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Checklist – a Library Move

Abstract: In this checklist, Margie Jones picks out some of the key issues she encountered when moving a regional law firm's library from the head office to new premises situated six miles from the town centre to a converted warehouse. These include the challenge of offering a distance service to the fee earners.
Keywords: law firm libraries; relocation

Introduction

Libraries, being by nature growing bodies of various collections of information, in various formats, sometimes need re-housing and moving to more spacious premises. The reason for moving the Lester Aldridge Library was indeed connected to a space problem, which was that there was no room for a growing collection of information in the newly redesigned main office of Lester Aldridge, so a decision to move the library was taken after 17 years of housing it on the 4th floor of Russell House in central Bournemouth. The new premises were situated some six miles away from the town centre in a vast converted warehouse that had doubled as office space for the past few years. Space, therefore, ceased to be the headache that it so often is. The main challenge would be how to deliver information to our lawyers and how to maintain support from a distance.

Mission statement/objectives of the LIS

The forthcoming move gave us an opportunity to reassess the objectives of the Library and Information Service (LIS). We defined these as being to provide information resources to our lawyers in order to support them and raise the standard of service of Lester Aldridge to their clients. The LIS should do this by developing the resources and making available up-to-date (current) legal information to our lawyers in whichever is the most cost-effective format. The LIS should provide and encourage the use of information communications technology to enable access to digital skills and services; and the LIS should extend current awareness opportunities to the Lester Aldridge lawyers. Revisiting our core mission statement made it easier to plan the move because, with these objectives in mind, we had a clear idea of what we wanted the LIS to be regardless of location.

Planning

The 'old' library was situated on the middle floor of a seven-story building in the middle of Bournemouth. We considered what stock we held, what was necessary to still hold, and what could be discarded. Librarians, and incidentally a lot of solicitors, do not enjoy discarding any information no matter how out-dated.

We already managed some satellite collections of information, which were housed with certain lawyers, or teams of lawyers, either in a dedicated office or on a bookshelf in a communally accessible area. In this way we made sure that the relevant books and loose-leafs were not too distant from those who had priority need for them. This meant that we were already managing collections in remote offices; a move out of town would be more and larger management of the same. In the library we held stock that was used intermittently by almost any of the lawyers in any area of practice, such as *Chitty on Contracts*. We also held some out-of-date books that the lawyers were reluctant to discard for a variety of reasons. We housed the big collections of law reports from 1865 in hard copy and a comprehensive collection of statutes.

Stock-taking

We began by conducting a stock-take of the library and the collections on the various shelves of the lawyers. We placed stickers on the spines of hard-copy information that was not up-to-date, where the lawyer was reluctant to discard or archive the book or loose-leaf.

We considered what stock we had and what was being actively used, and why. There are a number of methods to measure this and we used a combination of these: by counting number of loans, by the librarians' personal observations of library use by users, and by assessing the enquiries the library handled. This exercise highlighted much of the stock that was simply taking up shelf space in case it was ever needed. Some of it was

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available online through various online services to which we subscribed so could be considered for disposal.

Weeding

Packing and moving unnecessary stock is costly in time and budget and we had to be brave and discard some of the old books and magazines. This weeding process had to be carefully managed.

We were able to cancel a few of the loose-leafs, but not before checking the terms and conditions of cancellation, as well as checking with the various solicitors that the publication was no longer used. A word of warning: be very careful to check the contract terms when terminating any product, so that you avoid any cancellation penalty usually hidden in the small print.

We also took into consideration how often we had been asked for information. An example would be requests for certain EGi cases or law reports from back issues of the *Estates Gazette*. We had a one-user licence to EGi online, which in fact meant that we could discard most of our back issues. They take up a lot of space.

Another example would be whether we stopped subscribing to information that was seldom requested, and could be 'bought in' from the Law Society, or other sources, should we require it. This is a simple risk management task weighing up the cost of upkeep of information against purchasing one-off articles or cases every now and then.

Commercial law firms hone our perceptions of cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness as librarians as no other library does, because information equates to costs and profits for the firm, as much as any other service or tool in the law firm market place. We sacrifice archaic information as assessed by cost of space and upkeep of the collection.

Weeding the stock also made us think carefully about our on-line information resources. There are several on-line legal information providers of which LexisNexis, Westlaw, Lawtel, PLC and Justis are but a few. All purport to be the one-stop place for all our legal information needs. Obviously they are not – otherwise they would not still be competing in the information market. There is some overlap, especially in the legislation sources, but they are otherwise significantly different from each other – enough to necessitate subscribing to more than one, or to parts of one and other parts, where possible, of another. It takes the librarian time to understand and to keep abreast of the content and, importantly, the ease of navigation, of these services. This directly relates back to cost and profit of the information. Big firms may be able to afford to have comprehensive subscriptions to most of the major online legal services, but middle-sized and small firms cannot. So how does the librarian advise which ones to keep and why? And, having done so, how does he or she persuade the managing board that they need these services and there should be allocation in the budget for them?

These are two big questions that I will not attempt to answer comprehensively in this article, but I will note a few points that we considered when choosing which ones to have.

Cost

The first, middle and last point the managing board is going to consider is the cost of the service, which varies and is negotiable. Librarians need to learn to be adroit negotiators.

See Fiona Durrant's articles and courses on the subject.

Content

What is included and what is excluded in the subscription? Can this be bartered so that one piece of information can be dropped in favour of another which is more useful for the firm?

Navigation

Which service do the lawyers find easiest to use? Are they open to change and learning how to navigate another service with similar content? Do they have time to be trained on a new service? Most young lawyers are perfectly at home with many of the online information services, but they are not always sure why they use one over the other, or what the range of content is of each.

These points reduce to one overall issue: how well does the librarian understand his or her clients – the lawyers in the firm?

Personal knowledge

Nothing replaces personal knowledge of the various lawyers' likes and dislikes regarding online versus hard-copy, the area in which they practice, their confidence in relying upon you, as the librarian, to assist. This is the know-how that a librarian builds up of his or her clients, which is irreplaceable and essential to making a sensible decision about which online legal services to use or not, in small to middle-sized firms. Big firms, where there is less face-to-face contact with the lawyers, and more money in the budget, can afford to subscribe to a wider range of services. This area of knowing your clients can never be replaced by technology and it is important, as part of your professional skills, to cultivate it wherever and whenever you can.

We found that very often loose-leaf services, although sometimes offered as online resources, are often only used by one or two practitioners, and it is still cheaper to keep the hard-copy than to change to online. Secondly, the lawyers using the information may have a

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particular preference for using the hard-copy version. It is this kind of knowledge that drives decisions.

Packing

We had made our decisions, weeded the stock, checked every title and then the job of packing and moving was upon us. There is one point that appears to be obvious to librarians but to be quite inconsequential to whomever in the firm or company is in charge of hiring movers. Librarians want the stock to come off the shelf in the order in which it can be unpacked and replaced on shelves in the right categories and location. Be aware that you might have to make a very firm stand on this point. You will need to supervise the move and not leave it to the very able office movers, who will happily abandon any system and stack according to size of what fits in a box.

Another point which seems to elude those who are not librarians, is the weight of information. Do check that the shelves allocated are robust enough to take the weight, and also check that the floor is a load-bearing floor. I found that 100 metres of shelf space is very hard for a lay person to visualise. Also check accessibility as carrying heavy books up flights of stairs is backbreaking work.

Personnel

A library move is not just about moving information. It is also about disrupting established routines of the library staff. Where do they live? Will they have to make significantly different arrangements to get to and from work? Change is always a little intimidating. Some people adapt to it quickly, regarding it as a challenge, but others do not. It is wise to prepare the library staff for the move and to consider the points they raise personally where at all possible. It is helpful to manage their expectations.

It is also necessary to manage the expectations, and methods of using the library, of your clients, the lawyers. Many will worry that they do not have you nearby to call upon. Others, who may be used to you already being away from their office, may not worry about this at all, but you have to be aware that communication and support are essential to both staff and clients. You need to reassure both that the service will not deteriorate with change.

After the move

Finally, after the move, we returned to our mission statement, to see if we were fulfilling the needs of our clients. Feedback is a very important part of moving. There were minor points we had to adjust. Circulation routes for many of the journals and newsletters had to be rewritten. Some of the books had to be re-housed nearer a central point. We, personally, had to make a big effort to keep in touch with our clients. To do this we had arranged staffing a centrally located hot-desk for approximately five half-day shifts a week. This took a little manipulation, as one of our librarians found it necessary to reduce her hours to accommodate travelling time to work. We did not have to alter our address, as our post was handled in the same manner as usual, and then couriered to us by an internal courier every day. The slight delay was acceptable.

Conclusion

In retrospect, we were in a position where we were given no choice but to move. However, we were also assured that communication was of the utmost importance. So long as we could maintain instant communication, reinforced with personal visits on a regular basis to update loose-leafs, to aid with back-up training on information sites, or just in the capacity of PR, we found that the move worked more smoothly than we first anticipated. We did not receive any serious concerns from our lawyers that the support or service offered had lost any of its efficiency.

We learned that our roles as information providers are changing, as are many roles in this era of instant communications and outsourcing services. We also believe that a change of role does not mean that information can be managed by technology alone, because an integral part of our role is about knowing our firm and our lawyers.

In much the same way as lawyers value know-how, we as librarians must learn to value and promote the value-added service we provide through a thorough knowledge of our firm and the lawyers.

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