Space planning for law libraries
Futurists have long predicted the demise of the book followed closely by the end of brick and mortar libraries. Despite these forecasts, libraries continue to survive and thrive. At the same time, dramatic changes in technology and communications have transformed the practice of law and the delivery of information resources and services. The not surprising result: the 21st century law library is barely recognizable from the days when books were the most important resource and library staff could sit and wait for users to walk in the door.

Today, the average law firm library is considerably smaller, with fewer book stacks, a smaller (or no) reference desk and limited seating for the attorneys who still like to work there. All this was true before the most recent economic downturn and plenty of experts expect these trends to continue long after the economy has recovered.

Whatever the size of your firm and your library, the goal of library design remains the same: the creation of functional space that will support today’s information needs and yet is flexible enough to respond to the changing needs of tomorrow.

Whether you are building new space or renovating existing space, this Resource Guide provides information on each phase of the project from the initial planning process through the final move to new space. It also includes practical examples of how three law firms solved their library space and design challenges and the lessons they learned.
Getting started:
The planning process

Office space is expensive. Just how many of those valuable square feet should be allocated to the library? Unfortunately, there is no magic formula based on number of attorneys or any other criteria. There is only one way to determine the square footage requirement and that is by analyzing the information requirements of the firm. This task should be undertaken by someone who is knowledgeable about library operations and information management techniques: a librarian.

Firms often begin analyzing library space needs by looking at the book collection. This is understandable given that book stacks take up such a large percentage of the space in a traditional library. But, there is much more to a library than book stacks. To ensure that the space is designed to support the work of the firm, first look at the entire organization and only then analyze the library operation.

Your own library staff and users are in the best position to address these issues. It also makes sense to look at firms with similar practices although what works well for another organization may not fit your firm’s culture or budget. The literature is also filled with articles about the library of the future. Those written by librarians tend to be much more realistic than those written by architects, electronic publishers and others who are not involved with the daily provision of information services.

Step One: Examine the Organization

Start with the firm’s strategic plan. What are the plans for growth (or contraction) in time-keepers, offices and practices? Who do you count as your major clients and industries and who do you hope to attract in the future?

Examine the state of technology in the firm. What changes are in the works? Is there an Information Services staff available to provide technical assistance or do support departments rely on their own staff members?

Consider non-traditional use of the space. Do you need an informal gathering spot for attorneys from different practice areas? How about a setting for formal receptions?

Step Two: Evaluate the Library Operation

Assess the user population. Do the librarians and resources in this office support just the local office or other populations as well? How does it affect the size of the library staff and the collection?

Analyze the firm’s resources. Does it make sense to replace some of the books with electronic versions? Is now the time to discard those large sets no one uses and cancelled materials still sitting on the shelves?

Examine products and services. Will they be changed or expanded? How will this affect resource, technology and staffing requirements?
Of course your library staff will be intimately involved in the library portion of your project. They also have knowledge and skills that can be put to use to support firm-wide activities, from initial planning through design and the physical move. Take advantage of this expertise by involving your librarians from the very start. Here are some ways that they can bring added value to the table.

Getting the Information You Need
Librarians are the research experts, so why not ask them to conduct research? They can find information on current trends in law firm space planning, real estate costs, the LEED certification process, current and upcoming construction projects, and whatever else you need.

Keeping Things Organized
Design projects last a long time and can leave you drowning in documents of all shapes and sizes. (Think broker’s spiral presentation folders, architect’s oversized blueprints and lawyer’s thick contracts just to name a few.) Then there are all the electronic emails and memos containing critical records of actions taken and decisions made. Your librarian can help you organize all this data so that it is easy to retrieve as you need it. In some cases, your librarian may even be able to set up and organize an intranet site or page for the space planning committee or team to use to share documents, ideas and other information.

Sharing Best Practices
Librarians have developed a variety of tools and techniques for moving the collection, including books, files and other resources. They can share these processes with personnel in other departments, such as records, even helping other administrators to adapt them as needed.

Many law firms take advantage of a design project to qualify for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification, the U.S. Green Building Council standards for environmentally sustainable construction. There are many ways that the library can contribute to the LEED certification process and to ongoing efforts by the firm to “Go Green.”

Reuse and Repurpose
Consider whether any of the existing furnishings and fixtures in the library can be reused and repurposed in the new space. Can the shelving be repainted and moved? Can tables be refinished or can chairs be reupholstered? If not, how about donating to a non-profit (you may get a tax deduction) or having items picked up by a recycling company?

Convert Resources
Ask your librarian to estimate how much paper the firm is saving as the result of a) converting from print to electronic resources, b) delivering research results as PDF attachments instead of printing the results, and c) distributing current awareness newsletters in electronic form instead of paper.

Recycle
Make sure that all areas have recycling cans and place larger recycling bins in the technical services area to accommodate the extra large amounts of recycled paper and books. If you are weeding a quantity of print materials, look for a company that will recycle them instead of just throwing them out.

Use Natural Light
One of the biggest current trends in law firm design (and a large component of LEED certification) is bringing light into the core of the building and providing as much natural light as possible. The library can be a showcase for the use of natural light by situating it so that it takes full advantage of natural light sources.
A number of organizations (and, perhaps, your architecture firm) collect statistics but they should be used with care.

I found a survey that lists the average number of square feet dedicated to the library per attorney for firms of our size. Should I rely on this survey to calculate the size of the new library?

There are problems with this type of survey data. First, even if accurate, the survey reveals only the average size of the libraries and not whether those libraries are the right size to support the information needs of the firm. Second, no one is average. The right size for your firm will depend on a variety of factors, including the types of law practiced, the number of practice groups, the use of e-resources, and opportunities for sharing resources within the community.

What about statistics that show the growth rate of the collection? Can they be relied on to predict the future?

When the future resembled the past, relying on specific numbers (volumes added per year) and rates (percentage growth or decline) made sense. Today, all we know for sure is that the future is highly unlikely to resemble the past.

So, do survey statistics tell us anything about library space?

Yes, statistics can be used to show trends, useful for evaluating whether your individual experience is in line with others. For example, The American Lawyer has been publishing an annual survey of AmLaw 200 librarians since 2002. The questions have changed over the years making apple to apple comparisons difficult, but, whether asking about the size of the library, the loss of shelf space, or cancellations of print volumes, it is clear that the physical space and the size of print collections has been declining. (See Law Librarian Surveys, 2002-2010, created by ALM Legal Intelligence.)
The heart of the matter: Design considerations

The most significant library design trends are not new, but they remain a vital part of an effective design program. Taken together, these trends illustrate the change in emphasis from housing collections of books to supporting a range of library activities, from quiet study to collaborative work and training activities.

Promote collaboration. As the world increases in complexity, so does the need for collaboration. Today’s libraries are designed to support and even encourage collaboration among users, among staff members, and between users and staff.

- Tear down one or more walls, allowing the library space to blend with other work spaces to underscore the importance of research and information services to the core business of the firm.
- Use devices such as cafés, or at least coffee bars, and casual seating areas to promote lingering and casual interaction and to encourage the use of the library as a gathering place.
- Eliminate the traditional reference desk which sets up a barrier between user and staff. Instead, provide round or L-shaped desks where users and staff can sit comfortably while they confer about assignments or review resources.

Support technology. Users expect libraries to provide the latest equipment onsite and to support whatever devices they bring in.

- Provide network and wireless access, computer terminals and printers. As long as there are books, you will also need a copier in the library or located nearby.
- When locating equipment, consider where users, patrons, staff and repair technicians will stand to pick up print outs, load paper, change toner, fix jams, provide service and the like.
- Locate outlets near every seating area. Use grommets, cable trays and other devices to manage the inevitable tangle of wires.

Accommodate the (dwindling) print collection. Although our collections are smaller, most law librarians expect books to be with us for some time to come. Legal treatises, science texts used by IP attorneys, and the law of many non-U.S. countries are just a few examples of collections likely to remain in print.

- For large collections, save space by housing most of the collection in compact shelving.
- Opt for as much fixed shelving as space limitations allow. Fixed shelves are more attractive and less likely to block light and sight lines.
- Provide a station and equipment to accommodate a bar code reader or other circulation control system.

Acknowledge decreased foot traffic. Most libraries have experienced a significant drop in visitors and this change is reflected in library design. Even so, there are many attorneys who appreciate having the library as a refuge from ringing phones and other interruptions.

- Reduce the size of the large reference desk that used to greet visitors as they came into the library, or eliminate it completely in favor of locating staff offices within eyesight of the entrance.
- Specify carrels or small tables for individuals seeking a quiet place to use the print collection, draft or work on other projects. A location near the book stacks and away from busy or high traffic areas is best.
- To accommodate groups, specify larger tables and locate them in noisy areas.

Encourage training. Designated training areas have never been more important to ensure the efficient and cost-effective use of expensive resources and technologies.

- Equip training rooms with teaching equipment, including projectors, screens and electronic whiteboards.
- Make training rooms flexible by designing to accommodate both classroom and conference style seating.
Consider designating at least one computer in the library for demonstrations during orientation tours and impromptu teaching opportunities.

**Promote flexibility.** With the world changing quickly, we can no longer expect the same configuration to effectively address user requirements for years. Flexibility should be incorporated into the library design.

- Locate the library so that space can be easily reclaimed for other uses in future years. If the firm’s strategic plan calls for significant growth, consider the need to one day add square feet for staff, equipment or even a few books.
- Use techniques for providing long-term flexibility, including moveable walls, modular furniture, and standardized furniture and office sizes.
- Encourage multiple uses of the same space. Training rooms can also serve as work space for conferences and projects. The library can serve as a place for after-hours meetings and receptions.

**Manage changing library staff roles.** Technology has added to the cost and complexity of operating the modern library, elevating the level of expertise required to collect, organize, evaluate and distribute information. It has also blurred the traditional lines separating reference from technical services staff.

- Promote collaboration by locating staff members where they can easily work with, learn from and consult with each other.
- Design a common area for collaborative projects and to house shared equipment, resources and files.
- Acknowledge the continuing need to deal with books and large quantities of paper by providing a technical services area or workroom hidden from public view. (See Sidebar, “The Library Workroom.”)
Despite the trend towards digital formats, attorneys still use many print resources and each one is handled many times over by the library staff. Every book must be unpacked from its carton, examined while library records are created or amended, held while bar codes and spine labels are applied and, finally, carried to its final destination on the library shelves.

Because staff members often work with the same information, it is common to provide a shared workroom or other space containing individual work stations or counter space; storage for books, files and supplies; and shared equipment, including bar code readers, printers, faxes and copiers.

- The work is messy and is best tucked away behind walls or other barriers.
- When counting work space for staff members, don’t forget contractors who file looseleaf services or perform other technical services work.
- A large table or counter space is necessary for processing incoming mail which will include packages, newsletters, looseleaf filing, pocket parts, catalogs and other materials too numerous to mention.
- Open shelving is required to hold items under review or waiting for processing as well as stocks of desk books slated for attorney offices.
- Storage containers for magazine boxes, paper, forms, and all the other items needed to operate the library are essential.
- Some open floor space is recommended for large items such as book trucks and for housing boxes too heavy to lift with ease.

Shelving design and specifications

True, we’re not buying as many books as we used to, but shelving is still an expensive item that consumes plenty of valuable square feet. It is important to get this right.

- There is no point in starting to design until you know where the shelving can and can’t go. Have a structural engineer identify the areas of the floor loaded to support fixed shelving and those areas with the higher load required for compact shelving.
- Long shelving runs make it easier to shelve the library collection sequentially according to material types and/or call numbers. Make sure materials can be shelved from left to right, the way we read, without running into dead end corridors.
- Shelves that are of uniform height (all tall enough to hold a binder) and width make shelving and shifting the library collection easier.
- Compact shelving is now standard in law libraries because it allows you to make such efficient use of the space.
- Consider using low units, 3 shelves high, to open up the space and create sight lines. Low shelving also provides stand-up reading areas for quick-reference and counters to hold food served at receptions.
- Specify pull-out reference shelves and end panels with label holders so you can list the contents of each range.
Wrapping up:
Getting there from here

Weed the collection, removing cancelled items and repairing, relabeling and recataloging the remaining items, as needed.

Work with vendors to change your address, including materials mailed directly to attorneys and others in the firm. Even better, take this opportunity to correct the labels so that all materials are sent to the ALaw Library® rather than to individuals.

Select a moving company that has plenty of experience moving a library. Materials should be placed on large book carts -- not packed in boxes.

Plan the arrangement of books in the new space. First and foremost, be sure the collection can be shelved from left to right, the way we read. When you move, remove materials from the old space in the order in which they will be reshelved in the new space.

Work with the shelving vendor to make sure the deinstallation (if you are reusing shelving) and reinstallation go according to plan.

Communicate with patrons regarding the library move plans. Consider how long the books will be unavailable and provide the attorneys with alternatives (permission to use other libraries in the area, electronic versions, etc.) Let them know when the library will be moving, what hours the library will be closed, and how services will be provided.

Revise all documentation, including library guides, forms, maps and catalogs. Create new labels for end panels to help patrons locate materials.

Inform the library community about your move. If you participate in an interlibrary loan program, let borrowers know when your library will be closed and when you will reopen for business.

Arrange to meet with librarians in the new building and nearby to establish good working relationships.

Train the library staff to be sure they understand where materials are located and any new procedures. Make sure staff members are trained to use new equipment.

Provide tours of the new library for as long as necessary to acquaint everyone with the new facility.
The real world: Case studies

The 2010 renovation of Morgan, Lewis & Bockius’ 175-attorney San Francisco office provided the librarian with an opportunity to correct some glaring design issues: dark and uninviting space, staff hidden from users and each other making it difficult to collaborate and provide efficient services, and materials housed in compact shelving that dead-ended in a wall. To add to the challenge, many of the shelves were empty or contained large sets that were no longer used.

Martha Cook Campos, Manager of Library Services, worked closely with firm administrators and architects to design a flexible space that would serve the firm now and into the future. The new space is open, light-filled and encourages interaction among staff members and between attorneys and staff.

Bright Spots and Lessons Learned

The collection was reduced by over 40% which made it possible to replace the compact shelving with fixed shelving, much of it 3-shelves high. This opened sight lines and made the library a perfect place for holding social events.

The design incorporates features calculated to promote collaboration, including a casual seating area and a conference room used for attorney meetings as well as training by library staff and vendors.

Staff offices are now placed together, at the front of the library, making it easy for them to work together and provide back-up as needed. The location and the use of glazed glass make it easy for users to locate assistance and eliminate the need for a separate reference desk.

The firm mixed and matched existing with new shelving, requiring complicated advance planning to be sure the right pieces were specified and delivered. Because Campos took the time to review documentation related to the project, she knew to insist that the contractor provide a detailed list of parts.


When 175-lawyer Neal Gerber Eisenberg LLP set out to renovate its library a few years ago, the room was already bursting at the seams. Nine permanent staff and contractors shared staff space designed for four and each new volume required shifting to make room on the shelf. Also in need of attention: poor lighting and a lack of amenities such as pull-out reference shelves.

The Director of Library Services, Monice Kaczorowski, knew that advance planning was essential to determine requirements for the space. She calculated the cost of materials by practice group and then went one step further, calculating the cost to house each group’s collection based on the square footage required. With hard data in hand, weeding decisions were easier to justify. Kaczorowski set retention schedules for the remaining print titles and also made sure that electronic versions were easy to find via the firm’s portal.

Bright Spots and Lessons Learned

To open the space and encourage collegiality, two walls were removed. Marble conference tables and granite counter tops help make the space an inviting place to work.

By reducing the collection, space was freed for staff who no longer have to share desks and work in cramped quarters. Library staff use the same multi-functional, modular furniture in place throughout the firm.

A training center was added to the library so that library trainers would not have to compete for use of the general training room. When not in use, the center provides an additional work area for attorneys.

Midway through construction contractors discovered that the floor loading plan was incorrect and that one part of the floor was not reinforced to support heavy library shelving. Kaczorowski and the firm’s Director of Administration got to work, coming up with a revised design in the space of a single evening.

The New York office library of Skadden Arps has undergone two significant renovations in less than a decade. Although both were prompted by the need to reclaim prime office space for other uses, the changes also reflect the increasing reliance on electronic resources at the expense of print materials. While treatises are still used heavily, most reporters have been eliminated.

New York Library staff members support local attorneys and also provide a wide range of services to attorneys in the firm’s 24 national and international offices, including conflict-of-interest, sophisticated corporate research, and some back office functions such as cataloging. The Director of Library Services, Janet Accardo, looked at which services are accomplished entirely electronically to help guide renovation and relocation decisions.

In the first renovation, the library was divided into two parts and portions of the collection plus conflicts, corporate library, electronic services and technical services staff were moved from the 39th floor to the concourse level. Legal reference staff plus most of the active collection and seating remained on 39. This change transferred 50% of the library square footage from 39 to the concourse level. More recently, the 39th floor library was again reduced by almost half (46%) by eliminating one third of the collection and most of the attorney seating at carrels and tables. Except for two offices with windows, the library is now located entirely in the core.

Bright Spots and Lessons Learned

Allowing reference staff and part of the collection to remain on a floor easily accessible to litigators engendered good will among an important constituency. The presence of staff and resources on an attorney floor has also helped the department maintain its position in the research life of the firm.

The relocation of significant parts of the staff to a non-attorney floor reflects the virtual nature of many library services and products in the information age. Staff members can serve attorneys located in New York, Palo Alto or Hong Kong from anywhere.

The library’s dedicated training room on 39 was eliminated in lieu of one in the concourse library space. Staff and vendors also share the firm’s general training rooms on the concourse. This works because the firm has an adequate number of training rooms to accommodate each department’s intensive training schedule. As a bonus, the training rooms and the library are located on the same floor.

Some attorneys are concerned with the general change in atmosphere and the reduction in seating because it no longer functions as a meeting place or refuge where they can focus on their research free from interruptions.

(Article based on telephone interview with Janet Accardo, March 29, 2011.)
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For more information visit the Private Law Librarians Special Interest Section web site http://www.aallnet.org/sis/pllsis/.