



Manhattan BigLaw Libraries with a Smaller Footprint

*The analyses and processes of physically
downsizing the law library/information center*

By Dodi Levine

In the New York City BigLaw community, the question is not *if* a library/information center will be physically downsized, but rather *when*. This article examines the processes and analyses necessary when going through a library downsizing, including suggestions from Manhattan library directors.

Until the current economic crisis, the discussion on physical downsizing in articles and blogs centered on the shift from print to electronic resources and how less physical space would be needed. For example, a March 2008 article in the *Birmingham Business Journal* titled “Firms downsize their law libraries with proliferation of electronic research,” spoke to the downsizing trend as being based on an “increasing amount of information available on the Internet.” An information shift from print-based to electronic resources meant less shelf space would be necessary.

Now, cut to April 2009 in New York City: two Midtown law firms closed, almost all BigLaw firms have experienced layoffs, Midtown commercial real estate goes for 54 dollars a square foot (down from 73 dollars), and the new mantra is *save money*. As *The Wall Street Journal* reported on April 3, 2009, “Manhattan is getting clobbered.” Companies struggling to cut costs in a raging recession have dumped a near-record 25 million square feet of office space in the first quarter. Law libraries increasingly have to justify their square footage.

As library managers all over New York City are being told by their management to cut hundreds of thousands of dollars from their print budgets and to avoid renewing or buying anything new, the librarians interviewed here from New York BigLaw firms have also faced the downsizing of their libraries’ physical space. At times, this has been a collaborative effort with a team of firm management and other library staff; at others, it has been a non-library management decision with no library input. The former library space in two of the libraries is now offices, while the third will become part of the employee dining room.

A Library’s Real Value

Jeff Cohan, library director in the 30 Rockefeller Center offices of Fitzpatrick, Cella, Harper and Scinto, has been involved in several library downsizings. The most recent one involved negotiating with a partner and offering to cut the library space in half so Cohan could get what he wanted, which was a hefty increase in his electronic resources budget.

Based on this experience, Cohan urges library directors to be extremely proactive about downsizing. “The second you find there is a potential reduction, be forthcoming. Be proactive if you have to reduce the library space,” says Cohan. “Think of ways you can save money. I gave up one half of the space and picked up a huge amount for my electronic resources. View it as an opportunity—not a take-away from the library.”

Cohan also sees this as a great

opportunity for “continuing education” for attorneys and staff. “When you are downsizing, emphasize the service aspect: ‘We thought long and hard about improving library services and we’re spending the money on [more electronic resources] instead of books.’” He suggests that the library use this time to reach out and present this as a way to redistribute resources in the firm. “Just because it’s

“The primary value of the library is the librarian.”

physically smaller does not mean the library is going to be diminished in any way. The primary value of the library is the librarian.”

A Sense of Place

Paulette Toth, Kirkland and Ellis’ New York information services manager, feels that the library should have a “sense of place, rather than being stacks of shelves with librarians at the ends...which is what we have now.” She has seen Kirkland’s New York library space slashed in several physical downsizings, but has been promised a new library in 2011.

“We had a reading room, which was taken away. Now there is no place to sit and browse through books in the ‘library,’ which is really just some shelves,” says Toth. “We had to give up shelving throughout the office for the working collection. All the books you see looking so nice and uniform around the office are design elements only. They are not really part of the library.”

Toth was not involved in the downsizing decision. “The office manager needed the space,” says Toth. “The space is now offices.”

In addition to the physical downsizing, management mandated that Toth slash the library budget. Until this year, she added, the resources decision was based, as discussed above, on electronic availability with an eye to reducing the budget. “Since January, we have been mandated to buy nothing new and to reduce expenditures as much as possible. So we are examining every title for possible cancellation.” While Toth has hopes for a new library in 2011, she adds, “By the time 2011 rolls around there may be nothing left of the collection besides my staff and some periodicals.”

From the Top Down

David Merkin, coordinator of library services at Shearman and Sterling’s New York office, has also seen his library lose almost a third of its physical space. In some law firms where library staff reports to an administrative person or finance group, there is no lawyer input into a decision regarding whether the

library should be downsized. “It’s just space to these groups, not knowledge,” laments Merkin.

Describing the downsizing process, Merkin says, “The library staff was told by firm management maybe four years ago to make the library more electronic, to lose the books in preparation for a loss of space. Of course we started with the regional reporters, duplicate copies,

transfer binders, and law reviews. The last thing we physically got rid of was our microfilm collection. It was a slow process.” Merkin adds that attorneys are shocked when they see how much periodicals, magazines, newspapers, and newsletters cost.

“We consulted with attorneys on what periodicals to drop by showing what they circulated and the price of the item being circulated. Once five partners said they didn’t want it anymore, we cancelled the periodical. We cancelled non-legal periodicals such as *Forbes*, *Business Week*, and *Fortune* as well.” He adds, “Management told us how many linear feet to cut without consulting with attorneys—they left that for us to do. After weeding down the collection, we moved a lot to other floors.”

Merkin notes the result of the downsizing is not necessarily a greater cost savings. “We’re spending a lot more now to borrow stuff from libraries, for messengers, for physical copies that attorneys want to have in their hands. This proves management should have given us time to consult with attorneys before just telling us to cut so much space.”

As of eight months ago, there are about 3,000 linear feet of empty shelves in the Shearman and Sterling New York library. According to Merkin, the economy prevented management from building offices or expanding the cafeteria, so it has become firm storage space.

Service, Not Just Space

On the other hand, Alirio Gomez, Milbank and Tweed’s library director, declared he was happy to downsize from 10,000 to less than 7,000 square feet in a renovation last year. While not currently looking to downsize physically any further, he notes, “the library is not a place, it’s a service.”

Steven Lastres, director of library and knowledge management at Debevoise and Plimpton LLP, agrees with Gomez that “the space is not the issue” and feels that acting proactively when facing downsizing gave him the opportunity to manage the process.

(continued on page 28)

“When I was first told to review the budget for possible cost-cutting, I set a target of 20 percent,” says Lastres. “I worked closely with my knowledge management, technical services, and research managers to painstakingly review our print and electronic collection title by title. This gave us the opportunity to make recommendations to each of our practice group partners.”

According to Lastres, the next step was to meet with each practice group in person and review their respective collections. “We were armed with circulation and usage metrics that helped support our recommendations concerning which resources were marginally used and which resources were valuable to keep. As a result of this exercise, we were able to achieve a 25 percent cut in our overall library budget and were able to manage the process instead of being told what to do.”

Three years ago, the library was downsized by one third to integrate the knowledge management group into the library space while staying within the physical footprint of the original space. As a result, the integrated library/knowledge management department has provided lawyers with a single focus for research and knowledge management practice support.

Lastres observes, “In this economic climate, law firms are looking at every line item expense. They are making tough decisions about expenses they never would have considered previously. As our libraries continue to become more virtual, it makes good business sense to convert that space for other firm uses. The days when the library was a showcase space or the place where lawyers would gather are gone. There are other places that can serve that need within the firm.

“Library directors who dig in their heels about giving back space will eventually lose it,” Lastres says. “Directors should ask themselves, ‘How can I help the firm achieve its goals of minimizing expenses while still valuing our human capital?’ By proactively giving back space, you’re showing you understand the realities of the economic climate. In addition, you are potentially saving positions from being eliminated. In these economic times, library directors must proactively manage their department and their library space.” ■

***Dodi Levine** (dllevine@jonesday.com)
is reference librarian at Jones Day in New York City.*