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James Hambleton

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Managing Information and Libraries
in the Electronic Era*

James Hambleton**

Computers are being used increasingly in law libraries for both information storage and for retrieval through online searching. This article discusses the effects of this increased use and offers advice for training users and setting up a computer lab.

Several current trends affect the way we, as law librarians, practice our profession of information management. The basis of these trends is the use of electronic and other technologies to store and retrieve information. When paper was the only method by which information was transmitted, book management and information management meant the same thing. Now, however, information is found in books, online, and on microfiche, audiotapes, and videotapes.

Information-Based Librarianship

One trend, then, is movement from a book orientation to an information orientation. No longer are librarians simply concerned with cataloging and classifying books; rather, we are concerned with where to locate information. As librarians move from an item-based view of librarianship to an information-based view, so, too, do our users. Often we have a choice of where to obtain information from our patrons; if it is not available in a printed source in-house, we can either borrow that printed source or obtain the information from an online source. Choosing the method of retrieval requires us to balance how quickly the information is needed against the costs of retrieval. For example, an online source might be used to retrieve a case needed for a client filing, while a case needed for an associate's speech might be borrowed.

Electronic Storage and Retrieval of Information

A second trend is the increased use of computers for information storage and retrieval. Cheaper computer hardware with increased capacity for mass storage means that computing power is more readily available. Less expensive storage also encourages the storage of information in electronic form. While paper is still increasing in price, magnetic storage and optical storage are rapidly decreasing in price. Storage of documents in electronic form, which takes up less space than storage in paper, makes sense, especially to law firms in high-rent downtown districts.

Information retrieval from books must be done either page by page, or by using an index to find a particular page or section. Computers have enhanced indexed retrieval by making every word in a document an index key (full-text retrieval) and by offering "hypertext" methods of information retrieval.[1]

Decentralized Access to Computers

Another trend is decentralized access to computers. Computer workstations are no longer located only in the library. As attorneys and faculty members get computer workstations, we need to know what legal information resources are made available to them. Will attorneys and faculty members have access to LEXIS and WESTLAW? If so, who is going to install the software, train the attorneys, and provide the ongoing support? We as law librarians need to be involved with these decisions.

The effect of these trends is that information management responsibilities in the electronic environment must be clearly defined. The systems department and the library both need to define their specific roles. What are the responsibilities of the systems people, and for what will the library staff be responsible?

Essentially, the systems people should be responsible for hardware management and maintenance. After consultation with the library staff to ascertain its needs, the systems department should retain responsibility for buying the hardware. The ordering, installation, and systems administration all remain their functions. On the other hand, the management of the legal software applications on these systems should be the responsibility of the library. The library is responsible for the selection and administration

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1. Hypertext is a way of skipping from one information source to another, or of retrieving information in a nonlinear sequence. For example, you might be reading a treatise page on a computer terminal. If you were to focus on one of the footnotes, hypertext would allow you to jump to the full text of that footnoted information, and then jump back again to the full text of the treatise page. The computer allows quick retrieval of the full text of these different information sources.

of online database systems, as well as for other applications in the legal information area.

If legal applications are distributed to attorney or faculty member workstations, what will be the role of the law library of the future? The library will be the information hub of the organization. Traditional library functions, from selection and acquisition to reference, will still be performed, yet each will be affected by the integration of other information carriers and the decentralization of user access.

Selection may mean, for example, selection of CD-ROM databases rather than selection of books. Reference service will still be centered in the library, but in the future attorneys and faculty members may have more of this information available directly via desktop computers. Access to information will have moved to the attorney's or faculty member's terminal, but this does not mean that management of that information will no longer be the responsibility of the library. Indeed, decentralization of access increases the need for training and support by the law library, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Computer Labs

In the past, computer training in the law library meant off-site training in online database use. More recently, law school libraries have found themselves in charge of computer labs, where online searching is taught along with the use of applications such as database management systems, spreadsheets, and word processing.

Often in the law school environment the law library is responsible for both applications management and systems management. A more effective division of labor, however, is to have the systems people in charge of the maintenance and updating of the hardware.

A few law firms have established computer training labs for their legal staff, recognizing that training attorneys to use computers can provide a competitive edge. Attorneys work with information, and if the firm can control that information more carefully and use it more effectively, the work product of the firm is enhanced. In addition, establishing a computer lab can help introduce computers to the law firm in an orderly fashion. By offering training and support in specified software packages, the firm can avoid the confusion caused by a proliferation of programs. The law firm library may be responsible for managing the lab; however, sharing this responsibility with the systems people might prove more effective.

Resistance to Computer Use

When introducing computers to either the law school or firm, there is bound to be some resistance from faculty and attorneys. Partners or senior

faculty may not want their own terminals; aren't the secretaries paid to type? These people need to be convinced that the ways attorneys and faculty use a terminal are completely different from the ways secretaries use them. A secretary uses a computer to key in information, while the attorney, applying legal knowledge, uses the computer to create or edit documents.

In law firms, associate resistance to computers is often based on the fear that the law firm may require or expect longer hours. Associates see technology as another way the firm can squeeze a few more billable hours out of them. In reality, computer technology may provide the associate the opportunity to "time-shift" work. Just as a VCR allows the time-shifting of television programs, a laptop computer can allow the associate to shift work from the office to the home. A document begun at work can be carried home on a laptop for further editing and revision.

As information in electronic form becomes more common in the legal environment, the law librarian has an important role in overseeing the integration of these technologies. Two more aspects of electronic technology will impact on the role of the law librarian: image systems and CD-ROM.

Image Systems and CD-ROM

Until recently, electronic storage and retrieval was of either text or data. In the future, image storage and retrieval will also have a place in the law library. In the last few years, image transmission, or telefacsimile, has grown in popularity. This is largely because the cost of electronic storage has come down, making image storage, which uses more space than text or data storage, more feasible. Optical storage systems, CD-ROM or laser disks, may hold vast amounts of text, data, or image information that can be used by the law library.

Conclusion

The law librarian in the future will be responsible for integrating paper, fiche, magnetic, and optical information carriers. The law library will remain the information hub of the organization, but most attorneys or faculty will have access to information sources on their desktop computers. The librarian's role will still be one of acquisition and reference, but training and support will grow in importance. In the law firm, many of the newer information systems will not have been available while the attorney was in law school, so the attorney must be trained in the firm. Similarly, the academic law librarian must keep up with developments so that new technologies can be integrated into the legal research curriculum as quickly

as possible. The information role of the librarian, then, will continue to be important to the success of the organization.