



Tips for Succeeding as a New Law Librarian

by Suzanne Thorpe

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 Lori Hedstrom at 651/687-5891 or lori.hedstrom@westgroup.com.



Are you a law librarian just entering the profession? Wouldn't it be great if you could just move along a charted course in your professional life until someone told you that you had the requisite knowledge and skills to be a successful law librarian? Unfortunately, developing a career is not that simple. Yes, there are basic competencies that should be mastered. (The AALL Competencies of Law Librarianship are described at <http://www.aallnet.org/prodev/competencies.asp>.) Unlike many other professionals, however, law librarianship

does not have a standardized apprenticeship or rigorous licensing exam to measure professional competency. It will be up to the individual to find his or her own professional path and to use his or her own criteria for measuring how well he or she is doing. While there is no one right way to success, newer law librarians have found the following approaches to be helpful.

Start Within Your Place of Employment

How well do you know your organization?

To perform well, you need to know as much as possible about your place of employment. You may be fortunate to land in a library that supplies the information discussed below to newly hired librarians as part of a new employee-orientation program. Often, though, you will have to gather it yourself. Observation sometimes works, but asking direct questions yields the best results. Ask more than one person to gain a broad perspective.

Do you know who does what within your library? You will save yourself considerable time and consternation if you familiarize yourself with the overall hierarchy and reporting lines of your entire staff. If your library is part of a larger organization, find out similar information about that organization. Request an organization chart. If one does not exist, start with a staff directory and create your own. Ask your colleagues about their own areas of responsibility and those of other

staff members. Try to ascertain which departments or teams are in place and how they operate in relation to each other.

How familiar are you with the mission and goals of your library? Understanding the “big picture” of whom you are trying to serve and what you are trying to do will help clarify your current professional role. This information should be in the library’s mission statement. Mission statements also contain specific goals that determine a library’s short-term priorities. If you are not given a copy of your library’s mission statement and goals, request one from your supervisor. Find out how you will be involved in meeting specific goals. To gain perspective on the library’s goals and progress in meeting them, examine recent annual reports of the library. If your library does not have a formal mission statement, a clearly articulated set of goals or an annual report, ask your supervisor about general library priorities and those of the specific department in which you will work.

Are you clear about your own goals?

You may not have been told what you are expected to contribute or accomplish in your job. In order to perform as expected, you should ferret this information out as soon as possible. Ask your supervisor. Find out if you have target deadlines for completing your projects. It is very helpful to post your goals and deadlines in a prominent place on your desk so that you will be continually reminded of them. Learn the criteria upon which you will be evaluated, when you will be evaluated and by whom. Keep these criteria in mind as you perform your duties. This will help you assess yourself, clearly articulate and evaluate your accomplishments, and explain any unmet goals to your reviewer.

Are you actively pursuing on-the-job training? No matter how knowledgeable you are about law librarianship, when you start your job, you will still have a lot to learn. If you are lucky, your library will provide a structured training program that will help you identify gaps in your knowledge and gain the proficiency you need to perform your duties. Often, however, you have to take the initiative yourself and design your own training program. Find an individual at your library who has the proficiency you seek and carefully observe that person in action. Ask for “how do I do X” explanations and job efficiency tips. Practice the skills you observed and request feedback from your colleague. Do not be shy! Constantly ask other colleagues for constructive criticism on

your performance. They may be hesitant to share suggestions unless you ask.

Now Move Beyond Your Library

Are you networking? Even if you have excellent in-house support to launch your career, you will benefit from interaction with librarians and other professionals you see less frequently. One of the easiest ways to meet such colleagues is to participate in professional organizations. To identify organizations that you may be interested in, consult the list compiled by San Jose State University School of Library and Information Science at <http://slisweb.sjsu.edu/resources/orgs.htm>. Are you unsure which organizations you should join? Ask colleagues for advice. If you cannot participate in national organizations, try to join a local or regional chapter. AALL chapters are listed at <http://aallhq.org/public/chapters.asp>.

Do you participate in conferences and workshops? Whether or not you join professional organizations, you can generally attend the programs they offer. Library conferences and programs can be tracked through the AALL Continuing Education Calendar at <http://www.aallnet.org/prodev/calendar.asp> and the *American Libraries'* online datebook of events at <http://www.ala.org/online/datebook/datebook.html>.

Inquire whether your employer will provide financial support and time to attend relevant workshops and educational programs. Explain which skills you plan to hone and why a financial investment in your training would benefit the library. Report back to your supervisor on what you learned and demonstrate how you are applying your new skills and knowledge directly to your position. Do not despair if you are unable to get away! You may be able to participate locally in satellite videoconferences or self-paced online courses. Some of these distance-education opportunities are at <http://www.aallnet.org/prodev/teleconference.asp>.

Are you profiting from programs designed specifically for new law librarians? Library organizations frequently offer special programs tailored to help new members. AALL is an excellent example. Would you like to find an experienced law librarian to be your mentor? Try the AALL Mentor Project. Want to brainstorm or compare your

experiences with other newer law librarians? Try AALL's listserv called the List of Newer Law Librarians. Would an in-depth introduction to law librarianship and professional activities be helpful? Attend the Conference of Newer Law Librarians, held before the AALL Annual Meeting every year. All these programs are described at <http://www.aallnet.org/committee/mentoring>. Don't forget to tap into the programs offered by AALL sections — e.g., Private Law Libraries Special Interest Section Mentoring Committee at <http://www.aallnet.org/sis/pllis/commgrp/mentorcomm.html> and the Academic Law Libraries SIS Convocation for Newer Academic Law Librarians/Mentoring Committee at <http://www.aallnet.org/sis/allsis/directory.html#CONALL>.

Have you considered an internship or job exchange? Sometimes no organizations or programs match your needs. Spending time in another library where you can learn from others on the job

AALL Professional Development Program Competencies of Law Librarianship

- 1 Core Competencies
- Specialized Competencies
- 2 Library Management
- 3 Reference, Research and Client Services
- 4 Information Technology
- 5 Collection Care and Management
- 6 Teaching

This article addresses the AALL Core Competencies. The complete AALL statement of Competencies of Law Librarianship is online at <http://www.aallnet.org/prodev/competencies.asp>.

may be the best idea for you. Information on internships and exchanges is available from professional organizations — e.g., AALL Foreign, Comparative and International Special Interest Section Clearinghouse for Internships and International Personnel Exchanges, <http://www.lawsch.uga.edu/fcil/clearintro.html>. You may also want to consider contacting Exchanging Jobs, <http://www.exchangingjobs.org/resources.html>, an organization that specializes in helping librarians find job exchanges. Often the

best way to find such an opportunity is through personal networking or posting a message describing the type of training you seek on a law librarian discussion list. Inquire whether your employer will provide financial support and time to attend relevant workshops and educational programs.

Do you keep up with relevant professional literature and online discussions? It is essential that you monitor current professional literature to maintain your knowledge and skills. No one prescribed reading list fits everyone, but ask your colleagues what they regularly read; they may be willing to share their own subscriptions with you. Identify any serials that are critical for you to monitor and have your library subscribe to them. If you are unable to subscribe to these publications, try tracking them electronically through periodical indexes or contents services. A great place to gain free access to online library literature is BUBL Journals: Library and Information Science at <http://bubl.ac.uk/journals/bycat.htm>. This service provides abstracting, indexing and links to full-text journals and newsletters. Online discussion lists are also very helpful for tracking new developments and for consulting with colleagues. You can identify the lists most relevant to law librarians through Washburn University's Web site, WASHLAW, at <http://www.washlaw.edu/listservs.html>.

Don't just track developments in only librarianship and law. To perform well on the job, it is critical to be informed about current events and issues that concern your patrons. In a recent exchange on the LONELL listserv, several librarians identified their most important tools for keeping up with current events. Not surprisingly, the titles mentioned included *The Economist*, *Business Week* and *Wired*.

Share Your Ideas and Knowledge with Others

Do you have ideas for conference programs? One of the best ways to develop your career is to participate as a planner or presenter at a conference. Conference organizers welcome the fresh perspectives of newer professionals. Do not be shy about stepping forward with your program proposals even though it might take several tries for them to be accepted.

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A quick guide to the program-planning process for the AALL Annual Meeting is available at http://www.aallnet.org/events/am_03/03_proposer_glance.asp. If you do become involved in programming, make certain that you first have the approval of your supervisor because it can require a considerable commitment of time, both on and off the job. The extra time spent in planning or presenting a program is well-rewarded, however. You will expand your professional contacts and raise your stature among colleagues at your institution. The heightened visibility you receive from a program often leads to opportunities for publication or additional presentations.

Do you have publication ideas? If public speaking or conference organizing is not for you, then try to write for publication. Writing is challenging and takes considerable time, but you will make a lasting contribution that will earn you recognition by your colleagues. Are you interested in writing but don't know how or where to begin? Consult the July 2002 issue of *AALL Spectrum* at http://www.aallnet.org/products/pub_sp0207.pdf for insight into the writing process.

Know You Are Succeeding

It would be nice to know when you finally have arrived as a fully developed law librarian, wouldn't it? After a few years in the profession, you will be more confident of yourself. Other law librarians will take notice and you will begin to advance along the promotion ladder. These will be the most obvious reflections of your success. However, you will never really finish your career development. Look around you. You will see that even your most "seasoned" colleagues continue to engage in these very practices that help newer law librarians.

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