

Law Librarians Check Out Options

In a tough economy, many law librarians are not just seeing their book collections shrink, they're seeing their work hours decreased, too.

The changes have forced some to move into library positions outside of law firms, pursue freelance opportunities, and ponder what's in store for the next generation of law librarians.

"I think our profession will morph to meet the changing needs of the evolving economy. I have faith that we will come back as a profession much stronger than before," states Evelyn Campbell, Head Librarian at South University — Richmond.

Campbell worked as a law librarian for 18 years before she was laid off. Because law libraries do not directly generate revenue for a firm, librarians are some of the first employees cut in downsizing. "Law firm libraries are by nature already very lean departments with bare minimum staff handling the research needs of the entire firm," she explains, so even small cuts to the staff can have big consequences to the law firm as a whole.

The cutbacks affecting many law firm employees, including librarians, have been chronicled on numerous websites, including Above The Law and Law Librarian Blog. On these sites, people come together to talk about their situations, offer advice, post job openings, and discuss future prospects.

Campbell personally knows law librarians whose hours were reduced, forcing them to take retail jobs to make up the difference in their salaries. Some have also turned to freelance opportunities to keep their foot in the door while they continue their job search. This has created an opportunity for online groups to come together to support fellow displaced law professionals.

The National Association of Freelance Legal Professionals (NAFLP) is a community of freelancers that offers monthly "Telecoffee" meetings where group members share information and provide tips on freelancing within the legal industry. The site also has blog posts and materials that help freelancers to start and market a business. FreelanceLaw, an online service that facilitates connections between freelance legal professionals and law firms, has over 1,200 registered freelancers. There is also a Project Wall with job postings.

Campbell feels that these types of groups are beneficial helping law librarians to prepare for an uncertain future. Organizations such as the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) have even responded to members' needs by reducing membership fees for librarians who had lost their jobs, she says. "It has created a job resource center, and has been a beacon of light in the darkness for many laid off librarians," she states.

Despite the current challenges within the industry, things are starting to improve, according to an AALL survey. The results showed an improved economic outlook for law libraries, based on data collected in April and September of 2009. "Staff reductions, hiring freezes, and budget cuts have slowed," the study found.

But the survey also showed that jobs in private law libraries continue to be hardest hit. Responses to the September 2009 survey showed that 18% of libraries had reduced staffing and 50% implemented a hiring freeze in the previous six months.

"What happened in law libraries did not happen in a vacuum," says Campbell, adding that the law firm where she worked had reduced its law library's collection by more than 30% in just five years.

As collections shrank, firms turned to online support resources such as Lexis and Westlaw. Having used both programs, Campbell touts their benefits. "I do not think that people have lost their jobs because these two products exist. If you are not well versed in the intricacies of research on Lexis and Westlaw, then having them does you no good. You still need human intelligence to navigate through the two products."

Susan Davis, a former law firm librarian who started her own consulting service after being laid off, supports this notion. In an interview with the *Connecticut Law Tribune*, Davis asserted that online services did not displace library employees, but instead helped them to access information needed to keep a firm

running smoothly. "You need to find what materials are best suited to the people who need the information. And a lot of the research is done by the law librarians."

With the downsizing of law library collections, an increased reliance upon technology, and the reality that librarian staffing needs have decreased, what can industry professionals do to keep themselves employed? Campbell recommends diversification. "Don't limit yourself to those library jobs defined by tradition; have a sense of adventure, and carve out a library role in an industry or a place which never had one before. Be a pioneer in that new world that is coming to being."