

Trends in Law Library Management And Technology

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One and Many: The Challenge of Managing A Multi-site Library

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Imagine that you are a library director. You have been at work every day, but you haven't seen half of your staff in more than six months. A new library technician started a month ago, but you haven't met her yet. Several of your staff have never met each other. Most of your users have never seen your library, or even your building. Are you working in the twilight zone? Or maybe in some new "virtual library?" No – welcome to the world of the United States Courts libraries!

The Lay of the Land

The federal circuit libraries provide services to the judges and staff of the United States Courts through 13 library systems, one for each of the 12 geographic circuits plus the special jurisdiction Federal Circuit. All of these except the District of Columbia Circuit and the Federal Circuit are multi-location library systems. Each system has a headquarters library and three to eighteen "satellites" or "branches."

The 8th Circuit, where I serve as circuit librarian, has jurisdiction over seven states – Arkansas, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Five of these are among the top 18 largest states in the nation in area. The library system consists of 10 libraries, with about half the staff (11.6 fte) in the headquarters library in St. Louis, and the rest (11.9 fte) in one or two-person branch libraries. The library system is responsible for serving the information needs of 145 judges who have resident chambers in 27 different cities, plus their law clerks, secretaries, and the court support offices. All chambers have small (or sometimes not so small) chambers' libraries, plus there are many "shared" or "visiting" libraries, the latter in locations where there is no resident staff, but court is held periodically. We provide reference and research services, maintain the staffed libraries and assist with the chambers, shared and visiting libraries, coordinate Westlaw and Lexis use and training services, and order books and subscriptions for all court offices – more than 200 separate addresses.

Our 478,235 square mile service area presents special challenges both in personnel administration and service delivery. Maintaining a cohesive staff is extraordinarily difficult, since face-to-face contact may occur only once or twice a year at most, and some staff never meet each other. Typical supervision of branch librarians is not feasible, because day-to-day observation of their work is impossible. Therefore, branch librarian selection and training is extremely important. Branch librarians must be sufficiently experienced and independent to function with virtually no day-to-day supervision. They must also be able to cope with the isolation of having no professional colleagues on site.

Providing timely delivery of information to users is also made extraordinarily difficult when the user and the material needed may be hundreds of miles apart. Assisting judges with their chambers' libraries may require an overnight trip, and the librarian and some of her users may rarely, if ever, see each other.

Uniting Scattered Staff Through Technology

Fortunately, technology has greatly helped us to deal with these challenges. The courts tend to approach operational changes conservatively and generally lack the funding for "cutting edge" technology, but widespread use of e-mail, faxed and digitally scanned materials, active web sites, and teleconferences have revolutionized our operations.

Imagine the endless rounds of time-consuming phone tag if you had to make nine separate phone calls in order to announce a new procedure to your staff. With e-mail and fax, we became able for the first time to simultaneously inform all locations of new information. We have also been able to help unite our scattered staff with "the daily" message – an e-mail sent at 9:00 each morning to all locations to inform them of who's scheduled off that day, who's called in sick or is planning to leave early, who's celebrating a birthday.

New branch staff may still not meet each other for many months, if ever, but at least now we can put a face with the name and voice by scanning a photo of the new staff member and e-mailing it to all. E-mail has made it possible not only for librarians in different locations to express their opinions on a topic, but also to see and respond to each other's answers, creating a "virtual dialogue."

In the same way, technology has made it possible for branch and St. Louis librarians to collaborate on projects in a way that was previously impossible. As a result, committees of professional staff have created a multi-location disaster manual, a collection development policy, and a procedure manual. Our procedure manual was first published in looseleaf format. This was a very valuable document, but of course the filing was time consuming as was the issuing and distributing of new procedures. So about two years ago, it was converted to a web-based format and posted on the court intranet, enabling staff in all locations to access the same information whenever they needed it. New procedures are sent to the procedures manual committee, who quickly convert them to html and upload them to the web page. A personnel manual was also developed, and though the committee had a working print version, the only issuance to the staff was in html.

While these collaborations have generated very valuable products, perhaps the greatest value has been in providing professional enrichment to the isolated branch librarians, who work in buildings in which they are the only librarian. Most tried to develop professional contacts through involvement in local librarian groups, but they were largely left out of the 8th Circuit Library's policy development and projects, which were handled primarily by the larger St. Louis staff. None of the St. Louis staff had ever worked in a branch library, and therefore lacked a clear understanding of the branch staff's needs. Addition of the branch librarians to these types of activities has greatly expanded the range of ideas available, and made the resulting projects much more useful.

Expanding the Library's Role

The acquiring of an integrated library system was also of particular value for our geographically dispersed library system. Through a national contract, all federal court libraries acquired a modified version of Sirsi's Unicorn, including online catalog, acquisitions, serials control and circulation modules. The cataloging and acquisitions systems were implemented by all circuits; each circuit then decided whether to add the other modules. Prior to implementing the online catalog and serials check in modules, each library had to maintain a card catalog and a Kardex. As a result, there was a total of nine card catalogs and nine Kardex serials check-in files in the 8th Circuit. Maintaining all these systems was time consuming. A great deal of the librarians' time had to be spent on such mundane tasks as filing cards, updating holdings information (which constantly changed because of all the locations) and recording serials receipt information. The online catalog and serials record have freed the librarians to do work which is more interesting and more directly beneficial to users, has enabled locations to easily share holdings and receipt information, and has made it possible for judges throughout the circuit, even those who are located where there is no library, to view the library's catalog.

Unicorn's ability to process large amounts of data also made it possible for the circuit libraries to handle the acquiring of law books for all judges and court offices in each circuit. Before Unicorn, all books were ordered centrally by the Administrative Office of Courts in Washington, D.C. The Administrative Office staff was too far removed to be able to prioritize the ordering process to best meet users' needs, and had no effective way to work with the users to keep costs under control. With the national implementation of Unicorn, law book funding and responsibility for acquisitions were "decentralized." Each circuit now has the opportunity and the challenge of managing large law book budgets and a huge acquisitions workload in a way that meets the unique needs of our judges. Soon after decentralization, there were major cuts in law book funding, but the circuit libraries were able to meet this crisis by working directly with the judges to identify the materials that were most important.

Bringing Research Services to Isolated Users

Technology has also improved the ability of isolated judges to do research, and enabled librarians to reach them with needed information. Having in chambers access to Westlaw, Lexis, and the internet brought a wealth of previously unavailable legal information to the desktops of judges in remote locations from El Dorado, Arkansas and Cape Girardeau, Missouri to Duluth, Minnesota, and Bismarck, North Dakota. Instead of depending on mail or overnight delivery services to reach these judges with library materials, we are now able to provide copies by faxing, scanning, e-mailing, or using internet links.

The library has developed a web page on the Court's intranet which provides a listing of sites valuable to the federal court research process. It also serves as an easy portal for access to Westlaw, Lexis, and some recently acquired online services like Hein Online and selected products from Matthew Bender, Oceana and Gale. The web page provides information and photos of staff (who some users may otherwise never see) and access to our publications. The library also uses the web page to help create a bond among isolated court staff. Pictures from court events throughout the circuit are posted, and for the 2003 Library Week, we compiled and

posted a listing of users' favorite books.

E-mail has enabled us make announcements to all of our staff simultaneously and we can now easily convey important information to everyone in the circuit. This is usually done by sending a message from St. Louis to the branch librarians, and having them forward it to each of their users.

E-mail has also made library staff more accessible to users. Even if the librarian is away, the judge or law clerk can leave messages and research requests. At the same time, e-mail has increased the personal accessibility of many judges. While some still prefer traditional, formal means of communication, a growing number handle their own e-mail. Staff who may have felt uncomfortable calling a judge directly may find him or her to be much more approachable electronically.

Looking Ahead

With e-mail, fax, and the internet now a regular part of our work day, we have begun to look at other ways to use technology to better work together and to reach our users. These steps may be accelerated by an anticipated large budget cut for fiscal year 2004, which is expected to make face-to-face meetings and mailing of publications economically prohibitive. We recently held our first teleconference staff meeting with all branch librarians. We expect to have more teleconferences, perhaps on a regular basis throughout the year. We plan to explore the cost and feasibility of video conferencing, since most of our courthouses now have this capability. A new version of the Judiciary's e-mail system will have a realtime chat capability, so we hope to use that feature to facilitate staff discussions and project collaborations. Virtual reference programs also may have application for our far-flung users.

We currently issue several print publications that we must copy and mail to more than 200 offices. This is extremely expensive and labor-intensive. Beginning with the next issue, our bimonthly newsletter may only be posted on our web page with user recipients being e-mailed an announcement and link. This will not only save costs, but will also bring the newsletter to the desktops of law clerks, who are often not routed their chambers' print version. Also our compilation of photocopied title pages from law reviews received in St. Louis may be replaced with access to the University of Washington's electronic Current Index to Legal Periodicals. We will work with users to develop profiles that meet their particular interests. Finally, we are exploring various electronic replacements for our news clipping service which is currently copied and mailed weekly to 150 users.

While we may not be cutting edge, the adoption of e-mail, fax and internet technologies have greatly enhanced services, united scattered library staffs, and provided new professional opportunities for isolated branch librarians in the federal courts. We look forward to the new opportunities that future technology may provide.

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Endnotes

¹The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the United States Court of Appeals Eighth Circuit Library.