

*San Francisco Daily Journal, 11/16/00, p. 18.
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The Solo Law Librarian

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WHAT IS A SOLO?

You have no library colleagues to talk to before making important decisions; no mentor to guide you through unfamiliar topics. There's never enough time to get the looseleaves updated, books shelved, reference questions answered, periodicals routed, books ordered and the budget prepared. If this sounds like your job, you're probably a solo librarian.

The Special Libraries Association has defined a solo librarian as "an isolated librarian who has no professional person within the immediate organization." The solo may have clerical help, but she is the only librarian on the staff. Solos have been estimated as comprising 15% to 34% of the membership of various law library associations. Although over half of all law librarians who are solos work in private law firms, you'll find one-person libraries in all types of institutions, including corporate, government and court libraries (but not academia).

PROBLEMS

Some of the problems solos have are familiar to all librarians, but they tend to be exacerbated in one-person libraries:

1. **Professional isolation** can be discouraging. There's no one to turn to at work to discuss issues on a peer level or to ask for help. You report to a non-librarian who is going to need educating on library issues. You're pretty much on your own when it comes to professional development and keeping up-to-date on new issues in librarianship and the law.

2. **Lack of support** means you may be spending a large portion of your day shelving books, filing updates, opening mail and performing other clerical tasks.

3. **Lack of time:** When you are the only person in the library and are responsible for ordering, cataloging, budgeting, interlibrary loans, reference, administrative work, and everything else that needs to be done, there is never, ever, enough time.

SOME SUGGESTIONS

1. **Network with other law librarians:** You may be the only professional at your job, but that doesn't mean you can't have contact with and the support of other law librarians. When you join professional organizations like NOCALL (Northern California Association of Law Libraries) and AALL (American Association of Law Libraries), you'll be putting yourself in touch with your peers, whether you actively attend conferences or just scan their publications or their web sites at your desk. NOCALL's web site at <http://www.nocall.org> includes extensive links to subject web pages.

Listservs are an excellent source for finding answers to difficult-to-locate reference questions, keeping up with current topics or finding out how other librarians are dealing with issues you soon may be facing yourself.

There are general law library listservs, like law-lib or nocall-list, or more specialized ones, like Private Law Libraries or State Court & County Libraries or the Special Library Association's SOLOs listserv. Find a few of interest to you; subscribe or just view their archives from time to time. (See Lynette Louis-Jacques's Law Lists at <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/~llou/lawlists/info.html>.)

2. **Keep Updated.** As a solo, you are responsible for your own continuing education, not always an easy feat. Find some sources you like, such as Law Library Resource Xchange <<http://llrx.com>> or Legal Information ALERT newsletter and check them regularly for the latest news. On <<http://law.com>> law librarians have their own column (under Legal Professionals). Solo expert Judith Seiss publishes One Person Library, a newsletter that discusses management issues facing solos.

You can attend an AALL-sponsored workshop on Solo Librarianship or take one of their on-line tutorials, such as the one on copyright.

3. **Get Help.** You may be the only professional in the library, but you deserve help, be it a full-time assistant or a filer who comes in a half day a week. The firm may not care that you're working yourself silly trying to get all the work done. If, however, you point out that it is to the firm's advantage to pay a clerk's salary rather than yours to do the filing or shelving or routing, you may just get more help. Not only will the firm be saving money, but you can then spend your time at reference or cataloging duties.

4. **Prepare Users to Do the Work Themselves.** It might ruin your image as the Library Goddess, but tell them your sources for some Frequently Asked Questions. On your intranet or on a print handout, explain where they can locate docket sheets or patents and how to use the on-line catalog. Train the paralegals to use PACER. The intranet or a handout is also a good place for a "Get to Know the Library" memo. A tour is always helpful. Keep them aware of the new books you've purchased or the latest terrific search engine or web site. And don't worry – they'll still need you. They have even less time than you do to keep up with new information and besides, that's your job.

5. **Plan/Prioritize: Then Go With the Flow.** You can't get everything done, so do what you have to and what you can. Don't panic when the unexpected happens, as it will.

6. **Enjoy Being a Solo!** This can be a great job for an independent, enterprising person. You're on your own, working your own schedule, being your own boss. Your day is full of variety, not filled with repetitive chores and dull staff meetings. ... Whoops. Got to run. Just got a rush request.