began to play a more active role in how electronic information was presented to the user. Although this is a widely recognized problem in the information profession, librarians and information technologists are still struggling with how best to address the multitude of challenges it presents. Technology professionals maintain that they are best able to maintain technology systems for use in libraries. Librarians contend that they should retain the responsibility for how information is

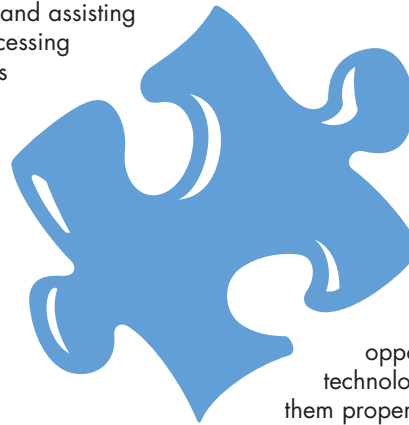
presented to library users and assisting users with the tools for accessing that information. Librarians had, after all, been responsible for this long before the advent of the computer.

Law libraries have not been exempt from these difficult issues. Law librarians and legal information technology professionals are also grappling with the task of identifying their proper roles.

Legal Information Technology Support: Yesterday and Today

Because the once-bright line between information technology and library services has blurred, users are often confused about whom to call for assistance. Many requests for assistance are technical in nature, but others reflect a need for help with using resources. Questions such as how to download documents from the Internet, how to properly navigate databases, or how to address a minor technical problem on WESTLAW or LexisNexis™ are better suited to library professionals, who are typically more familiar with user needs and with the resources available. However, patrons are asking such questions of the technology support staff at law schools, law firms and other law libraries. This is cause for concern for two reasons. First, law librarians are underutilized when they are not involved in this facet of library services. Second, information technology professionals are burdened with questions better suited for library staff.

From a law-librarian perspective, the overuse of technology professionals has become more evident recently. Users are waiting longer for technical assistance. In turn, those frustrated users are either trying to remedy the technical problems themselves or are learning to live without certain computer functions — or more accurately, live with certain computer malfunctions. This problem, combined with the knowledge that many of the questions



fielded by computing services are about using resources, indicates a need for a better way to address user questions.

Libraries need to establish a system to recognize information resource requests, as opposed to information technology requests, and allocate them properly. Law librarians would then be able to provide direct user assistance and alleviate some of the work load from technology professionals, freeing IT staff to perform purely technological functions.

Over the past several years, law-library staff have had to take on a more active role in technology support and upkeep of computer equipment and software. How many librarians have developed expertise in troubleshooting and repairing information technology in their law libraries? I have spoken with law librarians who have installed or re-installed software applications, performed trouble-shooting on operating systems and maintained CD-ROM products. It is not uncommon for law library staff to fix problems with printers, mice, keyboards and monitors. Law librarians have learned how to handle technology problems to ensure that legal information services are not interrupted.

Information Technology Support Tomorrow

Both librarians and technology staff need to realize that they must work together to adequately meet the users' current and future needs. As law librarians become more involved in teaching and outreach activities, the demand for technological support for these activities will increase. Similarly, since law librarians are no longer merely the keepers but also the creators of information, more information technology responsibilities will rest on their shoulders.

(continued on page 10)

Given the speed with which technology has changed and will continue to change, it is not possible to predict the future technology needs of the library with any degree of certainty. Some things are clear, however, in relation to law libraries and the services they provide.

Digital Initiatives Support

Providing access to legal information and library-related materials outside the walls of the library is an essential law library function. Because a proliferation of governmental, private and educational information is available on the Internet, law library users justifiably expect to be able to access certain sources of information without having to enter the library. Much of this information on the Web has been organized and provided by, or with the assistance of, law librarians. Most of this information is specific in nature in that it is pertinent to the mission of the organization that provides it.

Many law libraries, especially academic law libraries, are in an ideal position to prepare legal information for the Web and make it available to their users. Doing so, however, requires a technologically savvy library staff that is able to address the issues that inevitably occur from establishing and maintaining this type of information resource. Although the bulk of the work associated with such an initiative is organization and information processing, significant computer-services support may be needed to tackle the computer-related challenges that are bound to arise. So team work between

the information technology and law library staffs is vital.

Teaching Initiatives Support

Although online resources will never replace the printed book, most electronic resources enhance what is available in print. Currently both formats should be used by legal researchers to maximize the effectiveness of their research. Law librarians have historically assisted users on how to use print materials and have more recently assumed responsibility for instructing users on electronic information resources.

With this increased use of electronic materials, however, law librarians will be expected to provide more technology support because of their better understanding of the users' needs. Law librarians may have to trouble-shoot on an emergency basis in the event a class is in progress. Similarly, faculty may need them to prepare and plan courses that require technological assistance and expertise.

Hardware and Software Applications Support

Law-library software applications will continue to change as well. Use and support for new software will remain a challenge for both librarians and computing-services support staff. Some law libraries are already using the latest cataloging software, circulation software, and software for organizing and providing digital information to make their facilities more efficient and user friendly. But new applications mean law librarians must develop a higher level of technology proficiency. For example, cataloging no

longer means entering information about a certain book. It now means scanning and converting information, setting up Web pages and inserting Internet links into catalog records.

Law librarians will also continue to evaluate and acquire new library applications and hardware for patron use. As the library continues to extend outside its physical walls, more hardware, and thus technological support, will become necessary. For example, locating cameras on computers throughout a law library, or possibly in faculty or attorney offices, will require librarians to become more computer savvy.

It's All About Teamwork

On the most basic level, the law library plays a central role in having patrons use electronic resources. That said, law librarians and technology support staff must work toward the same goal of providing accurate and timely legal information. They must develop a more flexible approach to the traditional information service and information technology relationship. Without such a new relationship, technological advancements will create more problems than they solve. Both parts of the information team need to work together closely and modify their responsibilities to ensure that the evolution is as smooth as possible.

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