

An Unexpected Challenge for Law Librarians

Information is the foundation of the practice of law. The vast accumulated history of law transactions is what gives legal services its value. Applying all that information is what lawyers do. Managing the information falls on the shoulders of law librarians, often the unsung heroes of law practices.



That lack of recognition is beginning to change, however. Some firms feel their librarians' work is so important that they have created a C-level position for it: Chief Knowledge Officer. And with enormous responsibility come equally large challenges. Beyond managing the current physical and electronic contents of a firm's library, a CKO must consider the firm's future information needs, forecasting how the firm's strategic plan is going to shape the library's contents. This in turn influences the library's spatial needs, and a CKO is fundamentally involved in analyzing space usage now and in the future. A library's spatial needs presents unique challenges:

Organizing/Categorizing – Is the practice's library organized into cases, codes, and comments, or is it organized by category, perhaps on different floors: family law, intellectual property law, trusts? Organization dictates the quantity and arrangement of shelving and filing, and a mobile high-density shelving system will maximize capacity and reduce the storage footprint.

Archiving– Librarians have a strong hoarding tendency, and law librarians are no exception. Case documents need a home for years to come, and may need to be accessed again in the future. How large, and how quickly, an archive will grow over time determines the amount of storage that will be needed down the road. An expandable storage system gives librarians the flexibility to respond to both anticipated and unexpected archiving needs.

Tracking – Paper documents have a way of migrating from desk to desk, and disappearing under stacks of other paper documents. When there are potentially hundreds of documents comprising a single case, it's vital to know the whereabouts of each document. CKO's can take a page from the retail and warehouse world, where automated inventory systems use RFID to enumerate and track assets. Specialized paper with embedded RFID fibers, and RFID tags for books and files, enable librarians to know how many documents they have, and where they are at any time.



The Space & Information Professionals

Scanning – Working in Hybrid Tracking/Content Management solutions creates opportunities for firms to create digital content from scanning projects, on an ad hoc or even an as needed basis. For very active filing systems, back file scanning conversions allow firms to quickly and cost effectively scan significant amounts of paper files as desired. Utilizing a Hybrid Tracking/Content Management solution, then allows the introduction of scanned files directly back to the system that managed them in physical form. Conversion of records and media of all type is a highly mature service offering and all media types typically present in the active law firm also have readily available conversion methods.

CKO's and their staff have a lot of information to sift through, organize and manage. Just in 2015 (the most recent year for which statistics are available), over 350,000 cases were filed in U.S. Federal courts alone. Rather than add to the research burden when it's time to consider a space plan, CKO's can talk to a qualified storage consultant to get recommendations suited to their one-of-a-kind space utilization needs.