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Trends

IN LAW LIBRARY MANAGEMENT AND TECHNOLOGY

Edited by Mark E. Estes • For academic, firm, corporate, and government law librarians

Unplanned Career Paths: The Role of Serendipity (Part 1)

By JIM HAMBLETON, Texas Wesleyan & LOIS CALVERT, Colorado Supreme Court

Several years ago a colleague wrote about career planning. His article was filled with fine ideas about how to map out a career. As both authors are at the point where our careers are about two-thirds over, we thought we would write about how careers really work out.

How Did a Nice Person Like You End Up in This Line of Work?

Lois' Education and Job History

Why am I a librarian? It is in my genes. My mother, my aunt, and my sister all are librarians. My aunt was the person who hired college kids to work summers in the Rockford (Illinois) Public Library, and by the end of the first summer I was convinced that library school was in my future.

When I got my MLS from the University of Denver, I took a job in the main library at the University of Colorado. After a couple of years, a position opened up in the law library, and as the saying goes, the rest is history. I stayed for twenty years. When I took the job, I thought the law library was just a branch of the main library, and I was amazed to find a whole subculture.

The issue of the law degree came up after a few years, but for several reasons I decided against it. Even at the time, I knew that would limit my future

in academic libraries. But after twenty years, it was time to try something else. The something else turned out to be a job as an account representative with LEXIS. For two years I was the rep for the law schools in the Rocky Mountain region (eight states, twelve schools). After two years of travel, and many frequent flier miles, I became the rep for the big Denver law firms.

The chance to be head of a law firm library lured me away from LEXIS. Sherman & Howard was great fun at first—150 attorneys, two branches, and three more branches set up during the first year I was there. A couple of years later the savings and loan crisis hit. The firm was sued by the FDIC for its dealings with Silverado and paid dearly. During the next year it went from 150 attorneys to 75, closed three of the five branches, and a merger attempt fell through. Half the staff was “downsized,” and I was one of them. I called Mark Estes, who was AALL president at the time, to tell him the news, and he responded with an offer of lunch and a job. I accepted, with relief and gratitude, and stayed at Holme Roberts and Owen for the next two and a half years.

Now I'm at the Colorado Supreme Court Library. I've been here nearly five years as the Director.

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Jim's Education and Job History

I suspect that, unlike Lois, most law librarians didn't start out at an early age dreaming of becoming librarians. While I may have wanted to become a firefighter or an airline pilot or an architect, my schooling was aimed at the goal of becoming a college professor. After completing my undergraduate studies in Russian, I enrolled in the University of Michigan School of Graduate Studies. I soon discovered, however, that I really wasn't interested in graduate Russian studies. Some vocational tests taken while in college indicated I should consider careers in teaching, library science, or computer programming. Since teaching seemed gone, I turned to potential career number two, librarianship. A quick visit to the University of Michigan library school and I suddenly was a graduate student in that program.

Upon graduation from library school, I decided I shouldn't abandon academia totally, so I set my sights on becoming an academic librarian. Because Boston has a massive concentration of colleges and universities and because I had friends there, it seemed like a reasonable place to look for a job. Upon arriving in Boston, I pulled out the yellow pages, looked under "Schools and universities," and started dialing. I got two or three interviews from those cold calls, and ended up at Suffolk University School of Law Library as a beginning reference librarian.

My first job was a great learning experience, and one which pointed me to a career in law librarianship. But, three years into the job, I realized that a law degree would be helpful. Moving to Washington, D.C., I began law school as an evening student and worked full time during the day as a law firm reference librarian. The last year of law school, I quit my full-time law firm job to finish school more quickly. I began working part time for Mead Data, teaching clients how to use the then-new online research system, LEXIS.

Upon law school graduation, I was recruited by Roy Mersky to the University of Texas Tarlton Law Library as Head of Public Services. Three years later, the position of Director of the State Law Library came open. I accepted that position and remained in Austin another six years. Then a nifty law firm job lured me to the big city, Dallas, where I not only managed the law firm's libraries, but I also oversaw the records center and a training lab for attorneys' use of technology.

After three years and an economic downturn, the nifty law firm position was eliminated, and I began a consulting relationship with a start-up law school, Dallas/Fort Worth School of Law. When their library director retired, I accepted his position. The law school was acquired by Texas Wesleyan University, and I'm still director of the Texas Wesleyan Law School Library.

What's It Like Working in an Academic Library?

Lois

I worked at the University of Colorado Law Library from 1966 to 1986. I started as the cataloger and ended as the associate librarian. I had the same boss the entire time—Oscar Miller. In 1986 there were a total of six full-time staff members, including Oscar. The student body went from 250 to 450 during the time I was there, and the faculty and the building size nearly doubled, but the library staff only grew by one. The year that I left the ABA told the law school it would jeopardize its accreditation if it did not increase the staffing in the library. The library now has 18.5 full-time staff members.

It was a great job for many reasons, not the least of which was that when I started I was in my twenties and the students were mostly male and in their twenties. Oscar and I hit it off immediately, and he was my mentor and friend for twenty years. Although it sounds contradictory, the best part about the job was the small staff. It meant I could do some of everything, and I got a real sense of how the parts fit together to make the whole. It was the best of both worlds. I never lost contact with the students, but I also moved into more and more of the administration as I gained experience. The teaching aspect of reference work is very rewarding, and it is nice to see the students progress from beginners who don't know the difference between a case and a statute to full-fledged lawyers. The intellectual atmosphere in a university setting is very stimulating. The only downside is the emphasis that is placed on staff members holding a law degree. Academic law libraries are much more concerned about it than the firms or the courts, probably because their job is to produce people with law degrees.

Jim

Academic law libraries tend to be large compared to other law libraries. My first job as a reference

librarian put me far down the hierarchical totem pole. But at this level I had the most contact with students and faculty. Answering reference questions was challenging, and finding what people needed was rewarding.

As I gained experience in the academic law library and moved up the hierarchy, this front-line contact diminished, and I had more contact with those concerned with internal issues: with the dean, budget officers, and department heads. The irony of law librarianship is that the higher one goes up in the administrative structure, generally the less one has to do with information and patrons, the reasons why many of us chose law librarianship as a profession in the first place.

Working with law students, though, can be both challenging and rewarding. Most public service academic law librarians are "teachers" either in a formal, classroom sense or one-on-one at the reference desk. It's always a delight when students successfully put into practice what you have shown them.

What's It Like Working in a Private Firm Library?

Lois

The biggest difference between the academic library and the firms was reference. Instead of teaching the patron how to use the materials, the object was to find the answer and be quick about it. There were the inevitable frustrations with short deadlines and incomplete information, but it was very stimulating to get many different kinds of questions. This was my first real experience with business information. (No one in a law school asks for a 10K.)

The other major difference was space. When you are paying by the foot, it is much more important to keep the library small than when the building belongs to you. Law schools also have space problems, of course, but I don't know of a law school which suddenly has had to put the entire library into half the previous space, which was my (last) project at Sherman & Howard.

As a law firm employee you are also more vulnerable to economic shifts, as both Jim and I found out. There were four rounds of layoffs at Sherman & Howard, and I was in the last one. It happened the week after I had finished moving the entire library. (Why do they always make you do some dreadful project just before they fire you?)

Jim

Law firm libraries are in a less-defined relationship to their organizations than are other types of law libraries. Most law firms are divided into the legal staff (partners and associates) and the non-legal staff (everyone else). In a law firm, then, one is either a knight or a serf; there is no middle class. This creates awkward problems for the professional law librarian. One firm I worked for early on couldn't figure out whether to invite me to the lawyers' Christmas formal or the secretaries' Christmas luncheon, so I ended up being invited to neither.

The reference questions in law firms can be fun, but there also can be a lot of pressure for a quick, accurate answer. One of my favorites was the call from the tax attorney who had a client with an 18th-century sword he was going to donate to a museum and wanted to value for a charitable contribution. A call to Christie's auction house finally led to their "arms and armaments" expert who was able to help us.

Some law firms bill the librarians' time, which can create tensions. Librarians who are timekeepers are expected to contribute to the bottom line. Librarians who are not timekeepers are considered simply "overhead," and when cutbacks come the library (and librarians) can be easy targets. When the downturn came in Texas, the firm administrator told me one morning that I had to lay off four staff members, including a professional librarian. Later in the day, after I had terminated these employees, the firm administrator came into my office and laid me off! This was not one of my better days.

Jim Hambleton is Director of the Texas Wesleyan Law School Library, Irving, Texas. Lois Calvert is Director of the Colorado Supreme Court Library, Denver, Colorado.