ASK A DIRECTOR
Teaching Future Tech

Question: With technology playing a big role in the transformation of law, how do you see it changing the delivery of library services?

Technology is ubiquitous, and affects most, if not all, aspects of delivering legal services. Libraries have been successfully evolving in response to technological innovations, particularly in the areas of training, collaboration, and cost management.

Libraries already play an important role in teaching and training. The need for this will increase as we ensure our students and lawyers not only have the technical skills for using research tools, but that they can also apply those skills to use knowledge management, analytic, and collaboration tools effectively. Libraries will need to provide targeted and contextual training for specialized practice resources, as well as teach how to integrate and synthesize results across multiple platforms. There will also be a role for the library in training support staff, as they are required to conduct basic legal research, and to work within more complex document systems.
The ever-changing environment of information technology requires that librarians use their collaboration skills to work with other administrative groups in their organizations. For example, we need to access information from financial and business development systems in order to provide targeted information for lawyers to meet clients’ needs. This will also extend to library publishing in the sense that very targeted webpages, websites, dashboards, and other communication platforms will need to be created to support clients and business development efforts. We will therefore need to collaborate more with our technology department and support their efforts to launch and maintain new products and tools.

As our organizations invest in new and expensive technology, libraries will be pressured to contain and reduce costs—however unfair. We will need to apply analytics to library resource usage via enhanced or new electronic resource management tools to assist in contract negotiations, resource utilization, purchasing decisions, and transparency. Our library management software must be able to provide the metrics and financial data to support our decisions.

While technology will not dramatically transform our core library functions of acquiring, managing, and delivering information to our users, it will offer new opportunities as to how we deliver them, while strengthening the library’s role within our organizations.

I was sitting at the car repair shop recently while having a tire replaced. To pass the time, I decided to read my Twitter feed. In the 45 minutes I waited for the repair, I favored three articles from my feed to read later; all of the articles had to do with technological advances and the effect they have on the practice of law.

To say technology is changing so fast we can’t keep up is almost cliché these days. We’ve seen this frenetic pace of change for several years now. Advances in artificial intelligence, an increased need for knowledge management, and new job titles—such as data scientist or innovation and technology attorney—are just a few things sure to have a lasting effect on the practice of law. Likewise, these changes will have a profound effect on legal education and library services, especially in regards to what librarians teach and how that material is presented to students and faculty.

Several law schools have added classes on law firm technology to their curriculum, and many of these courses are taught by librarians. Such courses often focus on the knowledge management tools law firms are using to organize their internal work product as well as their external informational resources. Traditional legal research courses are taught through lectures on legal research, and feature problems so students can practice using the strategies and tools discussed in the lectures. In recent years, some courses have moved entirely online. According to a recent article in the 2017 May/June AALL Spectrum, “Artificial Intelligence: Legal Research and Law Librarians,” improvements in artificial intelligence and voice recognition technologies will result in dramatic changes in how research is taught and how data is retrieved.

Even as information retrieval becomes more automated, the importance of distinguishing reliable sources from the noise reaches critical levels. Librarians will need to guide users to understand how legal information is organized electronically, explain what a database is, and describe what resources are available to them. We live in an age of alternative facts and cyber hacking, where misinformation is rampant and easy to find, and where reliable sources are locked behind paywalls.

Librarians are uniquely positioned to educate users on how to use technology to protect confidential communications, to use cybersecurity to protect work product, and to engage in secure ediscovery and knowledge management.