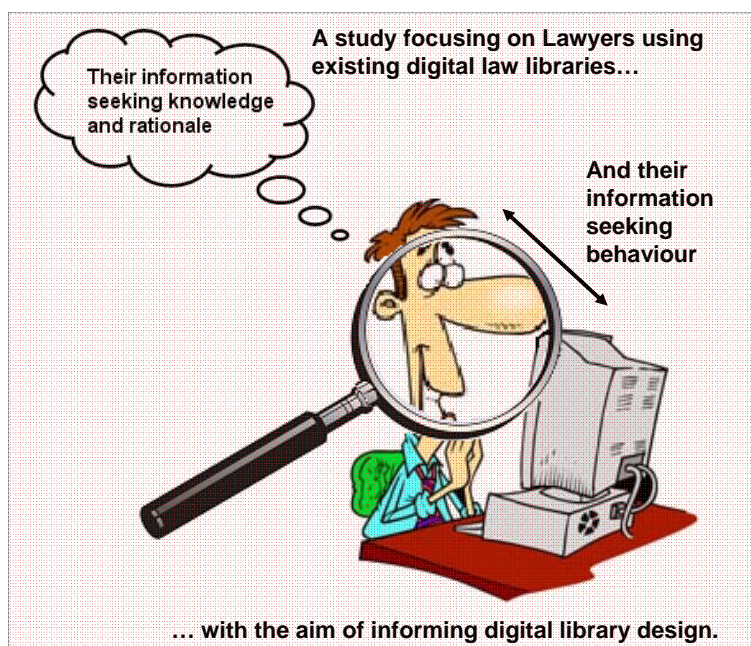# Studying Lawyers' Information Seeking to Inform the Design of Digital Law Libraries

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A study focusing on Lawyers using existing digital law libraries…

Their information seeking knowledge and rationale

And their information seeking behaviour

… with the aim of informing digital library design.

Abstract

We report findings from the initial phase of our study on legal information seeking, which comprised a series of semi-structured interviews and naturalistic observations of academic law students and staff looking for electronic legal information. This study has the long-term aim of informing the design of digital law libraries. Participants found it difficult to use digital law libraries, arising from poor knowledge of the digital library system rather than from poor general electronic information seeking skills. Hazy and faulty system-related knowledge were rife, suggesting the need for academic lawyers to understand more about the digital library systems that they use (within-systems knowledge). These lawyers chose to rely primarily on one major digital law library for legal information seeking. Their preference was often based upon vague or flawed rationale and suggests the need for academic lawyers to appreciate the situations in which different electronic resources might be useful (between-systems knowledge).

Methodology

The study comprised semi-structured interviews and naturalistic observations of twenty-one academic law students, ranging from first year undergraduates to final year doctoral students. We also interviewed six members of academic staff working at the same institution: one Senior Research Fellow, two Lecturers, two Senior Lecturers and one Professor of Commercial Law.

Participants were informed that the study would focus on how they look for legal information as part of their work. Interviews and observations were based on the Contextual Inquiry approach. Interviews began with a set of introductory questions, focusing on what stage the lawyer was at in their academic career, the nature of legal information seeking involved, the electronic resources used and how they choose when to use a particular resource. These introductory questions were followed by a naturalistic observation where participants were asked to find some electronic legal information that they currently need as part of their work.

Findings

The academic lawyers in our study found it difficult to find the information that they were looking for when using digital law libraries such as LexisNexis Professional and Westlaw. Much of this difficulty arose from poor knowledge of the digital library system rather than from poor information seeking skills in general.

Categories of knowledge held by academic lawyers

We identified three broad categories of system and information source-centred knowledge that academic lawyers held:

• *Awareness knowledge* (which resources exist to help locate certain materials),
• *Access knowledge* (whether they have access to certain materials and, if they do, how they might go about doing so) and
• *Usage knowledge* (how to use the electronic resource).

Although lawyers held enough positive knowledge about the digital law library systems that they used in order to 'get by,' hazy and faulty knowledge surrounding each of these categories of knowledge was commonplace across the entire academic spectrum.

Examples of faulty knowledge

To exemplify faulty awareness knowledge, a Professor of Commercial Law suggested that it is not possible to perform subject searches on Westlaw (i.e. to search for legal materials related to a particular subject such as 'jurisprudence'). He assumed that only searches where the precise details about the material required are known (e.g. when searching for a legal case such as "Donoghue v Stevenson") could be performed using Westlaw:

"It just doesn't help me… I can't recall now, but I'm not prepared to analyse the problem too much… whether it even has the capability of finding anything that's reasonably discoverable on a particular subject. I'm not sure, so I go straight into Google… punch in the phrase, see what comes out. You can do a word search once you're in a case, but if you wanted to find all the cases on a particular subject, I don't think you can use Westlaw for that. That's what I would really want." – R6

As an example of faulty access knowledge, one Senior Research Fellow incorrectly believed that the company behind Westlaw had developed both a U.S. and U.K. version of the digital law library.

He believed that U.S. materials could best be found by logging in via www.westlaw.com rather than through the .co.uk URL and commented that doing so would allow him to access non-UK legal materials by 'bypassing' the university's subscription to Westlaw. In reality, Westlaw only produce one version of their digital law library. This misconception highlights the fact that finding non-UK materials is difficult when using Westlaw.

The broader category of usage knowledge was found to include several sub-categories. These included knowledge about:
• The *coverage* of the digital library (what types of materials the system can be used to find and which parts of the system can be used to find them).
• The *content/structure* of materials within the library.
• The *authority* of the digital libraries and materials within the library.
• *How to search* the digital library.

Users' knowledge surrounding each of these sub-categories was varied and, similarly to the other categories of knowledge identified in this study, was often erroneous or hazy.

Summary and conclusion

Our findings suggest the need for academic lawyers to understand more about the digital library systems that they use (i.e. to acquire or strengthen their 'within-systems knowledge'). In addition, these lawyers chose to rely primarily on one major digital law library for legal information seeking. Their preference was often based upon vague or flawed rationale and suggests the need for academic lawyers to appreciate the situations in which different electronic resources might be useful (between-systems knowledge).