

Training the Clients of the Law Courts Library

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INTRODUCTION

The Law Courts Library was established primarily to act as a legal resource and information centre and to provide legal source material in a fast and accurate manner to the courts and tribunals located in the Law Courts Building. The courts include the High Court of Australia, the Federal Court of Australia, the Supreme Court of New South Wales, and various tribunals. The Library is jointly funded by the New South Wales and Commonwealth Governments. It serves approximately 85 judges, acting judges, masters and registrars and 180 support staff.

The Law Courts Library has two categories of clients:

- primary clients are the judges, masters, Federal magistrates, registrars together with their associates, researchers and tipstaves.
- secondary clients are members of the legal profession, litigants and libraries that have access to the Law Court Library's collection and services on a user-pays basis.

Services include research and reference services, provision of authorities for use in court and document delivery and inter-library loans services, but arguably the most important service offered by the Law Courts Library is training.

TRAINING

Each year new court staff are appointed to work for individual judges and as researchers. They are generally law graduates direct from university although some have had work experience. The general intake is in late January each year, with a smaller intake midyear when there is another twelve-month change over.

The new graduates find that because their legal research training was in their first year of studies, their recollection is inadequate for the duties they are expected to fulfil for their judges. They are generally very familiar with the Australasian Legal Information Institute (AustLII), which they rely on as their first port of call, but become bewildered if AustLII is not forthcoming with answers to their queries. The assumption that everything is on the Internet is extremely prevalent, ignoring the importance of other electronic formats and hard copy resources. The Law Courts Library now provides over 87 databases in the form of CD-ROM titles and online subscription services which judges and staff throughout the building can access from their desktops via the network.

A series of training sessions and workshops are offered throughout the year to help equip the new court staff for their work. Our challenge is to help get new staff up to speed as quickly as possible. The Library invests considerable resources for this purpose. The development of our training programme has been a major focus for the last few years. A particular challenge for us is the lack of a dedicated training room in the Library. All training must be conducted with minimal disruption to other library clients.

TOURS

All new court staff are offered, and are strongly encouraged to attend, introductory library tours. A maximum of five people per tour are given a one-hour overview of the Library’s resources and services.

WORKSHOPS

Legislation Workshops

Experience suggests that the new tipstaves and associates find legislation research to be their weakest area of legal research. An example of the type of difficulty experienced is typified by a young tipstaff, sent from court by the judge to get a second reading speech from Hansard. After I assisted him, he returned looking troubled. On inquiring what the problem was, he replied; ‘Oh no, this will not do. This is the second reading speech for the Bill. The Judge wants the second reading speech for the Act’

As an understanding of legislative research is particularly important in the work of superior courts, specialist legislation workshops are offered, covering the whole legislation process, including parliamentary procedure and the relevant nomenclature, e.g. the difference between a Bill and an Act. The workshops provide hands-on experience with both paper and electronic sources of legislative information. They are designed to equip court staff with the skills to find information such as the correct form of legislation at a given date, to locate second reading speeches and to compile legislative histories.

Legal research workshops

Associate Professor Rob Watt of the Faculty of Law, University of Technology, conducts legal research workshops for new court staff on a twice-yearly basis. These are a series of four workshops, comprising a refresher on Australian legal research; United States legal research, which is always the most popular programme; United Kingdom and European Union; and International Law.

Electronic resources workshops

Jane Pritchard, the Library’s Systems Manager, has developed a series of hands-on electronic training workshops:

- Basic Internet Searching
- Advanced Internet Searching
- Introduction to the Legal Research Network, including the popular Australian CD-ROMs
- Advanced Legal Research using Overseas CD-ROMs
- Legal Literature Searching

Every month the five different training courses are available to court staff. In February and March when most of the new tipstaves and associates commence employment, courses can be run several times a week. The courses are hands-on, with each participant having access to a computer. Hint sheets which summarise the training session and detail the steps in searching, tagging and printing, are given to participants. Over 110 judges and court staff were trained to use the Library’s electronic resources and the Internet during 2000.

Training is offered to judges in their chambers, at their convenience, and is generally conducted one-to-one. Each session is individually tailored to the requirements of the particular judge.

RECOMMENDATIONS

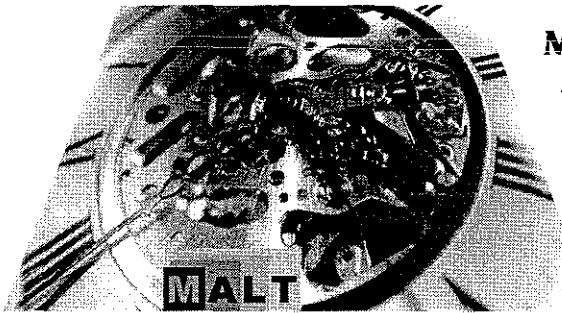
- Advertise. The Library currently issues a bimonthly Library Bulletin which includes new products, training schedules and hints. Jane Pritchard also sends out a memo every six months reminding the judges that training is available. Timing is important: post-Christmas always generates a good response.
- Be flexible. Participation at lunchtime legislation workshops increased dramatically when participants were invited to bring their lunch. The window of opportunity for training is quite small. The tipstaves and associates are in court during the day. Time available for training is an hour at lunchtime and after 4.30 p.m. The latter time is not always popular for training as the participants are already drained from a long day of concentrating in court.
- Make sure all the Library’s Reader Services staff are familiar with the CD-ROM products: how to search, how to print, what the product covers. They are the people who informally train court staff and judges every day to print out a judgment or find a case.
- Use evaluation forms. The feedback continually enhances the quality of the training sessions.
- Be ready to drop everything to give assistance to your primary clients, whether in person, phone or email. Ongoing assistance is required because clients often use particular resources irregularly.
- Make training material look as professional as possible.
- Send Library staff to Train the Trainer courses. Such courses emphasise the importance of training session plans with set examples.

TRAINING FOR SECONDARY CLIENTS

From time to time, law librarian clients have expressed an interest in attending the various Law Courts Library training sessions. Law firm librarians in particular have stressed the suitability of particular sessions for training their new library staff. Sessions have previously been restricted to court staff, but due to the

increasing interest in our courses, the Law Courts Library Management Committee has approved that, if places are available, they can be offered to secondary clients for a fee to be determined. Law librarian clients are therefore encouraged to enquire about any courses they see advertised at the Law Courts Library. Places are more likely to be available for courses which are run later in the year.

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