

NOCALL UPDATE

How Law Librarians Add Value to Private Firms and Public Agencies – An Update from the American Association of Law Libraries

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The AALL released the “Statement of Value Added by Law Librarians” in March 2003 (see www.aallnet.org/committee/pr_statement.asp). The Statement distills the function of a law librarian into four key roles: 1) information evaluators, 2) information managers, 3) teachers and trainers, and 4) expert researchers. Whether you are considering adding a librarian to your staff, are reevaluating your current library service, or are a librarian who wants to expand your level of service, these four identified roles and competencies can act as a guide. My experience is as a law firm librarian, so I will discuss these roles from that perspective, although these core values are applicable to law librarians in any professional capacity.

Role #1: Information Evaluator. As an information evaluator, I am in an ongoing process of reviewing information resources and assessing their utility. Even though your organization’s goal may not be to lead the pack in utilization of the latest legal research technology, it is still critical to ensure that attorneys are getting the best of the new products, and that costs are effectively managed for the services that your organization already relies upon. Librarians are professionally trained to apply reliable methods for discovering and evaluating information resources.

Role #2: Information Manager. I manage information for my firm by organizing library materials in a logical manner. To this end, I am weeding the collection of un- and underutilized resources, so that the library is more focused and thus easier to search and browse. With the support of management, I purchased the SIMA Camelot Integrated Library System (www.simainc.com) to organize our collection, track costs, handle routing and, most importantly to the attorneys, create a searchable electronic catalog. When complete, the catalog will contain a record for all the information resources of the firm that the library is responsible for, including books, online subscriptions, legislative histories and MCLE materials. It will be available on everyone’s desktop at the Firm’s locations in San Francisco and Orange County.

Role #3: Teacher and Trainer. Librarians are the only employees of a law firm who, as part of their

professional responsibilities, teach and train both staff and attorneys in the use of legal information resources. Examples in my own experience include teaching electronic search skills to a veteran attorney, instructing secretaries in the use of CEB forms disks, informing paralegals of the free Westlaw training sessions available to them, and giving a lecture to 25 of my firm’s attorneys demonstrating credible legal information and news resources available in-house and on the internet, for which they received 1 MCLE credit hour.

Role #4: Expert Researcher. As expert researchers, librarians can add value and reduce costs less by researching and addressing points of law – which is the purview of the attorney – but by clarifying points of fact. Utilizing our knowledge of reference resources, of the kind not commonly known or used by attorneys per se, your law librarian can be your firm’s super sleuth and fact-checker. Research requests that I and my colleagues have fielded include:

- finding the amount of square footage of lakes in Michigan;
- researching the background of an expert witness;
- obtaining the entirety of a report cited in a New York Times article; and
- determining where to serve process to a list of 10 companies doing business in California, but headquartered out of state.

A major cost and time saving function that I perform for our attorneys to assist them in their legal research is the facilitation of interlibrary loans. I connect my law firm with the collections of other local firms by networking with their librarians for this purpose. In addition, I also manage our membership to the San Francisco County Law Library and special loan services, such as Boalt Express, in order to obtain research materials as quickly and inexpensively as possible.

The day-to-day activities of a law librarian will continue to change as technology advances and the needs of the legal community and the clients it serves also change, however, the necessity for a law librarian - to evaluate, manage, teach and research – will remain a constant.