

Fishing on the Net : Solicitor Training on the Internet

Josephine Timcke

Librarian, Piper Alderman Barristers & Solicitors

"How has technology changed a librarian's working role in the past 5 years?" This question was put to me recently, and I found it quite thought provoking. From online systems to CD-ROMs to the Internet, the changes have been rapid, and with the changes our role as trainer, as well as researcher, has expanded

In the recent past, online services and systems meant training for librarians and other library staff because each system seemed to have its own particular search operators and techniques. Charging was, more often than not, based on the amount of time spent "online". This meant only well trained users would conduct these searches so as to keep the cost within budget restraints. Law librarians also needed to know which online systems contained which database of information and how to access that information as quickly, cheaply and accurately as possible.

Practitioners knew of these databases and systems, but rarely accessed them personally because they didn't have the time or expertise. Consequently, they gave librarians a detailed research request or peered over someone's shoulder while the search was executed. Searching these systems was (in many cases) expensive but essential as a means to certain information which was not available anywhere else.

While this was not an unsatisfactory method of researching, the CD-ROM helped revolutionise legal research. In a relatively short period of time, the amount of information that became available in this format was staggering. But the real bonus for the legal profession was and is the "user friendly" approach that most publishers took in producing this material. On the whole, these databases have been aimed towards the practitioners themselves, as opposed to librarians.

Librarians were now looked to as the professional with experience who could act as a trainer as well as user. As trainers we helped train those practitioners who needed to learn how to use this information in this format, and as users we had the knowledge to access the information accurately if practitioners didn't have the time. CD-ROM publishers provided user manuals and "help sheets" as well as support and training for librarians. In many instances it was more practical to have trainers from the production companies that produce the compact disks to provide the initial instruction for practitioners. Compact disc technology was a challenge to practitioners, but also to librarians who were expected to be trainers as well as users.

Compact disc technology was the logical step away from online systems towards a more streamlined legal research base. For each CD database the software was always the same, the material was always in the same format and it was updated in a set time frame (i.e. monthly or quarterly). It was this consistent background of each compact disc that allowed librarians to actually spend time training practitioners in basic electronic searching techniques as well as how the CDs worked. While there were still different types of software and searching programs being used, the “user friendly” approach was making practitioners feel more comfortable moving around databases without “hand holding”. And with computers generally appearing in more offices for more daily tasks, the whole concept was not so foreign.

While compact discs will still play an important role in legal research, for the time being it seems that all attention has turned to the Internet and the World Wide Web. Many of the applications of the Internet fall into one of two categories: communications or research. Both are of equal importance but as discussed in an article by Anne Abate, it takes more knowledge and background in researching to fully research on the Internet and achieve satisfactory results.¹

The concept of electronic communication is readily visualised as the global post office working at an incredibly efficient turn around time! Mail is addressed, written and sent while receivers “open” mail and can file it, reply to it or “trash” it in the same way as “normal” mail is always dealt with. It is a practical means of communicating on a local, national and global scale.

Researching on the Internet, and teaching people to research on the Internet is an entirely different concept from communicating and should be treated as such. With pressures from all directions to access the Internet for researching purposes, practitioners are stepping into a possible minefield of the unknown. While there is no single producer or publisher responsible to provide training or definitive user manuals, law librarians can further extend themselves to take on this role. “Although many law firms have been rushing to provide desk top access to the Internet and the World Wide Web, this access, without adequate training, will be useless.”²

One of the most important elements in relation to the Internet can be explained even before logging on. Abate states in her article that “all training should include warnings regarding the problems” and these are not restricted to security or technical problems. Reliability is a major concern that should be discussed. Simply because it is on the Internet does not mean that it is up to date or accurate, which many practitioners automatically assume. Although in theory information is available almost instantly on the Internet, this is not so. In some situations, paper versions of the material are more accurate and up to date.

1 Abate, Anne K. “Attorney use of the Internet: training is the key”, *AALL Spectrum*. November 1996, p. 14

2 *Ibid*, p 14

It may also be logical and practical to briefly explain some of the technical aspects of the Internet. To fully comprehend the size and usefulness of the Net, an explanation should be made as to how it began and also a discussion of the system of “links” that are used. The fact that hypertext links are the basis for navigating through the Internet will become obvious once users have logged on. In fact, the actual moving through the Internet and using a browser program is probably the easiest aspect of the training.

While locating Web sites with addresses and using the links to find the relevant information is a step by step process, it is hardly suitable for complex research queries. By using this method, practitioners are able to locate certain information themselves, although the accuracy and reliability must then be queried. And while there are many practitioners who are confidently using the Internet in this way, they rarely stray beyond similar sites.

With multitudes of search engines to choose from to research the entire Internet, how can a practitioner decide which will be the most suitable? Even with these various search engines, due to the size of the Internet, searches have to be carefully constructed and refined time and again. Sites are added or deleted or changed, and the same search can provide a different result from one day to the next. Given these problems, practitioners are soon out of their depth.

It is these in-depth research skills that librarians have developed and fine tuned, and searching on the Internet requires all this and more. Having dealt with the prospect of manual and electronic searching (and successfully combined the two in many cases), librarians are trained to deal with and search this volume and type of information. “In the same way that librarians intuitively turn to the index in a print publication, they also seek out better access methods on the Internet”³. While it is important that practitioners are trained to use the Internet and harness the technology, it is also necessary for them to know that librarians have the research skills to accomplish the more complicated research task more effectively.

Having firstly been trained to use manual research methods and then electronic research methods, over a period of time librarians have gained an insight into how types of research queries should be handled. Most research queries involve more than just “knowing where to look”. Librarians have developed a keen sense of lateral thinking to ensure that all areas for any one query have been covered. This process takes a great deal of time and persistence as it can often be tedious and cumbersome.

Unlike the compact disc technology, the Internet is never in a constant state (and sometimes not even consistent). With new sites appearing, new search engines and directories being developed, sites changing and providing more or less information, it is imperative to be aware of what and how things are changing

³ Ibid, p 14

With the time to search and knowledge of sources and access to other relevant material, librarians are adept at keeping up to date with the changes. "Through regular contact with the Internet and other information sources, librarians will know the next development when it surfaces" and "will be looking forward to the next step, search engine or indexing system and will be prepared to alert attorneys to the newest fad".⁴

In the same way that practitioners are experts in their own particular field, they must acknowledge that librarians are experts too. While it is important for users to be trained and to understand how to use the Internet, "it takes a librarian to find some elusive fragment of information that lies hidden deep within the confusion of the Web"⁵ This expertise must be marketed to practitioners so that they know where to turn when they cannot find what they are looking for.

Training, particularly with technology (and combined with legal practitioners!) should always be conducted with care and tact. As with any training situations, some people will learn faster than others, while some will not want to learn at all. And when practitioners are not using these skills on a daily basis, they will naturally need refresher courses and clear, precise documentation to refer to. But librarians and their clients should always keep in mind that while it is an integral part of a librarian's role to train users, there will be times when the users' research skills (however well they are taught) will need to be complemented by the reference, research and practical skills of the professional librarian.

"My job is to teach my users how to fish, and I can only do that if I know everything I can possibly know about bait, tackle, currents, etc. Let's be honest though. There are those partners in the firm who do not want to know how to fish, but merely want to be handed a fish. That is also part of my job - figuring out who wants to learn and who doesn't." Michael Saint-Onge (Librarian, Coudert Brothers, San Francisco, California)⁶

4 Ibid p 14

5 Ibid p 16

6 "The future of the law firm library - The AALL electronic round table", *AALL Spectrum*, September 1996 p. 15