

*San Francisco Daily Journal, 4/15/99, p. 18.
Posted with permission of the Daily Journal.
This file cannot be downloaded from this page.*

Collection Rebalancing: The Art of Matching Resource Formats to the Needs of the Firm

by Michael Saint-Onge,
Law Librarian Liason, LEXIS-NEXIS

*"Can't we eliminate the library space?
After all, everything is on the Internet now, isn't it?"*

Every librarian I know has heard this statement at least once in the last year. The hype surrounding the Internet has all but convinced managing partners and executive directors that the traditional library is a relic, a thing of the past. The truth, for better or worse, is that things ARE changing in the library. Librarians and their users are accessing resources in a variety of formats - and there has been a significant reduction in reliance on hard copy materials. Does it spell an end to the library as we know it? Well, yes and no. The reality is somewhat more complicated than that.

Information is a hot commodity these days. True, information is power, but it is a question of how to best access and utilize that power that is presenting some serious challenges to law firms these days. In the center of the struggle is the choice of formats. Choosing the proper format for one's information is vital, though there are no perfect choices. Each format comes with its own set of advantages and disadvantages.

The Book

The book, the traditional "tool" of the librarian, has fallen out of favor recently. However, there are still certain advantages to the book. It is easy to use. No one needs a training class on how to use a book. Sets of books can be easily shared among several users, which may not be the case with CD-ROM sources. Books never give the user error messages, and there is no fear of the network going down while one is reading. There are some disadvantages to the book, though. Books consume a tremendous amount of space. They are also labor intensive - they need pocket parts and filing updates, and they need to be shelved or shifted on a regular basis.

CD-ROMS

CD-ROMS were once considered the answer to the space problem of books, and while CDs had some advantages such as full-text searching and the ability to deliver information to the desktop, they often created more problems than they solved. There is no standard search engine, so the learning curve is steep. They are difficult to network, despite what some vendors will have you believe, and reading treatises online is often very difficult, especially with footnotes.

Online (Fee-Based) Services

The term "online resources" typically refers to the fee-based commercial databases such as LEXIS-NEXIS and WESTLAW. These services also have some definite advantages. They are easily accessible from remote locations. They contain a tremendous amount of content (more than you could possibly maintain in hardcopy or CD-ROM) and they are very fast. They also have those wonderful 800 numbers for users when they get stuck. The major downside to these services is cost - which is also mitigated by the firms' ability to negotiate a flat-fee contract. The learning curve for using online services can also be a formidable obstacle, though.

The Internet

The Internet has forever changed legal research, with a vast amount of information now available to the masses at relatively low costs. It is also fairly easy to use and easily accessible from any location. To ignore the drawbacks to the Internet, though, is to do so at your own peril. The Internet has yet to develop a search engine that hones in on exactly what one needs. There is also no stability - what is there today just might not be there tomorrow. The most serious consideration, though, is the reliability of the information. Anyone with a computer can suddenly become a "publisher," and learning to evaluate web resources with a critical eye is of the utmost importance.

So What Format is Best?

The logical question that follows, then, is which format is best? The answer is, as you suspected, "It depends." It depends upon how the users will use the information. It depends upon the comfort level of the user with the latest technology. It depends upon the support available in order to ensure that these resources are easily accessible. What might be the right format choice for one firm would be a ghastly mistake for another. The bottom line is that the "right" format choice is most often going to include a blending of these four types. That is, that some of the information will lend itself more readily to books, other types to CD-ROM, still other types to online services and the Internet. These choices are complicated and should involve a professional librarian who understands the information needs of the firm and the firm's culture. It is also not the type of thing that one can do once and then forget about. It is constantly evolving as the firm's needs change.

In order to assist librarians and law firm decision-makers, the American Association of Law Libraries has prepared a Resource Guide that includes a checklist of areas you should consider before undergoing a change in format. It also includes some real world examples from firms that have made some changes, and it allows you to learn from their mistakes and experience.

To order "AALL Resource Guide #4: Collection Rebalancing," contact AALL at 312/939-4764. The cost is \$11.25 for AALL members, and \$12.50 for non-AALL members.

Collection rebalancing is inevitable as formats change. Making sound decisions for the needs of your firm can put the power back into the information.

Michael Saint-Onge is a Law Librarian Liaison with LEXIS-NEXIS based in San Francisco. He can be reached at michael.saint-onge@lexis-nexis.com.

Copyright 1999 by Daily Journal. Reprinted with permission.