SCHOOL OF LAW
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

Texas A&M University School of Law
Texas A&M Law Scholarship

Faculty Scholarship

1989

Electronic Technology and the Law Firm Librarian

James Hambleton

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.law.tamu.edu/facscholar

Part of the Law Commons

Recommended Citation

James Hambleton, *Electronic Technology and the Law Firm Librarian*, 81 Law Libr. J. 551 (1989).
Available at: https://scholarship.law.tamu.edu/facscholar/149

Electronic Technology and the Law Firm Librarian*

James Hambleton**

Automating the law firm library requires understanding the culture and structure of the firm, and the abilities to work with systems personnel and to select appropriate software. Mr. Hambleton describes these processes and provides examples.

The first question many law librarians ask about automation is how to get started. Then, when hearing about the vast array of choices, they may panic. Rather than having to decide how to proceed, they take the easiest path, which is to do nothing. But automation is here, and the marketplace will never "stabilize," so now is the time to get started.

The first step in getting started is to know and understand the culture of your firm. Every law firm has its own culture, which is reflected in the way the firm does business. A careful observer can walk into any firm, and within half an hour have an idea of the culture of that firm. Understanding that culture will help you understand how the firm approaches automation. If the firm prides itself on its nineteenth-century roots, it may take a conservative approach to automation. If the firm is a new up-and-comer, it may want to highlight its automation efforts, and use those efforts as a marketing tool.

Along with an appreciation of the firm's culture, you have to understand the structure of the firm. This includes an appreciation of the firm's automation goals and long-range automation plans. Does the firm plan to provide desktop computer access for attorneys? If so, will LEXIS and WESTLAW be accessible? Who will handle training and support for desktop access? These are all questions that the law firm librarian needs to ask.

Understanding the firm's automation plans means talking with those in the firm responsible for automation and making an effort to work with them. Regardless of where the library is on the organization chart, you

have to determine how the library will fit into the broader context of the firm's automation plans. If your firm has a minicomputer, you should know what the firm is doing with that computer, and what hardware and software are being used. Get to know your firm's systems person.

Communication with the firm's systems personnel is sometimes difficult because they often talk in jargon unfamiliar to librarians. By the same token, the librarian must be able to articulate the automation needs of the library in terms that the systems people can understand. Make an effort to start a dialogue. Get to know what the firm's systems people are doing, and at the same time build respect for what the library wants to do. The best way to begin this dialogue is to learn and understand computer terminology so that you can describe what you need for your library applications. For example, if you want a database, you should know whether you need fixed fields or variable fields, and how each choice will affect computer storage and retrieval.

Before you begin to articulate your automation needs to the systems department, carefully analyze what those needs are. Sit down and describe in a written narrative exactly what you want to do. Don't just go to your systems personnel and say that you want to automate the library. Figure out what you really need to automate. An operation should not be automated unless it either helps provide more timely management information or allows you to provide better library services to the firm. For example, you can create an elaborate database that will keep track of the number of interlibrary loan transactions. But if the management committee doesn't really care, that information gathering hasn't done anyone any good. If you think that interlibrary loan transactions may bolster your argument for getting new staff, then by all means collect ILL statistics, but do it in the simplest way possible. This most likely will not include use of a computer.

When you are analyzing your needs, think of ways that automation can help provide service to the attorneys. Given a choice between automating an internal library operation, such as acquisitions, and a service function, such as routing, automate the routing system first. Automation that has the broadest, most visible effect will help the library maintain continued support for its automation efforts.

Before you automate a function, make sure there is a need for that function to be improved by automation. There is no sense in automating circulation if attorneys don't check out many books with a manual system. Try not to do too much too well. You need not plan for every possible eventuality. Don't replace a seldom-done manual function with an automated version of that function.

Once you finish defining what tasks you want to automate, it is time to choose a program. At this point you can either work with the firm's

systems personnel to write a custom program, or you can buy "off-the-shelf" software. If you choose to work with the firm's systems personnel, be careful not to lose control of the project. The librarian might have clearly communicated the library's needs, but during the programming phase the programmer may decide to move a data element without the librarian's knowledge. Relatively quickly, the librarian can lose control of what is going on, and the resulting program will not address the needs that the librarian initially defined.

If you choose to use off-the-shelf software, make sure that it will do what you need and that you have access to the expertise that will make it work. No off-the-shelf package is truly ready to use. Most likely, someone will have to do some programming.

Some examples of off-the-shelf software might be helpful. One package used by many firms is INMAGIC, which is a text-based management system. That is, it is particularly adept at searching for and retrieving text. Some firms use INMAGIC for litigation support, where rapid text retrieval is paramount. INMAGIC also can be used for the catalog. INMAGIC has a great "report generator." That is, the printed output from the database can be easily manipulated. This allows quick and attractive production of book catalogs. The other advantage of INMAGIC is that its fields are variable length, and each field can reoccur any number of times in one record. This means that an entry could have one or ten subject headings of any length, and the data structure doesn't have to define the number or the length beforehand.

If your law firm has a Wang word processing system, you might consider a package such as KWICFILE, which is another text retrieval system. Library records can be entered and searched using the same kind of logic that you use to search one of the online systems. The work product retrieval of the firm—the memo and brief bank—can be on the same system as the card catalog, allowing attorneys to use the same search for both.

In addition to text-based systems such as INMAGIC and KWICFILE, database management systems like dBASE have a role to play in the library. Some firms are using dBASE to keep track of their acquisitions. With its computational capabilities, dBASE can keep track of different funds and provide reports on various budgeting activities. It can also search quickly by author or title so that you can check to see if a particular item is on order. If you use printed order slips, dBASE can produce those for you as well. The dBASE program is a shell that requires some expertise to make any application of it useful; you cannot open the package and start programming sophisticated operations a few hours later. Expertise is usually available at reasonable rates. In budgeting for software acquisition,

Law Library Journal [Vol. 81:55i]

put in some amount for training and programming. Many of these simpler library applications should only take a few hours to program for an experienced dBASE programmer.

Spreadsheets have many applications in the library. In addition to the obvious applications, such as the library budget and keeping track of online searching costs, spreadsheets can be used for projects such as the routing system. As I mentioned earlier, it is always good to automate a procedure that has visible benefits for the attorneys in your firm. A spreadsheet can keep track of all titles being routed. One system prints out a memo of all titles any person gets; this is helpful in handling the effects of attorney turnover.

Once you have started down the road of automation, continue to reevaluate your automation plans in the light of new developments in technology. As the technology changes, you may find new and better ways of doing something you have already automated. An important point to keep in mind is that once your data is in electronic format, any subsequent changes are less difficult and take less time than your initial automation effort. The first step is always the hardest.