

From Student to Law Librarian: Challenges and Opportunities

Alissa Sputore

Librarian, Legal Aid Western Australia

ATTRactions OF LAW LIBRARIANSHIP

I became interested in special librarianship in the early stages of studying for the Bachelor of Applied Science (Information and Library Studies) degree at Curtin University in 1996. The initial attractions for me were the challenges of providing information services in a dynamic business environment and the opportunities to undertake complex reference work. A later realisation was that law librarianship provided the opportunity to be part of a team working for justice and helping people in the community, something I find very rewarding. My first position in the field of law librarianship came about with some help from serendipity, when I saw the job advertisement on the university noticeboard on the same day as the closing date for applications. Fortunately they were happy to accept a late application and my foot was in the door!

The position was as a student librarian at the Western Australian Bar Association Library in Perth. I worked one day a week which fitted perfectly with second year studies at university, with some extra days required when the Librarian took leave. It was a great opportunity to begin working in law librarianship, as I was not expected to know anything about the law and was given training from the ground up. The Librarian was a patient teacher and I learnt from her both practical skills and theory over a period of eighteen months' employment. My work predominantly involved general administrative duties and the ubiquitous looseleaf filing. However, there was ample opportunity to assist clients with simple queries such as using electronic databases, and the Librarian often took time to walk me through the more complex reference work she was completing for clients.

SKILL DEVELOPMENT

I would summarise my training and learning in this position as having three tiers. I found in the early days that simple tasks, such as shelving or shelf tidying, were the best ways to get an overview of the law and an understanding of how legal information is published and organised. I next became familiar with the contents of the major legal sources such as Halsbury's, *Australian Legal Monthly Digest* and government gazettes and identified the specialist publications for different types of law. From there, applying information sources to particular research problems comes with experience and the greater the experience the more efficient legal research becomes.

Working in law librarianship encouraged me to undertake further study in that area and in the third year of my degree course at Curtin University I studied an introductory law unit in the Business School. This gave me an excellent general background to law and it was particularly valuable to get an insight into the way lawyers learn to think and work. I also took the optional Legal Reference unit in the BAppSci(ILS) course. I had been working at the Bar Association Library for over a year when I started this unit, so whilst I was familiar with the information sources we studied, the course nonetheless offered an excellent consolidation of the practical skills and knowledge involved in law librarianship. A primary learning tool, to which I still refer today, was Campbell's *Legal Research: materials and methods* which discusses major sources and tools in legal research in a clear and practical manner¹

I continued to work at the Bar Association Library whilst finishing my degree. Other casual positions came my way through university-based practicums and personal networks and these also contributed to my transition from student to professional. I often found my practical experiences assisting me with university assignments. My employers and colleagues were always able to fill any gaps in my understanding and answer all those tricky questions students ask! At the same

¹ Campbell, E, York, Lee Poh. & Tooher, J. 1996, *Legal Research: materials and methods*, 4th edn, LBC, Sydney.

time, it was extremely valuable to put my education into practice and actually employ some of the skills and theory I had been learning.

EXPERIENCE ABROAD

After graduating from University in 1998 I travelled to the United Kingdom on a working holiday. I was aware of employment agencies for information professionals in London, but had no real plan in mind. After travelling for several months I approached these agencies with high expectations and found that my lack of experience in England, plus my status as a new graduate, meant I was a small fish in a very big pond! Almost all law librarian positions required experience with online services and my brief introduction to DIALOG at university didn't cut the mustard! However, there was plenty of work around and after several short term assignments in health libraries (in which, by the way, I had had no experience whatsoever!) I managed to talk my way into a three month contract at the British Library's Business Information Service. They told me later I stood out among other applicants as the only one who had visited the library's exhibitions as a tourist!

Working at the British Library (BL) as a temp was an extreme case of being thrown in at the deep end, but I must have kept my head above water as I ended up staying six months! My position there involved a mix of non-professional and professional duties, such as shelving in the BL's huge basement and some of the most challenging reference work I have been involved with to date. It was an excellent learning experience, sharpening my quick thinking and fast learning skills and my ability to use past experiences to adapt to a new library environment. It was also very stimulating to work at the BL and be surrounded by so many fellow professionals, as well as the amazing items that form its collection.

NETWORKING

After returning from overseas I put my networking skills into action and was employed on a three-month contract as a Librarian at Legal Aid WA in Perth. Over nine months later I am still there and thoroughly enjoying the reference

work, current awareness and collection management duties I am required to perform on a daily basis.

Networking is an important part of a career in librarianship and when making the transition from student to professional this can be particularly valuable. Through it one creates opportunities to talk to colleagues and to apply simple conversational skills, such as remembering names. It is also a good way of keeping abreast of current happenings in the field, and can lead to discussions in which job opportunities are mentioned. There is nothing wrong with letting people know you are looking for work because those already working in the field are well placed to keep an eye on vacancies and other opportunities. If you are looking for work and are given leads by your 'network' make sure to follow these up, and always thank people for thinking of you or they probably won't bother next time. Keeping in touch with previous employers, colleagues and fellow students and joining professional groups are the obvious ways to form a 'network', but do not overlook friends and acquaintances outside the information profession. It is important to keep as many doors open as possible and not limit yourself solely to law librarianship, or even libraries period.

Joining email lists such as the *anz-law-librarians* list is a great way to hear about job opportunities. You can also place your name on a job register, such as the one maintained by the Australian Law Librarians' Group (WA Division). Short-term contracts will often be advertised informally in this way. Contract positions that do not require you to address selection criteria can be an excellent way of building up practical experience and skills so that you can become more competitive for those positions that do require you to write to a selection criteria. The email lists are also a valuable way to keep up with current issues in the profession and the types of skills and knowledge that are desirable.

Personal skills that I have found to be invaluable in making the transition from student to law librarian include the ability to communicate well with people on all levels and the confidence to deal with any situation calmly and professionally; from a stressed-out solicitor wanting something five minutes ago, to a new articulated clerk who has just dropped a looseleaf service and scattered pages all over

the floor! Good common sense and an understanding of a business environment is important, as well as a knowledge of current affairs and the ability to deal with confidential information discreetly.

The support of library and non-library colleagues is invaluable to the new graduate, especially library staff who work as a team and share information freely. Library Managers and supervisors who have an open-door policy and are always happy to answer questions (even for the tenth time!) assist the graduate to avoid pitfalls and disasters. Filtering organisational goals and other managerial directions to library staff will ensure they remain motivated and dedicated to the organisation as a whole and give direction to the library service.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

I have thoroughly enjoyed my short career in law libraries and I have felt pride and personal satisfaction at my achievements in each of my positions to date. However, I am not sure that my transition is complete and I have some concerns about my future in the law librarianship profession. One particular concern is that the field of law librarianship seems to be currently saturated and there is a shortage of positions and opportunities available, particularly for new graduates. I have been assured that the field will grow and keep pace with the legal profession and that the need for information management is only likely to increase with developments in publishing and information technology, however, for new graduates a more proactive and immediate approach is needed. Perhaps new librarians need to diversify their skills so as not to limit themselves to library environments. Some particular skills to open doors in the legal environment might be records management skills, information technology skills or paralegal skills. Alternatively, taking opportunities in other special library environments will mean new graduates are gaining valuable skills and experience that can always be applied to the law environment when something does become available.

Another issue for new graduates in law librarianship is the use of short-term contracts. There are both advantages and disadvantages to working in this way. Building up experience and exposure to a variety of library environments and

working practices is one of the advantages of taking up short-term contracts and help a new graduate become a more capable and flexible employee. However, a short-term contract cannot provide the professional or personal security one would like when starting out in a career. Training opportunities, eligibility for promotions, pay increases and other workplace benefits are limited and long-term career planning is impossible. On a personal level, obtaining and repaying loans is just one of the difficulties of working on short-term contracts and is one of particular concern to young graduates.

CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CPD)

To continue to establish myself professionally there is still so much I would like to learn. The expense of tertiary education can be a barrier to career development, but one I feel law librarians will need to overcome as information management becomes more crucial to their organisation's bottom line. Skills in areas such as strategic planning, risk management and information technology are increasingly called upon as a librarian moves into managerial roles. Further study would be valuable in providing the librarian with skills to perform at the same level as other managers in an organisation.

It would be extremely valuable for new graduates to be able to attend conferences on law or special librarianship, enabling them to mix with peers, develop networks, and learn about developments at the cutting edge of the profession, which university studies may not have been able to cover. However, so many workplaces cannot afford to support these kinds of expenses and it is left to the individual to pay their own way. The cost of a delegate from Perth attending the 2001 Special, Health and Law Librarians Conference in Melbourne is at least \$1500, including airfares, registration and accommodation. To justify this expense, a new graduate would want to be sure the knowledge gleaned from attending such a conference would be considered in their favour when applying for positions. Unfortunately, selection criteria for many professional positions seem focussed on practical skills and proven experience rather than on theory and dedication.

I would like to see more affordable continuing professional development in the special librarianship field and greater access to these opportunities for new graduates. I feel it is the role of professional bodies such as the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) to encourage new graduates to become involved in CPD. Professional bodies could consider offering reduced membership and conference fees for new graduates and/or first time attendees, with the aim of increasing their exposure, membership and registration numbers. Again, greater workplace recognition for CPD efforts is crucial to encouraging new graduates to become involved with professional bodies. I would like to see ALIA and the ALLG more actively promoting library services and staff to key players in business and government. Involvement of law librarians with other professional bodies, such as the Law Society, could also raise awareness of the value of libraries and CPD amongst our clients and employers.

In my short law librarianship career I have noticed a wide range of attitudes to information services. Some legal professionals think of an information service as a core business unit, an investment and a resource which can be highly personalised and tailored to meet an organisation's information needs, while others see information service merely as a collection of documents. The former group will be heavy library users, the latter you will probably never see! Unfortunately this attitude carries over to staff also and law librarians really need to get out into their organisation and show people what they are capable of in order to avoid outmoded stereotypes. We need to become better advocates for ourselves and our abilities, using management and marketing skills to tailor our services to an organisation's business needs. These skills need to be developed more aggressively at both the tertiary education and continuing professional development levels. However, simply providing good 'customer service' by being polite, helpful and patient, plus going that extra mile to get the best possible information for your client, can make a radical difference to your clients' perceptions of the library service.

Together, these efforts will encourage a steady flow of new graduates into law librarianship and ensure that they receive the necessary education and encouragement to make valuable contributions to the profession.