

*San Francisco Daily Journal, 9/17/98, p. 18.
Posted with permission of the Daily Journal.
This file cannot be downloaded from this page.*

What a Law Librarian Can Do for You

by Michael Saint-Onge
Coudert Brothers

Mention the word "law librarian" to lawyers and many will harken back to the image of librarians as "keeper of the books," individuals who spend their professional lives cataloguing and classifying legal materials maintained in row after row of stacks in large academic law libraries. But those attorneys have another definition coming -- today's law librarian, especially one working in the private firm setting, is a hybrid of researcher, organizer, networker and cost-saver, making him or her the secret weapon in the current cut-throat legal marketplace.

Yet the uninitiated might have many questions about hiring a professional law librarian: How do I know the time is right for my firm? How do I find the right person for the job? And once I find him or her, how do I utilize his or her skills most effectively?

When deciding whether or not a professional librarian might be right for your firm, don't evaluate based solely on the firm's size, but focus on the value that could be added by someone with professional research and management skills. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

Research:

Who stays on top of the changes in WESTLAW and LEXIS?
Who coordinates training sessions for online services?
Who knows how to harness the power of the Internet for effective and efficient research?
Who is the firm's expert in non-legal or business research sources?
Who handles research necessary to support marketing efforts and new business presentations?

Organization:

Who is responsible for arranging your library in a logical order so precious time and energy isn't lost searching for materials? Is it working?
Who ensures that the material on your shelves is current? Court rules, forms and other reference materials are heavily relied upon and yet may be dangerously outdated.
Who decides in what format the information should be kept? Hard copy? CD-Rom? Online?

Networking:

How is critical research material obtained when it is not in the firm's collection? Is valuable time lost by sending attorneys to local law libraries rather than arranging for interlibrary loan?
What means do you have to access the collective brain-power of other professionals?

Cost-saving:

Who negotiates flat-fee agreements with online vendors?

Who is checking to see if the firm already owns needed material, thereby avoiding duplication?

Who determines the most cost-efficient format for the information?

If the answers to these questions are "no one", or you aren't sure, the time might be right for you to explore what a librarian can do for your firm.

Since hiring a law librarian can be an unfamiliar experience for many firms, the American Association of Law Libraries has developed a series of Resource Guides for law firm managers and administrators. The eight-to-twelve-page guides, developed especially for decision-makers by practicing law librarians, summarize the important considerations, costs, and benefits of information professionals. The first Guide in the series, "How to Hire a Law Librarian," is full of practical information such as how to assess your firm's needs, how to determine the qualifications and skills best suited for the position, how to identify and advertise for candidates, how to create a suitable compensation package to attract the best candidates, and what questions to ask during the interview.

The Resource Guide series is available by subscription (\$80 non-members for 8 issues) and by individual copy (\$15 each, or 2 for \$25 for non-members). For more information on purchasing the Guides, contact the American Association of Law Libraries at 312/939-4764.

Michael Saint-Onge, M.S.L.S.
Librarian, Northern California Offices
Coudert Brothers

Copyright 1998 by Daily Journal. Reprinted with permission.