

*San Francisco Daily Journal, 1/18/01, p. 18.
Posted with permission of the Daily Journal.
This file cannot be downloaded from this page.*

From Classroom to Real World: A New Law Librarian

Anne Dana, Fenwick & West, LLP

Eight months ago I realized a long-term personal goal, changed careers and took a job as a reference librarian in a large law firm. This is my first post as a librarian and my first job in a law firm. The past eight months have been a voyage of discovery: testing how much I already know; sizing up the ocean of unknown information and knowledge before me; finding out whether library school did a good job of mapping the voyage. Along the way, it has been an interesting experience comparing my expectations to the reality of life behind the reference desk.

I wanted to be a librarian because I love libraries and books and I like finding information and helping others find it. Law librarianship and reference work seemed like a good fit for me. I have a B.A. and a paralegal certificate from a program that included two legal research classes. I worked as a paralegal for 14 years and over those years I kept up my research skills. Thus, I knew my way around a law library, legal books, online legal databases, and the Internet and had done plenty of legal research by the time I began the MLIS program. My library school offered a class in law librarianship, which I completed, but the class focused on basic legal resources and I did not learn anything new. However, at least three other classes in the MLIS curriculum provided practical information I use everyday: reference; online searching, and web site design.

My library school reference professor began each class with a sometimes-painful exercise in which he would pretend to be a library patron and each class member in turn would try to assist him with a different reference question. Although geared toward public library reference work, these exercises provided me with an opportunity to see the pitfalls of making assumptions and to learn to conduct a reference interview, even with difficult patrons. The large law firm I now work in covers a lot of different practice areas (e.g., tax, corporate, employment, litigation, intellectual property) and the library often has to deal with requests coming third-hand from people under pressure to find something very quickly. It turns out those practice reference interviews in the classroom were indeed valuable. Unlike the class however, I no longer have a week to complete my reference assignments.

"Online Searching" was another very useful class in my library school curriculum. We learned about and ran practice searches in some of the same proprietary databases I use in my job today such as Lexis and Dialog. The professor emphasized cost-effective searching which is paramount to our clients. The class also spent a lot of time looking at Internet searching, analyzing and comparing various search engines in addition to running searches in them. Coming out of this class I not only had experience with some of the databases I use, I have a framework for developing effective search strategies in databases I have not yet seen. When I look over the list of passwords to the more than thirty proprietary databases I now use at the reference desk, I can really appreciate that classroom experience.

"Web Site Design" was another library school class that has turned out to be very relevant to my day-to-day job. Our law firm is growing rapidly so the library is always looking for ways to do more with the same amount of library staff. The library has set up pages on the

firm's Intranet providing resources for many of the recurring ready-reference questions as well as pathfinders and guides to legal research tools. I am responsible for populating those pages. My coursework gave me experience using web site building software, understanding web site design issues, and assessing external web sites for possible linking by our site.

These were not the only relevant classes in library school. I also took classes on management, collection development, etc. and at some point in my future career may have an opportunity to discover whether they were "on-point" or not. Of course there are many aspects of law librarianship that library school does not prepare one for and a law firm is very different than the in-house corporate legal departments in which I spent my paralegal career. Time sheets and summer associates are as new to me as inter-library loans. I have experienced a few moments of real terror staffing the reference desk by myself; suddenly realizing I'm the one who is supposed to have the expertise when an eager associate asks for help on a legal topic I have never encountered before or a partner asks for "that red book about patents that usually sits on one of those shelves over there." The librarians and library staff I work with have been generous with their knowledge and patient with my inexperience. I am lucky to have very experienced librarians and staff backing me up and pointing the way. I've also learned to search the NOCALL web site (www.nocall.org), the Law Librarian's Resource Exchange Guide (www.llrx.com/guide) and Svengalis' The Legal Information Buyer's Guide and Reference Manual for quick help.

After eight months on the job, a lot of the day-to-day reference and research requests I receive are becoming familiar. As I settle in, I'm learning that the unusual questions that come to the reference desk are not to be feared; they are the interesting ones. So far, it appears that I've chosen a career in which it is possible to learn something new every day and that can be both a joy and a challenge.

Copyright 2001 by Daily Journal. Reprinted with permission.