

Developing the legal information professional: a study of competency, education and training needs

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Abstract

Purpose – Legal information work has expanded with the growth in knowledge management and emergence of a new type of knowledge/information manager, the professional support lawyer. This study investigated competency requirements for library-based information work in UK law firms, including the specialist subject knowledge required, methods of development and the impact on information professionals of professional support lawyers.

Design/methodology/approach – The investigation used a pragmatic mixed-methods approach, including a mainly quantitative questionnaire, administered online to 64 legal information professionals, followed by 8 semi-structured interviews and a focus group with 4 participants. A literature review informed the questionnaire design and contextualised the findings.

Findings – The survey confirmed a broad range of competency requirements and clarified the specific subject knowledge needed. Participants favoured a varied combination of formal and informal learning. Most also wanted specialised professional education for the sector.

Research limitations/implications – The nature of the sample and use of categorised questions were limiting factors, partly compensated by inviting open-ended comments and follow-up interviews. A larger study using qualitative methods with professional support lawyers and fee-earners would provide a fuller more rounded picture.

Practical implications – The findings indicate that the subject knowledge needed for legal information work in law firms is more extensive than for other sectors and suggest that information science departments should strengthen and extend curriculum content to reflect this need.

Originality/value – The study has advanced our understanding of the competency, education and training needs of UK legal information professionals, challenging assumptions about academic/professional qualifications and illuminating the blend of competencies needed.

Keywords Competencies, Information professionals, Law firms, Professional education, Subject knowledge, Training

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The work of subject-specialist library and information professionals and the competencies required for their roles have been discussed and reviewed by practitioners and researchers over several decades, especially the question of how much subject knowledge is needed to do the job (e.g., Hardy and Corrall, 2007; Holbrook, 1984; Hooper-Lane, 1999; Rodwell, 2001; Williams, 1991). This issue has been particularly keenly debated in relation to law librarianship and legal information work, where the need for dual qualifications in librarianship or information science and law has also been discussed, but with a notable lack

of consensus (e.g., Brookes, 2005; Constable, 2003; Hambleton, 1991; Oakley, 1989; Stanfield, 2009; Whisner, 1999). Two decades ago, Oakley (1989, p. 147) observed that “The educational requirements for law librarianship have been the subject of considerable debate, and have been far less settled than other parts of the profession”. This uncertainty continues today.

Irrespective of whether a legal qualification is actually necessary for effective performance as a legal information professional (LIP), some law firms have specified this, rather than a librarianship or information management qualification (Harvey, 2003), but Stanfield (2009, p. 294) asserts that a legal qualification for information jobs “is not so frequent latterly”. There has also been a tradition of appointing legally qualified staff to law library posts in the UK academic sector, particularly in older universities. However, recent surveys by the British and Irish Association of Law Librarians (BIALL) have shown this is a declining practice: the latest report found that only 21 (23%) of the 92 higher education law libraries responding had staff with academic or professional legal qualifications, compared with the 25 per cent and 30 per cent recorded in the previous two years. The proportion of professionally staffed law libraries in pre-1992 universities with legally qualified staff was 35 per cent, compared with only 10 per cent in the post-1992 sector (Clinch, 2010).

In the commercial sector, a complicating factor is the emergence over the past two decades of a new breed of legal knowledge/information manager, the professional support lawyer (PSL), typically a qualified lawyer and former fee-earner, who has moved into a support role serving a particular area of legal practice (Gibson, 2001; Harvey, 2003; Hoult, 2003; Humphries and Carter, 2006; Malhotra *et al.*, 2010; Stanley and Eisenschitz, 2008). Several years ago, Gibson (2001, p. 29) noted that “All of the large law firms and many of the middle-sized firms now have professional support lawyers as well as their library services”. PSLs are now “established roles within the firm” (Lank *et al.*, 2008 p. 108), “widely accepted” as “essential” (Faulconbridge, 2008, p. 202), and moving into business development (Goodman, 2007; Malhotra *et al.*, 2010; Stanfield, 2009) and up the hierarchy (Humphries, 2008), although the role is not as prevalent in other countries, such as the US.

Both PSLs and LIPs can be characterised as “hybrid professionals”, manifesting “boundary-spanning roles which occupy the expanding shared territory that represents the overlap between formerly distinct domains” (Corrall and Cox, 2008, p. 43). Stanfield (2009, p. 293) distinguishes between qualified lawyers that have “taken on an information role” and PSLs “who fulfil a role between that of the information professionals and the lawyers”. Law librarianship (along with health informatics and learning technology) is a “mature hybrid specialism” (Corrall and Cox, 2008, p. 44), with its professional association, BIALL, formed in 1969, in contrast to the informal networks supporting PSLs (Hoult, 2003). However, although PSLs lack a recognised sector-wide career development framework, several firms have introduced their own PSL career structures (Goodman, 2007; Humphries, 2008). The maturity of the PSL function is indicated by the decision in 2009 of online vendor Lexis-Nexis to launch a new legal intelligence product named Lexis®PSL, providing access to legal “know-how”, precedents and guidance, and described as “like having your own professional support lawyer”[1]. Some authors (e.g., Harvey, 2003) view PSLs as a threat to the library/information profession, but others (e.g., Barrow, 2005) see their role as complementary and an opportunity for productive partnerships.

While there have been several studies of the education, training and development needs of law librarians in the US (Brookes, 2005; Cali, 2000; Hambleton, 1991; Oakley, 1989), the

UK lacks comparable research, particularly in the commercial legal sector, apart from Brown and Stephens's (2004) investigation of the transition from library and information science education to employment in law firms and Eisenschitz's (1999) discussion of training for information work in law firms and barristers' chambers. A previous BIALL report on the academic legal sector specifically comments on the absence of an equivalent study of the commercial sector (Clinch, 2006). This research gap is particularly significant given the lack of an authoritative formal statement of the competencies required by professionals working in the UK legal library and information sector, with no British equivalent of the *Competencies of Law Librarianship*, issued by the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL, 2001; 2010).

Against this backdrop, the present study aimed to investigate the competency requirements of library-based information professionals in the UK commercial legal sector, with a particular interest in understanding whether specific legal knowledge is needed to carry out their role and how the required competencies and knowledge can be acquired. In this paper the terms "law librarian", "legal information professional", "legal information specialist" and similar expressions are used interchangeably to mean any staff whose primary function is to provide library or information resources and services for a law firm or library specialising in law, whose role may include work related to knowledge management/know-how. The study had three key objectives:

- to identify the competency requirements of library-based information professionals in the commercial legal sector, with a particular focus on legal subject knowledge;
- to investigate perceptions of the most appropriate/effective way(s) of obtaining the competencies needed, including formal education, training courses and on-the-job development;
- to explore the impact on the library and information profession of those with an academic/professional legal qualification, especially the professional support lawyer.

The next section of the paper reviews the literature that provides the background and context for the study, concentrating on themes of particular relevance. Subsequent sections describe the methodology adopted, analyse the results obtained and discuss them in relation to the literature, which was revisited after completion of the fieldwork to relate the findings to current research and practice. The paper is based on an unpublished Masters dissertation (O'Brien, 2007), which contains further details of the study, including the research instruments and data collected.

Literature review

Professional competency requirements

The revised edition of the AALL (2010) *Competencies of Law Librarianship* specifies 62 aspects of competence, divided into "Core Competencies" needed by all law librarians from their early career and "Specialized Competencies", dependent on the role fulfilled. The latter include library management, reference/research services, information technology, collection development, cataloguing and teaching, broadly matching the coverage of the four categories of "Professional Competencies" in the SLA's *Competencies for Information Professionals* (Abels *et al.*, 2003), though interestingly the AALL gives significantly more prominence and specificity to the teaching role, listing nine points under this heading, which the SLA covers briefly as one "applied scenario" within the information services area. Both statements also specify a range of personal abilities, such as communication, creativity, critical thinking and

risk-taking. Knowledge management (KM) features in one of the AALL Core Competencies, which stipulates sharing knowledge and expertise with users and colleagues (1.12), but it is interesting that another explicit reference to KM in an earlier version of the *Competencies* has recently been modified, with “Acts within the organization to implement the principles of knowledge management” (1.10) amended to “principles of *information* management” for the current version (AALL, 2001; 2010).

Hambleton (1991) notes that competencies for LIPs fall naturally into the two broad areas of competency as an information professional and competency in the law (discussed below). The literature generally supports the requirements specified by the AALL (2010), emphasising the continuing value of traditional technical skills in information retrieval and organisation, including cataloguing and classification (Amos, 2001; Gibson, 2001; Norris, 2002), abstracting and thesaurus construction (Worley, 2007), in addition to their contemporary application in relation to information technology and KM (Gibson, 2001; Norris, 2002; Stephens and Hamblin, 2006). The use of Web 2.0 tools/social media (such as RSS feeds, blogs and wikis) for updating, knowledge sharing and recording frequently asked questions (FAQs) illustrates the way new technologies are being adopted for established tasks in legal information work (Lustigman, 2010; Mullan AALL, 2009; Weiter, 2008; Winter, 2008). Educational, managerial and (inter)personal abilities also feature, emphasising training/teaching (Owen, 2002), marketing (Gibson, 2001; Hill, 2001), communication (Podboy, 2000), confidence and risk-taking (Jones, 1998). Understanding the business of their parent organisation is identified as a key requirement, but perceived as an area of weakness for some information professionals (Amos, 2001; Gibson, 2001; Stenson *et al.*, 1999).

Legal subject knowledge

SLA’s original (1997) *Competencies for Special Librarians* placed “specialized subject knowledge appropriate to the business of the organization or client” high among 11 Professional Competencies, second to “expert knowledge of the content of information resources”. Hooper-Lane (1999) asserts that “Most would agree that having and maintaining subject knowledge is an invaluable component of librarianship”, identifying benefits for science librarians, which include increased professional respect from clients, an enhanced library image and reduced job anxiety. However, this emphasis on subject knowledge is not retained in the SLA revised *Competencies* (Abels *et al.*, 2003). Writing about subject specialists in academic libraries, Rodwell (2001) suggests that a reduced focus on subject knowledge recently may be because it is so fundamental to the role, though he also argues that the requisite subject expertise is not knowledge of a subject, which is often too specific or quickly outdated, but a mixture that includes knowledge of the client community, its needs and the resources available in the field; however, he notes law librarianship as an exception here, as “a recognised specialty usually requiring formal (legal) qualification or extensive experience” (Rodwell, 2001, p. 49).

Eleven of the AALL’s (2010) 62 *Competencies* contain the terms “law” or “legal”. Although the word “knowledge” features only once in this context (in Core Competency 1.4, “Demonstrates knowledge of the legal system and the legal profession”) and the terms “law” and “legal” often simply describe the context in which generic librarianship competencies (e.g., collection development) are exercised, one can infer at least the areas of subject knowledge regarded as core to the role, namely: general knowledge of the legal system and the legal profession; specialist knowledge of legal resources and legal research methodologies, at a level sufficient to teach others; and knowledge about the specific legal

institution served, expressed in terms of understanding and supporting its culture (1.3). “Monitors trends in specific areas of the law” (3.7) is a Specialized Competency (supporting Reference, Research and Client Services).

Commentators generally confirm the need for knowledge of the legal system and profession in addition to the primary and secondary sources of the field (Constable, 2003; Norris, 2002; Oakley, 1989), with several authors highlighting the need for a working knowledge of legal vocabulary, jargon and acronyms to search for information effectively (Constable, 2003; Hicks in Butler, 2006; Oakley, 1989), although some also emphasise the amount of business research typically conducted in law firms (Eisenschitz, 1999; Hazleton, 1993; Norris, 2002); Worley (2007, p. 115) reports “heavy, in-depth research over a wide subject area” related to business development and estimates that around 50 per cent of a law firm librarian’s work now involves business information. Practitioners also observe that legal subject knowledge can create a rapport with lawyers and enhance professional credibility (Hicks in Butler, 2006; Oakley, 1989), similar to the professional respect associated with scientific knowledge of science librarians (Hooper-Lane, 1999). The level of knowledge suggested can be significant, with Hicks (in Butler 2006, p. 375) specifying a “sophisticated understanding of the legal system” and Constable (2003, p. 146) a “thorough understanding of the law”. Eastland (2005, p. 16) argues that law is too complex and too conceptual for the required knowledge to be assimilated on the job, but criticises US law librarianship courses for not imparting the “level of specialized knowledge needed for law library reference”, though noting that specific knowledge requirements depend on the local legal context.

Education and training

Specialist professional education for legal information work has been debated since the 1920s, when the eminent academic law librarian, Frederick Hicks, argued that library schools should provide preparatory training, including specialist classes in legal bibliography and law library administration (Butler, 2006).

Some authors advocate whole programmes/specific qualifications in legal information work (Brookes, 2005; Clarke, 1985; Constable, 2003; Norris, 2002), departing from a professional tradition favouring generic education as the foundation for practice in any sector, rather than limiting careers to law librarianship (Danner, 1998; Middleton and Hallam, 2001). The generic library/information Masters continues to be seen as valuable preparation for the field (Amos, 2001; Bizub *et al.*, 2005; Danner, 1998; Eisenschitz, 1999; Hambleton, 1991). Many see additional specialist modules as a way of improving the competence, confidence and numbers of recruits into the sector (Brown and Stephens, 2004; Hazelton, 1993; Oakley, 1989; Tice, 2001). Contemporary US provision is patchy, with eight universities offering joint law and librarianship programmes, three offering three or more specialist modules, but most only one or none (Brookes, 2005). Only one UK university has specialist provision, with other offerings either abandoned or subsumed into business information modules (McTavish, 1997). A recurring theme is the need for co-operation between academics and practitioners, in relation to both initial and continuing education (BIALL, 1985; Bizub *et al.*, 2005; Butler, 2006; Tice, 2001).

Opinion is divided on the need for a law degree in addition to a library qualification: while Mersky and Konseksi-White (1991) and Rodwell (2001) claim a legal qualification is generally required, Norris (2002) reports only 20 per cent of jobs (predominantly academic libraries) specify this, confirming Oakley’s (1989) view that it is not necessary. Whisner (1999) reports that only 29 per cent of AALL members actually have a law degree, but many

commentators see it as the ideal preparation (Hazelton, 1993; Jensen, 1998; Oakley, 1989). However, Stanfield (2009, p. 294) points out that librarians without dual qualifications are demonstrating their value in managerial positions in law firms, “proving that a legal qualification is not a necessity”. Other qualifications suggested as supplements to library/information degrees include MBAs (Stensen *et al.*, 1999), legal masters (Hambleton, 1991; Oakley, 1989) and paralegal qualifications (Norris, 2002). Battersby (2004) describes a new postgraduate diploma in Know-How Management for Legal Practice, taken by librarians, knowledge managers, PSLs and other legal professionals. Given the shortage of specialist education and requirement for specialist knowledge, practitioners predictably regard in-service training as particularly important: research indicates most UK LIPs gain their specialist knowledge by a combination of learning on the job and attending specialist courses, typically those offered by Aslib and BIALL (Brown and Stephens, 2004; Clarke, 1985; Stensen *et al.*, 1999).

Professional support lawyers

The PSL role originated in the early 1990s and developed in line with the growth of KM activities in law firms (Hoult, 2003; Humphries and Carter, 2006). Humphries (2008) reports significant expansion from around 12 PSLs in London in the 1990s to an estimated 200-300 in the UK by 2002, with many more appointments subsequently across Europe, but far fewer in the US. The role is now well-established in large and medium-sized firms (Gibson, 2001; Hoult, 2003); Goodman (2007) notes a doubling of the number of PSLs at Berwin Leighton Paisner in 18 months and Lank *et al.* (2008) report that the large London-based firm Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer employs 90 PSLs (who are known as Knowledge Management Lawyers), while Janetta (2008, p. 274) describes the growth of PSLs at medium-sized Field Fisher Waterhouse from “a handful” when she joined the firm to a situation where “nearly every practice group has the support of a PSL and an information officer”. Their function is typically presented as disseminating know-how and particularly associated with drafting precedents and keeping them up-to-date, producing guidance notes and providing legislative updates or other types of current awareness (Attfield *et al.*, 2010; Barrow, 2005; Faulconbridge, 2008; Hoult, 2003; McKenzie, 2004). In addition to promoting knowledge-sharing, they are often involved in intranet development, knowledge organisation (cataloguing/classification) and training (Attfield *et al.*, 2010; Barrow, 2005; Booth, 2001; Faulconbridge, 2008; Gibson, 2001; Hoult, 2003; Lank *et al.*, 2008; McKenzie, 2004; Rudman, 2009; Tuckwell, 2010).

Hoult (2003) notes continuing evolution of the role with specialisms establishing their own support networks, predicting an increasing profile and greater professionalization. More recently, Humphries (2008) identifies several areas of potential specialisation for “second generation” PSLs, which focus on both content and process, such as legal specialist/technical guru, thought leader, knowledge broker, knowledge innovator, business development, learning and development/training; she cites the role of Practice Development Lawyer at Freshfields as an example; Tuckwell’s (2010) role as Training Support Lawyer at Herbert Smith is another example. Though originally defined in terms of internal support, as noted above, in many firms the role of PSLs has broadened into business development, including support for marketing and communications (Stanfield, 2009) and in some cases their work has extended to meeting the know-how demands of external clients (Amos, 2001; Humphries and Carter, 2006).

The relationship between PSLs and LIPs is much discussed and contentious (Amos, 2001; Barrow, 2005; Booth, 2001; Gibson, 2001; Harvey, 2003; McKenzie, 2004; Stanley and

Eisenschitz, 2008). The evolution and fluidity of early PSL roles resulted in ambiguity and perceived duplication or overlap with the work of LIPs, raising fears that the latter might become sidelined or redundant (Amos, 2001; Barrow, 2005; Booth, 2001; Harvey, 2003). While some commentators (e.g., Harvey, 2003) present a rather negative view of PSLs, others focus on opportunities to work together for mutual benefit; for example, in induction and training programmes (Mackenzie, 2004; Tuckwell, 2010) and in intranet or collection development (Rudman, 2009; Sippings, 2007). Barrow (2005) and McKenzie (2004) see their roles as essentially complementary, but both stress the importance of defining and differentiating their respective contributions. Stanley and Eisenschitz (2008) similarly identified clear delineation of tasks as the key to reducing friction and improving relations, with overlaps and tensions found in both intranet-related activities and enquiry work, especially when LIPs were attached to practice areas.

McKenzie (2004), who is legally qualified with experience of working in both know-how and information teams, distinguishes their focus on internal and external sources respectively, explaining how LIPs provide externally-based current awareness services and PSLs extract key items for updates and add knowledgeable commentaries. Stanfield (2009) confirms this picture, describing how PSLs add value to the library's current awareness and enquiry work by identifying implications for practice and clients, while Rudman (2009, p. 250) similarly differentiates their respective expertise in terms of "content" and "information". Stanfield's (2009) perception of PSLs as positioned between information professionals and practice areas is consistent with their "intelligent filter" role in current awareness identified by Attfield *et al.* (2010, p. 635), mediating between fee-earner lawyers and incoming information flows. Barrow (2005) argues that some PSLs perform (inappropriate) information-related tasks simply because they are unaware of the information team's services and expertise, which should be conveyed from the outset (e.g., via the firm's induction programme), while Stanley and Eisenschitz (2008, p. 133) found that overlaps in activity often occurred simply because the "correct" worker was absent from his or her desk.

Research methodology

The investigation adopted a pragmatic mixed-methods approach, using a mainly quantitative questionnaire survey, administered online to a self-selecting sample of UK LIPs ($n=64$), followed by eight interviews and a focus group with four participants, to support and illuminate the survey results with qualitative data. A review of related literature was used to inform the questionnaire design and contextualise the findings, supplemented and updated as necessary.

A quantitative survey was selected as an appropriate and convenient method of collecting a large amount of data within a relatively short timeframe at low cost, facilitating the gathering of information and opinions in a standardised format from a geographically dispersed population to build a broad picture of the area under investigation. Evidence from previous research, practitioner literature and email lists signalled interest in the topic and the likelihood of obtaining more responses from a self-completion questionnaire than from scheduled interviews because of the demands on LIPs' time. Interviews were used as the primary qualitative method to enrich the data collected and enable further exploration of key questions in a more flexible way. The mixed methods enabled triangulation of data, testing different sources of information against each other to mitigate bias and enhance validity.

The study employed a form of purposive sampling, using relevant email lists (BIALL, LIS-LAW and SLA Europe) and online forums (CILIP and Freepint) to post information about the project and invite target subjects (information professionals in law firms) to participate. Sixty-four people contacted the researcher, who supplied additional information and a link to the online questionnaire. Interviewees were drawn from the same pool of 64 participants, by sending invitations via email, aiming to recruit subjects representing different levels of responsibility and sizes of firm. Although the sample participating was self-selected and not designed to be representative, the pragmatic method adopted was successful in collecting usable data from information professionals working at different levels of seniority in small, medium-sized and large law firms.

The questionnaire contained 29 questions covering respondents' employment situation, their opinions on competency requirements (at a relatively detailed level) and methods of acquiring the competencies needed. The questions were predominantly closed with pre-determined answers to facilitate completion and analysis, using multiple-choice tick-box questions of varying types (selected, specified, ranked and scaled), but around a quarter were open and a similar proportion included comment boxes for respondents to elaborate on factual content and opinions, enabling depth to be added to the findings. The Survey Monkey tool was chosen as an efficient means of distributing the questionnaire and generating data in a form ready for analysis. The instrument was piloted thoroughly, with useful feedback on design, structure and terminology obtained from fellow researchers and selected practitioners in the field.

Eight semi-structured interviews (six face-to-face, two telephone) were conducted to explore in greater depth experiences and perceptions of key issues such as the most important competencies for the sector, professional education and qualifications, involvement in KM and the role of professional associations. A focus group was conducted with four participants from one firm, using the same schedule as the individual interviews. All interviews were recorded and field notes used to capture non-verbal communication and other contextual points.

Quantitative data were analysed using spreadsheet software. Qualitative data from both the questionnaire and interviews were coded at two levels to identify initial categories, which were then reviewed to eliminate, combine or subdivide these into second-level codes. Partial and selective transcription of interview data was used as necessary to establish the main categories, reflecting the pragmatic approach and time constraints of the study.

Results

Sample characteristics

The sample of 64 respondents was evenly distributed across the levels of responsibility specified and also represented a range of different sizes of law firm. Table I summarises key characteristics, showing actual numbers and percentages (rounded). The "other" category included stand-alone professionals and experienced staff who were not managers.

Despite the number of large firms in the sample, most respondents worked in relatively small information service organisations, with around half ($33 = 52\%$) reporting the total number of LIPs in their firms as 5 or fewer and only slightly more than a quarter ($17 = 27\%$) having 11 or more LIPs. Numbers of PSLs reported were proportionately lower, with fewer in each of the bands specified: 23 (36%) indicated that their firms had 1-5 PSLs, 12 (19%) had 6-10 and 14 (22%) had 11 or more.

Table 1. Sample composition

	Number (and %) of respondents		
	Questionnaire	Interviews	Focus Group
Level of responsibility			
Senior manager/service head	19 (30%)	7	2
Senior professional/team leader	19 (30%)	-	2
Entry-level professional	19 (30%)	1	-
Other	7 (11%)	-	-
Size of firm			
750+ employees	25 (39%)	3	4
250-749 employees	21 (33%)	2	-
50-249 employees	17 (27%)	3	-
1-49 employees	1 (2%)	-	-
Notes: <i>n</i> = 64			

Professional support lawyers

In most cases the PSLs were not part of the information organisation, but a significant minority (13 respondents) indicated that they were part of the same team or in the same group, which in two cases were labelled “knowledge management” (rather than “information”). One respondent described the PSLs as having “a dotted line into IS”. Fifteen respondents reported that their firms employed no PSLs, though one mentioned two “senior part-time consultants, part of whose role is a training/information role”, who were integrated with fee-earning teams, rather than the information team.

Where applicable, participants evaluated their level of co-operation with PSLs on a 5-point scale: the vast majority of the 48 respondents assessed the relationship as at least moderate (i.e., 3 out of 5), with 21 choosing this score, 11 scoring 4 and 9 scoring 5 (= close working relationship). Asked to characterise the PSL role, 45 participants provided free-text comments on the types of activities undertaken in their firm. Responses were broken down into separate points and categorised to identify common themes. Table II shows the most frequently occurring activities.

Table 2. Main activities of professional support lawyers

Tasks performed	Number of respondents
Current awareness/providing updates	22
Training (fee-earners and external clients)	21
Drafting precedents	18
Knowledge management/writing know-how documents	17
Notes: <i>n</i> = 45	

In-depth research, interpreting legislation and contributing to publications also featured among responses. Several respondents mentioned co-operation between LIPs and PSLs in relation to both current awareness and training. One interviewee mentioned that her team jointly managed a know-how database in co-operation with PSLs, with the latter providing content and the library providing quality assurance. Others characterised the PSL role in KM as operating on a different level to the LIPs, with PSLs adding expertise by editing content provided by LIPs.

Asked whether there was clarity on role boundaries between the two professional groups, almost two-thirds of eligible questionnaire respondents (30 out of 48) answered “Yes”, with 11 answering “No” and 7 “Not sure”. Thirteen respondents provided wide-ranging comments elaborating on their answers, but dual involvement in activities and lawyers’ apparent preference for dealing with other lawyers emerged as key themes, for example:

We are also involved with current awareness and KM. Feel that lawyers are unsure who to ask for what information, or on the flipside, our role in the above is devalued – lawyers believing that PSLs are the only people to contact.

Historically the PSL has always done information tasks. Solicitors feel safer talking to other solicitors.

Additional comments identified problems arising from the *ad hoc* nature of the PSL role, which resulted in some of the firm’s PSLs being involved in information tasks, but not others, for no apparent reason, as well as difficulties caused by poor communication and/or understanding, for example:

They tend to forget that we are professionals too and try to tell us what to do in areas [where] we actually know more.

Interview participants commented on skills needed by both groups, particularly in training, in organising information and in assessing and selecting relevant material to forward.

Competency requirements

Respondents were asked to rate 28 competencies identified from the literature (including 11 professional/technical, 8 managerial and 9 personal abilities and attributes) on a 5-point scale, where 1 represented “Not required” and 5 represented “Essential” for their work as LIPs. All the competency areas specified were rated at 3 or higher by more than half the respondents, validating their inclusion in the questionnaire. Table III displays the 10 most highly-rated competencies, based on the mean (arithmetic) average scores, also showing numbers of respondents assigning each area a rating of 5.

Responses demonstrated the perceived importance of personal/interpersonal competencies, which dominate the list; only one competency in this subset, coaching, had a mean score below 4 (at 3.59). Although only one business/managerial competency features in the top 10, only one item in this subset, risk management (2.9), had a mean score below 3. Three competencies here (business awareness, people management and financial management) had a mode average (most frequently occurring score) of 5 and another three (project management, marketing and change management) had a mode rating of 4. There was slightly more variation in the ratings for the professional/technical competencies, with three areas (Web 2.0, e-learning and indexing) recording mean scores below 3. Five areas here (database

searching, information literacy, collection management, KM and acquisition) had mode ratings of 5, with others spread between 2 and 3.

Table 3. Top ten generic competencies for legal information professionals

Competency areas	Average score (out of 5)	Number rating as 'Essential' (5)
Database searching	4.87	58
Communication	4.77	51
Team-working	4.58	44
Prioritisation	4.57	42
Information literacy	4.51	43
Confidence	4.48	39
Motivation	4.33	31
Training	4.29	29
Business awareness	4.13	31
Collection management	4.08	28

Notes: *n* = 63

Participants were invited to identify other competencies and 5 respondents suggested skills in several areas, with personal transferable abilities again prominent, in addition to specialist information/technical competencies (e.g., approachability, customer service, document drafting/written communication, lateral thinking and stress management; and business information research skills, legal research skills, intranet development and management). Interviewees were asked to define the pre-eminent competencies for the sector and departed somewhat from the questionnaire findings, with all but one highlighting cataloguing and/or classification (which both had mode ratings of 2) followed by information retrieval and research skills (e.g., EU and business information). They also stressed the importance of management competencies, including business awareness, as well as personal attributes (e.g., communication, team-work, confidence, a positive outlook), in addition to business and legal knowledge and technological competence.

The majority saw the competency requirements as generally the same as for other sectors, but mentioned the different resources and the need for "a different mindset". Interviewees thought the competencies needed for KM were basically library and information skills ("all in the same ball park"), but applied in a slightly different way, as it involved working with different sorts of information extraction, that was more business-oriented, needing more business awareness, an outward focus and skills in analysis and assessment, as well as promotional and social skills.

Competency development methods

Respondents were asked to select the most appropriate way of obtaining each specified competency, choosing between formal education, training courses and learning on the job. Figure 1 compares the balance of support for these development methods for the three

categories of competencies identified. Preferences varied significantly across the whole set of competencies, but there were some discernible patterns related to the three subsets.

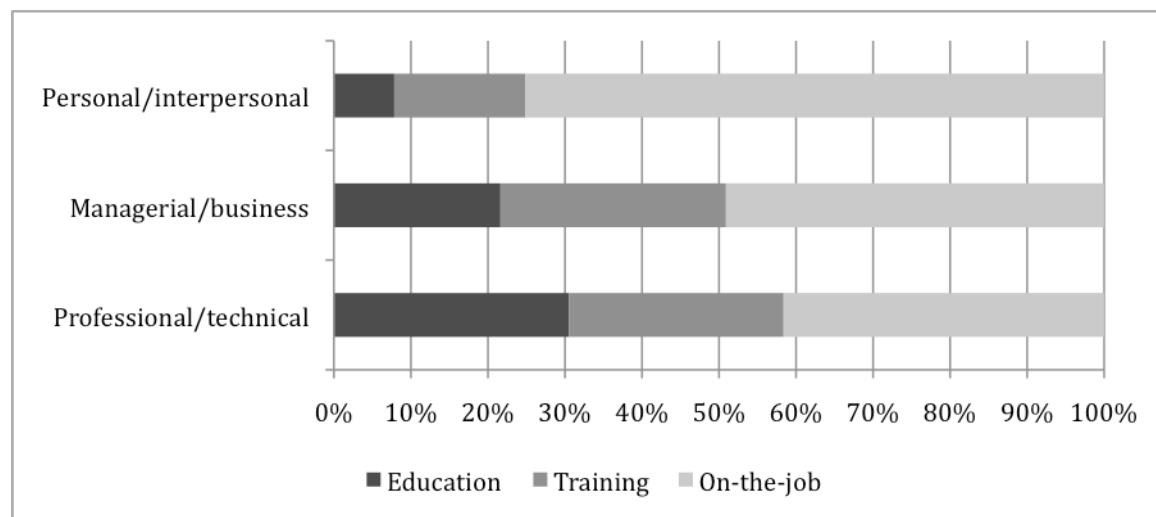


Figure 1. Preferred development methods for generic competencies (n = 62)

For the personal/interpersonal competencies, responses overwhelmingly favoured learning on the job, apart from the areas of coaching and training, where only slightly fewer chose training as the preferred method of competency development. A significant minority also preferred training for development of negotiation skills. There was minimal support for formal education as the best method for any competencies in this group. For the business/managerial competencies, on-the-job development was again generally the most popular choice, but there was more variation here. For six of the eight areas, around one-third of respondents preferred training and for marketing this was the most frequent method chosen. Significant minorities also suggested formal education as the preferred method for most of these competencies, except for business awareness, where there was minimal support for any method other than learning on the job.

In contrast, development preferences for the professional/technical competencies were spread across all three options. Formal education was the most popular choice for the traditional core competencies of cataloguing, classification and indexing, though there was also significant support for learning cataloguing and classification on the job and learning indexing via training. Training was the most frequent choice for database searching, e-learning and Web 2.0 technologies, though with significant minorities favouring on-the-job learning for databases and Web 2.0. On-the-job development was preferred for acquisition, collection management and information literacy, though with some support for formal education for collection management and information literacy. Preferences for developing competency in KM were divided equally between formal education and learning on the job.

A few respondents offered additional comments here, several arguing that while personal “real life” abilities can be taught theoretically, no simulation can come close to the real situation; others suggested that many competencies are best developed through a mixed approach, blending two or more of the methods identified. Interviewees reported they had mostly picked up their competencies on the job, particularly in relation to financial management and IT (and specialist legal competencies), mentioning both external and in-

house courses in this context. One emphasised identifying “gatekeepers” in the firm and learning from colleagues, for example:

Strategic elements I have learnt from other people, such as writing, thinking and how to apply it and phrase it and how the business works.

Specialist knowledge

When asked whether possessing legal knowledge was important for LIPs, a large majority (38 of the 62 answering) responded “Yes”, with 13 answering “No” and 11 “Not sure”. Respondents were then asked to rate 21 specific areas of legal knowledge, identified from the literature as likely requirements, on a 5-point scale as before. As with the generic competencies, all the areas of specialist knowledge identified were rated at 3 or higher by more than half the respondents, validating their inclusion in the questionnaire. Table IV displays the 10 most highly rated areas of knowledge, based on the mean score achieved, also showing numbers of respondents assigning 5 to these areas.

Table 4. Top ten areas of specialist knowledge for legal information professionals

Knowledge areas	Average score (out of 5)	Number rating as ‘Essential’ (5)
Statutes/legislation	4.37	37
Case law	4.32	36
Legal research methodology	4.31	36
Law reports	4.26	34
Legal citation	4.25	32
Legal terminology	4.25	28
Official publications	4.03	28
Legal system	3.98	28
Court system	3.89	19
Law library administration	3.64	15

Notes: *n* = 62

Mean scores here were generally slightly below those assigned to generic competencies, but seven areas of knowledge (one-third of the set) had a mode rating of 5 and a further seven had modes of 4 (EU information/documentation, EU institutions and processes, the law library profession and the legal profession, in addition to the last three areas shown in Table IV). Only two areas, legal ethics (2.84) and general sources of social sciences information (2.85) had mean scores below 3, indicating that the spread of subject knowledge required, or at least desired, by LIPs is quite extensive. Fourteen respondents suggested additional knowledge areas required, relating mainly to particular areas of law (e.g., litigation, insurance, company/corporate, contract and tort), but pointing out that requirements essentially depended on specialisations of employers.

Respondents were again asked to select preferred methods of gaining the knowledge specified. Overall, learning on the job or via training was more often chosen than formal education, but there was less consensus here than for development of generic competencies.

There was a strong preference for gaining knowledge of law library administration and the legal profession on the job. Similarly, for EU information/documentation, EU institutions/processes and foreign/international law, learning via training was strongly preferred. However, for other areas where training was favoured (e.g., case law, court system, law reports, legal citation), significant minorities expressed preferences for formal education and/or learning on the job and for two areas (legal system and statutes) opinion was spread across all three options. Constitution was the only area where formal education was the most popular choice, but education was strongly supported for gaining knowledge of the court system (only marginally behind training) and for legal reasoning (slightly below on-the-job learning).

Several comments reiterated the benefits of combining different methods, but this time with particular emphasis on blending formal education with on-the-job development via practical application, seen as vital in consolidating and developing learning gained in academia, for example:

I think that some of these areas are best learned via a combination of ways, e.g., official publications – an understanding gained in the classroom but then developed on the job worked for me!

I think dual qualifications in law and LIS is the ideal grounding (though I accept it is rare and that experience can provide equally good results over time) – you need a blend between academia and on the job training.

Among other comments, two emphasised the importance of business information as another specialist knowledge need for LIPs. When later questioned specifically about this, respondents provided conclusive evidence, with 51 (of 60) confirming its importance and only 4 responding to the contrary, with 5 unsure. They were also asked about the relative value of specialist information-related knowledge and specialist legal knowledge, where the balance of opinion favoured information-specialist knowledge (34 of 60), but with a substantial minority (22) considering both areas equally valuable. Twenty-one participants provided additional comments here, the majority elaborating why information expertise was more important for their role. A recurring theme was that the core skills of library/information professionals were transferable to researching in different areas, as well as being essential for day-to-day operation of their information services, for example:

The “topic”, i.e., law, can be learnt and “picked up” by a qualified librarian as they are trained in how to apply their skills and how to identify and absorb key areas in a new specialisation. Those trained just in law do not have the core skills of the librarian nor the skills to identify and “absorb” new areas, I have found.

Respondents also pointed out there were many other people in law firms who could provide specialist legal knowledge, although a few mentioned the benefits of having some legal knowledge for dealing with enquiries. Even so, when asked to specify one thing that they did not know on entering the sector which would have helped them at the outset, the vast majority identified legal knowledge (e.g., a basic knowledge of the law/legal system, an understanding of legal vocabulary and how law firms work), with only a minority identifying broader or more generic competencies, such as business information or influencing/negotiation skills. Another interviewee suggested that large general law libraries, such as the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, The Law Society and Inns of Court, acted as

de facto training establishments for new entrants to learn the basics before moving to law firms.

Academic and professional qualifications

Reinforcing opinions expressed on the value of their information specialism, few participants (7 out of 58 respondents) felt that the lack of an academic or professional legal qualification had hindered their career and even fewer (5 out of 60) perceived those with such qualifications as a threat to their profession, though there was less certainty here with 33 participants either unsure or equivocal in their response. However, apart from a few concerns about qualified lawyers being employed instead of librarians, additional comments were largely positive in identifying benefits to the firm, its clients and the information service in having legally-qualified people in the team, because of their understanding of material, respect from partners and opportunities to learn from them, although some commented on the poor research skills of lawyers.

Respondents were asked to indicate which types of qualifications/programmes they considered most appropriate for gaining competencies for legal information work. Table V shows a strong preference for specialist hybrid provision of a type not currently available in the UK, with minimal support for standalone legal qualifications. Additional comment here flagged the need for such specialist provision to be delivered flexibly (e.g., via distance learning), drawing a parallel with current educational provision for health informatics.

Table 5. Preferred types of academic/professional qualifications

Qualification options	Number of respondents
Specialist law librarianship/legal information management programme	40
Generic information science qualification	30
Specialist electives as part of generic information science programme	28
Tailored pathway within generic information science programme	20
Knowledge management qualification	17
General degree	14
Academic/professional legal qualification	11
Paralegal qualification	5
Other	7

Notes: *n* = 58; respondents could select more than one option.

Additional questions explored experiences and opinions of current professional educational and development provision. When asked about competencies gained from professional education, interviewees particularly valued coverage of search techniques and KM, in addition to enquiry handling, information storage and retrieval, cataloguing and indexing, collection management, library planning/design and management. However, some criticised out-of-date content that was too generalist and lacking a real-world context, noting insufficient coverage of finance and indexing/cataloguing (compared with the past). Several commented on the need to ensure a practical focus for education and training, by improving links between educators and practitioners and involving people with relevant current

experience in programmes. There was near-universal support (51 out of 59) for introducing law firm internships into professional education for legal information work; shadowing working lawyers was also suggested as a useful development method. Interviewees had mixed opinions on CILIP Chartership, with some not valuing it, but others feeling it enhanced status in a professional setting.

Specialist courses (e.g., Legal Foundations, Legal Reference Materials) and other offerings from BIALL were generally highly regarded, likewise those of the City Legal Information Group (CLIG) and City Information Group[2], though numbers commenting were relatively low and a few respondents felt events were more useful for networking/catching up than developing competencies. The majority of respondents viewed the intensive two-day KM master class offered by Nottingham Law School as a useful/very useful model and a substantial number (26 out of 59) thought law schools should be involved in the education of legal information professionals, though 12 disagreed and 21 were “Not sure”. One respondent suggested development of a new specialist qualification with a law school, to be offered by day release or distance learning that could (also) be taken by paralegals.

Opinions were fairly evenly divided on whether current opportunities for continuing professional development in the sector were sufficient, including provision for new entrants. Criticisms included the London-centric nature of provision, limited training budgets and the lack of advanced courses; some also felt that lack of confidence inhibited development. Interviewees noted the value of a Young Law Librarians Group and of regionally-based activity (e.g., a Central England sub-group of BIALL and an East Midlands Legal Information Group) and were keen to see more regional provision, suggesting that the Legal Foundations Course could be offered regionally or via distance learning.

Discussion

Generic and specialist competencies

The survey results confirm that LIPs need a broad range of professional/technical, managerial/business and personal/transferable competencies in common with other information professionals, but also need specialist legal competencies and knowledge of business information. Respondents emphasised the importance of personal qualities and abilities in areas such as communication, confidence, team-working and training, which is consistent with the emphasis found in the literature (Jones, 1998; Owen, 2002; Podboy, 2000) and the AALL (2001; 2010) *Competencies*, including the latter’s extensive coverage of training/teaching.

Responses also reinforced points made by many commentators (e.g., Amos, 2001; Danner, 1998; Eisenschitz, 1999; Gibson, 2001; Middleton and Hallam, 2001; Sippings, 2007; Worley, 2007) about the continuing value of traditional information-related competencies gained via initial professional education, prioritising information searching and retrieval, information/collection management and research/enquiry skills. Although not prioritised in questionnaire ratings, interview participants highlighted the importance of cataloguing and classification skills; this contrasts with recent findings in the academic sector, where law librarians were notably not involved in cataloguing and classification (Hardy and Corrall, 2007). However, it is interesting that some AALL (2001) role-dependent Specialized Competencies (notably teaching/training and collection management) featured in our sample’s top ten and their frequent mention in comments suggests these are core roles for contemporary UK LIPs.

Managerial/business competencies were also highly rated, especially people and financial management and aspects stressed in the literature, such as marketing (Gibson, 2001; Hill, 2001) and business acumen (Amos, 2001; Gibson, 2001; Stanfield, 2009; Stenson *et al.*, 1999). The business understanding needed in this sector is multi-faceted: comments indicated that LIPs need an understanding of commercial practices – particularly a grasp of how law firms work – and also need business information research skills: the latter featured among the pre-eminent competencies for the sector identified by interviewees, confirming comments in the literature (Eisenschitz, 1999; Hazleton, 1993; Norris, 2002; Worley, 2007), while the former was a recurring example of knowledge identified as useful for new entrants to the field. Participants also identified KM (AALL, 2001; Battersby, 2004; Stephens and Hamblin, 2006) as an emergent key area of competency, involving application of traditional professional/technical skills in novel ways, requiring higher-order skills in information extraction combined with business acumen and interpersonal abilities.

The study confirms the importance of specialist subject knowledge for legal information work and identified some areas considered particularly important, although there was less consensus here than on generic professional competencies. Questionnaire responses prioritised knowledge of statutes/legislation and case law above knowledge of the legal system and legal terminology, but the latter were frequently identified among things needed when entering the sector (along with a basic knowledge of the law). However, the overriding message was that the core competency needed is the ability to navigate the information resource base of the field, which requires some contextual understanding (e.g., the specialist materials, citation practices and professional vocabulary) to do efficiently and effectively. The law library literature consistently couples specialist knowledge of legal resources and research methods with a working knowledge of legal procedure and terminology in this way (Butler, 2006; Constable, 2003; Oakley, 1989). Moreover, the type of subject expertise identified here is precisely that which Rodwell (2001) specifies for subject librarians generally, i.e., not subject knowledge *per se*, but a mix that combines knowledge of the client community and its needs with knowledge of the information resources of the field.

The majority of our interviewees specifically confirmed that the competencies required for legal information work were the same as those needed for information work in other sectors, apart from the different resources used and the need for a different mindset. However, although the majority of our whole sample (34 respondents) agreed that information-specialist knowledge was more valuable than specialist legal knowledge and several argued that their professional education specifically equipped them to gain familiarity with new subject areas, a substantial minority (22) valued both types of knowledge equally and our findings provide some evidence to support commentators such as Rodwell (2001), Constable (2003) and Eastland (2005) who suggest that the specialist knowledge demands of this sector are more extensive and more complex than other areas and may therefore need different professional preparation. The fact that all 21 of the identified specific knowledge areas were rated at least 3 or higher reinforces this view.

Education, training and development

Formal education was the least favoured method of gaining competency for most areas identified, with the exception of the core professional/technical abilities of information professionals, although several additional comments indicated that formal learning via educational programmes could be a useful way of establishing initial understanding of an area that could be developed further in a practical setting. Despite significant recognition of the value of specialist legal knowledge for legal information work, only 11 participants

selected an academic/professional legal qualification as the appropriate way to gain the required competency and only one explicitly identified dual qualification as the ideal, thus offering only limited support to authors favouring this (Hazelton, 1993; Jensen, 1998; Oakley, 1989).

Library/information science programmes were valued for their coverage of core areas such as collection management, information retrieval and KM, but interviewees identified gaps and shortcomings in current UK provision, including poor coverage of key aspects (e.g., cataloguing/indexing and financial management) and out-of-date or low-level content, often with limited connection to real-world practice. Several participants called for improved links between education and practice, echoing similar messages in the literature (Bizub *et al.*, 2005; Butler, 2006; Tice, 2001).

Despite the long-established professional tradition of generic preparatory education (favoured by Middleton and Hallam, 2001), there was substantial support here for providing a specialist legal information management programme, an option selected by more than two-thirds of respondents, in line with views advanced by Brookes (2005), Clarke (1985), Constable (2003) and Norris (2002). An alternative model of specialist electives within a generic programme, promoted by authors such as Brown and Stephens (2004) and Tice (2001), was supported by nearly half the respondents. An even higher proportion (51 out of 59) supported the introduction of law firm internships into professional education. Opinion was divided on the involvement of law schools in the education of LIPs, but Battersby (2004) reports that librarians have taken the Nottingham Law School Diploma in Know-How Management.

In the absence of specialist education provision, training courses run by Aslib, BIALL and CLIG are widely used by new entrants to the sector to learn about legal and business resources, processes and institutions, confirming the findings of previous UK research (Brown and Stephens, 2004; Clarke, 1985; Stensen *et al.*, 1999). Existing courses are well regarded within their acknowledged limitations; participants identified a need for more advanced provision and (especially) delivery beyond London, including distance learning. Training was also preferred for technical aspects of information work (e.g., databases, e-learning) and valued for several management areas (notably, marketing) and particular personal competencies (e.g., coaching, training, negotiating skills), where in-house courses were specifically mentioned.

On-the-job development is widely favoured by LIPs for acquiring personal, managerial and specialist legal competencies; this mode of learning was also popular for some core professional competencies (notably acquisition, collection management, information literacy). Respondents also value learning from colleagues, including legally-qualified people in their unit and “gatekeepers” in their firm. Activities organised by professional associations and special interest groups offer useful networking opportunities and contribute to development via professional updating. The role of large general law libraries as *de facto* training grounds for new entrants to the sector was an interesting insight from an interviewee.

Professional support lawyers

The responses showed that most LIPs (49 out of 64) worked alongside PSLs, whose work centred on current awareness, training, drafting precedents and managing know-how, confirming reports of their growth and descriptions of their function in the literature (Attfield *et al.*, 2010; Barrow, 2005; Faulconbridge, 2008; Gibson, 2001; Hoult, 2003; Mackenzie, 2004). Although the two groups were generally managed separately, most respondents

reported moderate to close working relationships and several described collaboration in delivering current awareness and training or managing a know-how database, evidencing the complementary nature of their expertise, supporting Barrow (2005), McKenzie (2004), Stanfield (2009) and Tuckwell (2010). In contrast to Harvey (2003), few respondents perceived PSLs as a threat, but a significant proportion reported ambiguity of role boundaries, as suggested in the literature (Amos, 2001; Booth, 2001; Harvey, 2003; Stanley and Eisenschitz, 2008). Apparent overlaps in activity were attributed to fee-earners' preferences for dealing with other lawyers and poor understanding of LIPs' competencies (noted by Barrow, 2005). However, the balance of opinion seemed to follow Barrow (2005), Rudman (2009), Sippings (2007) and Stanfield (2009) in viewing PSLs positively and identifying opportunities to learn from colleagues with different expertise.

Distinguishing features of legal information professionals

Although most respondents perceived their competency needs as similar to other sectors, the results show significant differences in priorities and several distinctive features that separate the work of LIPs in law firms from law librarians in universities. The divergences in perceptions and practices relate to three areas where substantial growth and change has taken place in the past decade: the teaching/training role of library and information professionals, the adoption of Web 2.0 technologies and the implementation of KM.

Hardy and Corrall's (2007) study of chemistry, English and law subject librarians in UK universities similarly identified searching, communication and team-working among the top ten competencies needed, but placed teaching skills on a par with searching and ranked pedagogical knowledge (specified separately) at the same level of importance as team-working and only slightly below communication. All the law subject librarians in the sample prioritised teaching competencies to this extent, in contrast to the lower rating given to competence in training in the present study (ranked as "essential" by only 29 out of 63 respondents). Different perceptions of the teaching/training role are also evident in the preferred methods for developing competencies in this area. The present study found fewer than one-fifth of respondents favoured formal education for their training role, with on-the-job development the most popular method (closely followed by courses), but another recent study of UK subject librarians reported strong support for incorporating modules on teaching in initial professional education and also found that almost one-third of the sample had taken a formal educational qualification in teaching (Bewick and Corrall, 2010). Wakefield and Allbon (2008, p. 19) support this view of law librarianship in universities, suggesting "It may become commonplace for law librarians to pursue professional teaching qualifications to complement their existing knowledge in librarianship or the law field".

Web 2.0 is another area revealing differences in practice between law firms and universities. Respondents ranked competence in Web 2.0 technologies below the top-rated technical competencies (collection management, database searching, information literacy and KM), but above the traditional skills area of cataloguing and classification. The literature shows that well-established Web 2.0 tools, such as RSS, blogs and wikis, are being used in law firms to improve efficiency and effectiveness by enabling faster updating of information, separating key updates from other emails and making it easier to share knowledge within teams, between teams and with clients (Winter, 2008; Lustigman, 2010). Other social networking tools (including LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter), are being used in the legal information community, but more for networking within the profession than within law firms and with academic law librarians – rather than LIPs in law firms – reported as the main users of social networking sites in the legal information world (Weiter, 2008; Mullan, 2009). Wakefield and

Allbon (2008) give several additional examples of social media used by university law librarians to enhance service provision (including del.icio.us, You Tube and Second Life) that illustrate the contrast. Weiter (2008) and Mullan (2009) both note that many IT departments in law firms block access to social media sites on the basis that they are time-wasters and not appropriate for business use, but Lustigman (2010) suggests this may be changing, with 5 out of 16 firms investigated now allowing access to sites such as Facebook.

KM provides what is arguably the most significant example of divergent practice here. While the interviewees in the present study suggested that KM competencies needed by LIPs were basically library/information skills, it was evident from respondents' descriptions of their KM activities that they needed an extended skillset, requiring business understanding and specific subject knowledge blended with higher-order information extraction and analysis skills, which differed from the information retrieval skills and more general knowledge of resources in the field mentioned by subject librarians in universities (Bewick and Corrall, 2010; Hardy and Corrall, 2007; Rodwell, 2001). Although Wakefield and Allbon (2008, p. 20) report that in university law libraries "Wikis are used...for knowledge management on the cheap", other reports of KM initiatives in university libraries show that their interpretation of the concept is rather narrow, with the focus predominantly on sharing library-related knowledge among library staff by using intranets and databases to record library policies/procedures and answers to reference questions (Mphidi and Snyman, 2004; Stover, 2004). A few university library practitioners (e.g., Branin, 2003) have offered a broader conception of KM as an extension of library collection management, but their focus is essentially on managing explicit knowledge in the form of existing datasets, faculty publications and learning resources, rather than capturing the tacit knowledge of experts within the institution. The KM role of LIPs in law firms not only demands more advanced information-related competencies, but also requires some knowledge of the specialist work undertaken within the firm and an understanding of its business context. The nature of their KM role illustrates why LIPs in law firms want specialist preparation for legal information work in their initial professional education, while subject librarians in universities prioritize specialist education for their teaching role (Bewick and Corrall, 2010).

Limitations of the research

The research was limited by time and resource constraints, which affected its scale and scope. In addition, the self-selecting nature of the sample may have biased the results towards those motivated to return questionnaires and/or with a particular interest in competency development and related issues. Also, despite frequent use of the option "Other – please specify", extensive use of categorised questions may have led respondents to omit points not explicitly mentioned. Some participants identified ambiguities in the wording of questions, but these were resolved via email. Interview data are inherently vulnerable to researcher bias, but the team was alert to this risk and strove for objectivity throughout the investigation. Within these acknowledged limitations, the study has advanced our understanding of the competency and development needs of LIPs, challenging existing assumptions on the subject.

Conclusion

This study investigated competency requirements for information professionals working in commercial law firms, including their need for specialist knowledge of the field, preferred methods of developing competencies needed for their work and the perceived impact on LIPs of PSLs – a new cadre of hybrid support staff engaged in information-intensive activities, whose employment has been viewed as contentious because of identified incursions into the established territory of professional information specialists.

The findings confirm the breadth of competency requirements identified in the literature and the continuing value of traditional professional/technical abilities, though the most important areas identified have an obvious contemporary flavour, prioritising database searching and information literacy alongside complementary qualities and abilities in areas such as business acumen, communication, team-working and training. KM was also highlighted as an important developmental area where traditional competencies can be enhanced and applied in new contexts to create value by combining professional expertise with business and interpersonal attributes. Although taking them into territory increasingly seen as the preserve of PSLs, some LIPs have successfully delineated specific responsibilities in relation to content acquisition, editing and quality assurance; but the diverse arrangements outlined evidence the characteristic fluidity and ambiguity of the PSL role.

The study demonstrates the importance of specialist domain knowledge for LIPs, identifying requirements similar to those of information specialists in other disciplines, combining knowledge of the information resources and methodologies of the domain with an understanding of the business context – but knowledge requirements that are more complex and more extensive, because of the distinctive nature of legal materials, citation practices and professional vocabulary, coupled with the additional need for familiarity with business sources and research methods, as well as the higher-order information-related competencies and deeper level of firm-specific knowledge associated with KM activities, which differentiate LIPs in law firms from law librarians in universities.

Our findings challenge the assumption that a law degree is the ideal preparation for legal information work, revealing instead a strong preference for specialist professional education in legal information management, representing a significant departure from the tradition of a generalist professional qualification preparing candidates for work in any sector. Participants also supported other options for specialized education, including specialist electives within generic programmes and law-firm internships linked to professional education, stressing the need for all academic provision to connect with the real world of specialist practice.

Specialist training offered by professional associations currently meets key sector needs, but extended provision is wanted. On-the-job development plays a vital role in managerial and personal competency development, where learning by doing and learning from colleagues complement formal learning; external professional networks also support continuing development for new and experienced practitioners.

The present study achieved its objectives within the limitations noted, but further research in this area would be useful in view of the continuing evolution of roles and relationships of LIPs and PSLs in relation to KM. A larger-scale study surveying PSLs and fee-earners in addition to LIPs with more emphasis on qualitative methods would provide a more holistic in-depth understanding of the situation; this could be particularly valuable in gaining other stakeholder perspectives on the competencies, education and training needs of both LIPs and PSLs. A more ambitious comparative investigation of specialist information and KM roles in other professional domains, such as healthcare or another interdisciplinary field, could examine similarities and differences in competency requirements and contribute additional understanding of the generic and specialist domain-related knowledge and skills needed by information professionals and their associates in the contemporary knowledge economy.

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Notes

1. Lexis®PSL. <http://www.lexislegalintelligence.co.uk/intelligence/lexisppl>
2. City Information Group ceased operating in July 2009.

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