

SHAPING THE FUTURE OF LAW LIBRARIES

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There is no doubt that law libraries and law librarians are going through many changes. Whether you see this as a positive or negative shift depends on what role you take in that change. Are you leading and shaping change, or being swept along in its wake?

The more you understand the emerging trends that are likely to affect your work, the better you can anticipate the possibilities for reinventing yourself and your library in response to these trends. You will then be in a position to recognise the golden opportunities and work around the challenges.

In this article, I will guide you through some of the major signposts of change for law libraries and law librarians. I will suggest some possible futures. Hopefully I will challenge your thinking about your role in shaping the future of law libraries.

Dollars and sense

Everyone everywhere wishes they had a larger budget to do their work. In academia, in government, in the courts, and in the commercial world, law libraries face increasing financial pressures from their funders to downsize, increase efficiencies, and demonstrate their value. At the same time, publications, a core library product, are becoming unaffordable.

The typical ways to respond to reduced budgets are to cut staff, services, publications, and physical space. Most law libraries have already cut back in these areas. We need to consider other options that do not risk the sustainability of libraries through further downsizing.

I can see three options for responding to increased financial pressures: library consolidation, funding diversity, and recasting the library/publisher relationship.

Consolidation

There are several recent examples of the consolidation of law libraries in order to save money and improve services, particularly in government and the courts.¹ It is conceivable to imagine this approach being applied to other law libraries too, particularly smaller ones. There are many law libraries located in the CBDs of large Australian cities. There are potential benefits if they, or at least some of their services such as training, are consolidated. Law librarians should choose to identify opportunities for consolidation and collaboration on service delivery. This way they can ensure that these changes benefit library users and staff and are not just about economics. The alternative is to be subject to decisions made by others.

Funding diversity

As any financial adviser will tell you, a smart way to manage your money is to spread your risk and diversify your investments. This thinking can be applied to library funding. If your budget is under threat, can you find ways to increase it, diversify it, and make it more sustainable? Law librarians need to think of themselves as fundraisers. This means advocating

for money and ensuring your funders understand the benefits and value of your library. It also means exploring alternative sources of funding, such as grants, bequests, sponsorship, and commercial opportunities.

The library/publisher relationship

The relationship between publishers and law libraries is a difficult one. Generally, a law librarian who is aiming to save money is negotiating with a publisher's representative who is working on a sales commission. The nature of this relationship has led many law libraries to use professional negotiators to deal with their publisher contracts. Meanwhile their customer satisfaction continues to diminish, while the publishers look for ways to retain profit using analog business models. The library/publisher relationship needs to be recast. Law librarians have two choices: become content publishers themselves, harnessing the power of the legal profession behind them, or forge a common cause with the legal publishers.² Otherwise, there is a real risk that legal publishers will price libraries out of the market.

The permeable library

The walls of the library are coming down, metaphorically and literally. Many law libraries are seeing their physical space shrink or be re-purposed. While print will be around for some time to come, virtual libraries are becoming reality.³ If you take away or reduce the books and the physical space, is it still a library? The common re-imagining is that the law library is a service, rather than a space.⁴ Some librarians I have spoken to take this idea further. They see the library not as a space or a service, but instead as a partner to the organisation it operates within.

This makes sense as the boundaries are beginning to blur between libraries and other parts of the organisations they work within.⁵ The idea of 'embedded librarians' is gaining popularity within sectors such as academia and professional services. Embedded librarians build strong relationships with their users and an understanding of their needs. They share and contribute to common goals and become integrated and indispensable to the work of their users.⁶

It is also becoming more popular for libraries to be co-located with other services, particularly in local government, where libraries often sit alongside other customer services. It is happening in law too. For example, in the United States, probono legal advice clinics are being co-located with court libraries.⁷

² Palfrey, John (2012) *Do We Still Need Libraries?* <http://jlpalfrey.andover.edu/2012/12/30/do-we-still-need-libraries/>.

³ For example, see Stern, Joanna 'The First Bookless Public Library: Texas to Have BiblioTech', *abc news* (online), 14 January 2013 <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/bookless-public-library-texas-home-bibliotech/story?id=18213091>.

⁴ The American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) and the International Legal Technology Association (ILTA) (2012) *Digital White Paper, The New Librarian* <http://www.aallnet.org/main-menu/Publications/aall-ilta-white-paper> p.8, p.36.

⁵ *Ibid* p.59.

⁶ *Ibid* p.9.

⁷ Morris, Mike 'County Court Library gets new look, amenities' *Houston Chronicle* (online) 25 November 2012 <http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/County-law-library-gets-new-look-amenities-4065719.php>.

¹ Examples include the consolidation of the Victorian Government libraries, the libraries of the Federal Court of Australia and Family Court of Australia, and the planned consolidation of the libraries of the Victorian courts and legal profession.

What does all this mean for law librarians?

As the emphasis on the physical library diminishes, how do you define your library and how do you ensure it is visible? How will you change perceptions that your library is obsolete? Is it a physical space, is it virtual, is it a service, is it a partner, or a blend of all four? This question is important because it forms the basis of designing a strategy for your law library. Libraries need sound management practices, and having a strategy is critical.

The library's strategy should align with the objectives of the broader organisation. You need a vision of where you see your library in five to ten years time, otherwise someone else will imagine a future for you. This means learning the core business of your organisation, getting involved in decision-making, and lobbying for your library. You need to gain support from senior management. Law librarians who build partnerships and look for opportunities to collaborate with other parts of the organisation will help secure their library's future.

In many cases, this might also mean looking outside your organisation for these opportunities. Large state, public and university libraries co-locate with other services and businesses, such as bookshops and cafes. We may see this trend growing in law libraries too.

Where to next?

Many law librarians have seen their roles evolve over the last decade or so to include an expanded range of responsibilities such as business management, knowledge management, information technology, project management, training, information management, web 2.0, content creation and curation, marketing, human resources, online community management, and the list goes on. This means that law librarians have learnt a wide range of new skills and knowledge. This has seen some law librarians adapt and innovate by redefining their roles to the point where they are called something other than a librarian now. Others have left the profession to apply their new skills and knowledge to alternate careers.

There is a lot of current debate and interest about what is next and how law librarians can 'future proof' their careers to stay relevant, and employable. There isn't one answer for everyone as law librarians are not a homogenous group despite sharing some common core skills. Each of you has to choose the path the best suits your skills, strengths, and more importantly your interests, when it comes to professional development. Besides the professional benefits of expanding your resume, it is personally rewarding to learn something new.

I have mentioned various initiatives that I think law librarians can take to shape the future of law libraries. They all require law librarians to be leaders. You don't need to be at the senior executive table to be a leader in an organisation, but you do need to come up with good ideas and sell them to the people that matter so you can turn those good ideas into great actions.

I spoke earlier about law librarians needing to promote and position their libraries. You also need to market yourselves to gain recognition for your contribution and expertise.⁸ You can do this by writing journal articles and blog posts, contributing to intranet content, presenting at seminars and conferences within and outside your organisation, and offering to collaborate with others on their projects so you can showcase your skills.

Imagining the future

In this article, I have touched on some of the barometers for the future of law libraries. There is more ground that I could cover, particularly on emerging technologies and how they are influencing the delivery of legal information. For example, how do libraries embrace the growth of visual information such as video when working with the legal profession, which is so reliant on the written word?

The future of law libraries is in your hands. Take a broad perspective when imagining this future. Places to look for inspiration are writings on education, marketing, not-for-profits, publishing, retail and start-ups, as well as ideas from futurism, scenario planning, innovation, and the future of work.

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⁸ Schawbel, Dan (2009) *Personal Branding 101: How to Discover and Create Your Brand* <http://mashable.com/2009/02/05/personal-branding-101/>.