

Northern California Association of Law Librarians

GATEWAYS TO ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES:

Considerations for Building Digital Libraries in Law Firms and Legal Organizations

Introduction

The information landscape in law firms has seen dramatic changes over the past several years: print collections are being supplemented with licensed content, access to and quality of web-based content is on the rise, technology and services for scanning case files and managing case data are scalable and affordable to virtually any type or size organization.

Librarians can help their organizations confront this rapidly changing landscape by taking steps to simplify access all manner of library and institutional holdings—print, multimedia, and digital—through centralization.

This brief article examines:

- Reasons for centralizing the management of a firm's information resources and what resources might benefit from such management
- Some benefits of and challenges in providing centralized access to information resources
- Components of useful digital libraries
- Why law libraries should be at the forefront of developing and managing these gateways within their organizations

This article does not address the technological aspects of centralizing an organization's resources. There are a great many out-of-the-box and customizable applications that can be discussed in this context, not to mention the complex issues involved in data and systems integrations. This article also does not venture into the topic of digital imaging. Both are subjects for future articles.

Why is it important to manage your firm's information resources?

In organizations with more than one department and multiple workgroups (i.e., virtually all law firms with more than one practitioner), information is being created, acquired, and stored in growing numbers of formats and locations and across work-

groups, departments, and offices. Even in a very small firm, there can be too many places to look for information.

Any efforts to provide centralized, streamlined access to good resources—which are created, revised, and relocated with great frequency—can:

- Boost legal staff research efficiency by simplifying search and retrieval of resources, regardless of format, author, or location
- Reduce information overload by providing access to the latest and most comprehensive information

Resources that can benefit from centralized access

Many types of information resources, both print and digital, can benefit (e.g., be subject to increased visibility and usage) from centralized access. These include resources owned or developed by the firm, resources licensed by the firm, and other free or pay-per-use resources accessible to the firm.

Information owned or developed by a firm includes:

- **Print:**
 - Materials acquired and owned by the firm or organization (e.g., books, journals, audiovisual materials, reports and other publications) and the records that represent those materials (e.g., library catalog entries)
 - Materials developed by the firm (e.g., research documents and guides written by staff, teaching and training materials, legal work product)
- **Digital:**
 - Scanned versions of print materials acquired by the firm for legal representation purposes (e.g., trial and litigation files; transcripts, depositions, other documents filed with the courts; historical records)
 - Materials created by members of the firm's staff. These include:
 - Work product
 - Departmental web sites
 - Teaching/training materials

(presentations, manuals, sample pleadings, audio/video files)

- Raw data and other original sources (interview notes, survey data, statistics)
- Case-specific and firm-wide databases (e.g., conflicts, clients, vendors)
 - Legal research notes
- Pre-publication research papers, conference materials, book chapters, law review articles

Licensed materials, or information resources to which staff have access through subscription but are not owned by the firm, that benefit from centralized access include:

- Electronic books and journals
- Legal research resources like Westlaw, LexisNexis, and HeinOnline
- Topical research databases like PubMed, NewsBank, Medline, RAND California

In addition, it is beneficial to include free and pay-per-use resources in the centralized organization. Since the earliest days of web browsing, librarians have been bookmarking useful web sites for their patrons. Why not continue to do so within the context of organizational resources? While it is the first instinct of many of today's researchers to try their luck with a favorite search engine, the savviest users still recognize the great value of a specialized collection of web resources developed by subject experts and information professionals.

Type of resources that benefit from centralized access

- Materials owned or developed by the firm
- Licensed content
- Free and pay-per-use web resources

Digital libraries as information gateways

So, what is a digital library? One way to define it is a system (practices, procedures, technology) that centralizes access—or provides a gateway—to an organization's print and digital resources, regardless of location or format. Elements of a successful digital library system, regardless of the level

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and sophistication of technology applied, include:

- Simple procedures for submitting and adding content
- Ability to account for (index, catalog) all manner of resources
- Allowances for decentralized collection development and management (i.e., keeping content management in the hands of topical experts)
- Ability to accommodate the numerous records and metadata (representing or associated with print and digital materials) from existing systems and ensure they are retrievable through a centralized system

There are many clear benefits to establishing an information gateway:

- For the information professional:
 - Centralized administration
 - Quality control, particularly in cataloging and indexing
 - Standardized procedures and workflow
- And for the legal staff:
 - Fewer points of access to information from many collections/systems
 - Robust (metadata, full text) searching
 - Preservation of work product
 - Increased communication about organizational knowledge, leading to more opportunities for collaboration and helping to avoid reinvention of the wheel

Sample digital libraries

- Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov/>)
- California Digital Library (<http://www.cdlib.org/>)
- UCLA Law Library Digital Collection (<http://www.law.ucla.edu/home/index.asp?page=1287>)

Building blocks for a useful digital library

If you are embarking on a digital library initiative, it is useful to ask a number of questions to determine whether you have the core elements, or building blocks, for building a useful system. Are there existing collections that would benefit from centralized organization? To what extent are those

collections already organized, indexed, and described? What projects demonstrate the clearest value to staff and are most likely to get sponsorship and support from managing partners?

The National Information Standards Organization (NISO) Framework of Guidance for Building Good Digital Collections (2nd ed. 2004) [<http://www.niso.org/framework/framework2.html>] identifies four major components for creating good digital collections: collections, objects, metadata, and projects. An information professional embarking on a full-scale digitization project will find this document very useful for defining, planning, and building support for such a project.

While the NISO Framework specifically applies to developing collections of digitized materials, we can consider similar necessary components for the creation of a useful digital library (i.e., a collection that includes both print and digitized resources):

- Pre-existing collections of print and/or digital materials for which centralized organization and access would benefit the firm
- Authoritative vocabulary and classification scheme
- Established administrative and collection development procedures and protocols
- Clear value to the organization

Collections

Most organizations have resource collections for which centralized organization and access would benefit the firm. A solidly cataloged library collection, with a searchable catalog and firmly established collection development policies, clearly demonstrates the success of a centralized system.

But what about the many valuable resources that exist outside of the library collection? These resources—which can exist in document management systems, standalone databases, on the bookshelves in a paralegal's office—include print materials, non-digital audio/visual materials, scanned versions of print materials; and materials that were created digitally (word-processing files, digital photographs).

In my organization, I am constantly surprised (and impressed) to discover collections of resources—formal or informal; print, digital, or some combination; cre-

ated as a specific function of case work or simply to develop knowledge on a relevant topic. Often, these collections are not widely known to all staff members because they are not accessible through intuitive means (e.g., buried in a case collection, identified/indexed using metadata that are not intuitive to the casual researcher).

Some questions to ask once you have identified one or more collections of potential value for centralized and highly visible access:

- Who else within the firm might benefit from this information? Is the level of effort to organize it and make it accessible justifiable based on its potential value to the firm?
- To what extent are these collections already organized, indexed, and described? Are subject matter experts available to assist in describing these collections further?
- What projects demonstrate the clearest value to staff and are most likely to get sponsorship and support from managing partners?
- Are the resources to be made accessible provided in a manner that protects the privacy of clients?

Authoritative vocabulary

In its Framework, NISO defines metadata as “structured information associated with an object for purposes of discovery, description, use, administration, and/or management.” Metadata most familiar to librarians make up the content of a library catalog. Assuming a firm's catalog is subject to some level of authority control and uses a controlled vocabulary that is familiar to staff (i.e., is useful for locating materials in your collection), librarians can apply and, if necessary, extend the classification currently in use for library resources to resources that exist outside of the cataloged collection.

Some questions to ask when assessing a vocabulary:

- Is the current vocabulary/classification scheme sufficient to describe and classify non-library materials? If not, do you need the assistance of subject matter experts to extend the current scheme?
- Is the current vocabulary familiar enough to non-librarians to ensure users will be able to find what they need?

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Procedures, protocols, policies

Many law libraries are fortunate to have one or more professional and paraprofessional staff members with expertise to define, implement, and promote the continuous development of information management and collection development procedures, protocols, and policies. As with metadata, librarians can extend existing procedures to the management of resources existing outside the cataloged collection.

Some questions to ask when assessing procedures needed to manage resources to be accessible through a centralized collection:

- Can procedures for submitting and adding content to your library collection be extended to easily include other types of resources?
- Can procedures be implemented in such a way that encourages subject experts to contribute specialized collections (i.e., in a way that does not create excessive extra work for them)? [Note: Useful content is critical to the success of this centralization effort. Cumbersome procedures for sharing and adding content will discourage potential contributors and undermine the success of the system.]
- Do procedures account for copyright and client privacy requirements?
- To what extent can or must the system integrate with existing systems containing important collections for which centralized access is desired (litigation support systems, document management systems, standalone and enterprise databases, web repositories)?

Value

There are many information management projects that can be planned and implemented within the library unit (perhaps with support from the IT department). However, a project involving the centralization of resources across the organization—and requiring the participation of contributors and topical experts throughout the firm—will require a fair amount of promotion to educate decision makers and stakeholders and garner the support and resources (human and financial) needed for project success.

Some questions to ask when assessing and demonstrating the value of this effort:

- How will this effort add value? Can you

demonstrate how, for example, it will improve efficiency and have a positive impact on the bottom line?

- Can the scope of the project be limited in order to prove the concept to decision makers?
- Who will lead the effort?
- Who can and should participate in the effort, or who are the primary stakeholders (librarians, attorneys, administrators, IT staff, topical experts)?
- What are the project's goals, objectives, and success factors? Is there a realistic timeline for implementation? A plan for sustainability?

Necessary elements for building a useful digital library

- Collections for which centralized organization and access would benefit the firm
- Authoritative vocabulary and classification scheme
- Established procedures and protocols
- Clear value to the organization

The digital law librarian

There clearly is a growing, critical need to simplify access to high-quality information resources that are created with great frequency within all units of law firms and legal organizations. By this point, I hope I have provided compelling reasons for law librarians to be at the forefront of efforts to centralize access to resources within their organizations. Additional reasons, which may serve as justification for such efforts, include:

- Facilitating access to resources is a fundamental professional function of law librarians.
- Library professionals have the expertise to manage and organize the proliferation of information resources that are being developed.
- Providing simplified access to firm-wide resources represents a powerful opportunity for libraries to participate in and encourage collaboration among staff experts and information developers.
- The collection of print materials remains important, but acquisition and organization of resources in digital form is an increasing

responsibility of law librarians.

- It enhances the expertise, leadership, and support that the library can offer within an office or across the firm.

Developing effective gateways to resources should result in clear benefits for the organization: centralized administration; increased access to resources, as well as institutional knowledge and expertise; efficient, time-saving research; and increased collaboration and communication.

Law librarians have the knowledge, expertise, and influence needed to generate support for and lead the way—even if incrementally—in developing gateways to their rapidly growing collections of materials, thereby helping to boost efficiencies in research and reduce information anxiety.

About the author

Nicolette Lodico is the information manager and digital librarian for the Habeas Corpus Resource Center, an agency in the State of California judicial branch. For the past five and a half years, she has led the development of a digital library of print and digital resources developed by and supporting the work of the agency.

Resources/further reading

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