

Biography

Karen Latimer is a graduate of Edinburgh University and of Queen's University Belfast and spent her early career at Durham University and as a library building consultant at the University of Houston in Texas. For much of her career she was the architecture and planning librarian at Queen's University, Belfast before moving in to library management. Karen is a member of the UK Designing Libraries Advisory Board, a former chair of the IFLA Library Buildings & Equipment Standing Committee and a member of the LIBER European Research Libraries Architecture Group. She is also a Trustee of the Architectural Heritage Fund and of Hearth Historic Buildings Trust. She has published on a range of library and architectural topics and frequently speaks at national and international conferences. Karen is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals, an honorary member of the Royal Society of Ulster Architects and was awarded an OBE in 2007 for services to architectural heritage.

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The Library in an Agile World: Case Studies from Gowling WLG and Withers LLP

Abstract: This article developed from a talk delivered by the authors, Timonie Green and Diane Miller, at the BIALL Annual Conference in June 2018, whereby they looked at how the Library and Information Services in both of their firms have managed a move to agile working. Withers, at the time, were deep in preparations for the move, whilst Gowling WLG had been working agilely for some time. The hope is that by telling these stories, and talking about the issues encountered, some pointers and ideas can be given to other firms facing the challenge.

Keywords: ways of working; agile working; law firms

INTRODUCTION

The dictionary definition of the term agile, from OED Online is “Able to move quickly and easily; nimble, dexterous”. The Cambridge Business English Dictionary defines it as “able to deal with new situations or changes quickly and successfully”. The term can refer to a project management tool, and originated in the software industry when a group of developers came up with the ‘Agile Manifesto’ as a new way for product development in 2001. Since then the term has spread to businesses in general wishing to achieve greater flexibility, especially in the workforce. The term used in this context is ‘agile working’.

But what is agile working? The term seems to be everywhere as a growing number of businesses, in all

sectors, claim that they are adopting ‘agile working policies’. There are many definitions of agile working and many elements to what can be a bit of a pick ‘n’ mix group of working practices. It can sometimes be reduced to ‘hot desking’ or ‘working from home’ and whilst it can include both of these it encompasses a whole lot more.

It is a fundamental change in the culture of an organisation, for both the employer and the employee, and one that has to be based on trust, to use the best technology, and support services, to enable people to work anywhere beneficial to the task they are engaged in, and to themselves personally, whether this is the office, at home, in a library, in a client's office or travelling. Agile working often goes hand in hand with ‘activity based working’, which is essentially agile working in the office,

choosing the best place to perform a particular task, such as sitting with another team for the day, or with a special interest group, and so promoting a more collegiate way of working and knowledge sharing.

Although the legal sector has been quite slow to adopt agile working, it has really taken off in the past couple of years. In May 2016, an article in *The Lawyer* reported that a flurry of firms were adopting some form of agile policy, including Clifford Chance, Linklaters and Dentons. A report by CBRE Research found that, of the firms they surveyed, 30% had adopted an agile policy by the start of 2017 and 61% had adopted one by the start of 2018. So, as it becomes more common, the need to think about how law library and information services respond to this has become more urgent.

WHY WITHERS IS GOING AGILE

Withers was fortunate that a break clause in our lease allowed the management the opportunity to think about which direction they wanted the firm to take with regard to office space and working practices. A desire for an office that was fit for the 21st century, in what it offered to our employees, the business and to our clients, led to the decision to move premises, from 72,000 square feet to 58,000 square feet. The bigger shift though would be a cultural one, to agile working practices. Any move to smaller premises obviously involves a cost saving exercise, but for Withers it was creating an agile environment and supporting collaboration that are the drivers in the move to smaller premises and not the other way around. The move has given Withers the opportunity to take the plunge and make a full-scale change in working practices.

In preparation, to see if moving to a smaller space was workable, a number of surveys were carried out, including a desk usage survey which found that only 75% of desks were in use full time. Also, we had already moved to open plan hot desking in our real estate team a couple of years previously and this had proved to be a great success. In the months leading up to the move this open plan area was used as a trial space for different work options, such as booths and sound-proofed pods for meetings and confidential phone calls. The teams in the business division were also encouraged to move into the open plan area. A 'working from home' pilot group was set up in addition, to test new technology solutions and iron out any issues or concerns. Hand in hand with this was training on using the new technology and formulating 'best practices' for working from home.

THE ISSUES FOR LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES

The main concern for the library team, to begin with, was space – not just what we currently had in terms of hard copy collections but what we wanted for the new building and how we saw our services developing in the 'agile world'.

We had a sizeable archive collection of journals and old editions of key texts in the basement, plus current collections in the seven practice group libraries and smaller collections in fee earner offices as well. We were informed early on that there would be space available in the basement of the new building for the archive but that there would be a high cost in renting a large amount. The above ground space was even less negotiable, so we had to put forward the best case for what we needed.

So, what did we need? Having the resources in the best format is an obvious necessity. Accessibility is key but so is usability. Moving online where possible helps but, as we all know, there is a cost to that. Also, not everything is available online. In addition to this, not everyone is happy using books online and whilst this may be a training issue it is also important to recognise that people do take in information differently, and some texts just do work better as hard copy.

With the physical library space the question was did we want to stick with what we already had, departmental libraries dotted around the firm, and smaller collections living in the offices of fee earners. This was clearly not feasible in a new space where no one has an office! In addition to this we wanted a space that took into account the new style of working. The limited amount of space in the practice area zones meant that departmental libraries, if space was found, would be hidden away in cupboards. We also wanted to encourage agile working too, finding the right place to do a particular task. A consolidated library with a quiet study space fitted the bill perfectly.

HOW WE DEALT WITH OUR ARCHIVE COLLECTION

The objective here was to continue to be able to supply articles and old editions of key texts as quickly and cost effectively as possible. The first step was to carry out a review of what we held, and then see if we could access the same content elsewhere. We are lucky to only be about 15 minute walk from the Law Society library, and we also joined IALS (which is a 30 minute walk at most). This way we could take advantage of excellent document delivery services, but also copy or consult resources in person if the cost of document delivery was not justifiable.

We decided to keep key titles, based on frequency of request and difficulty of obtaining elsewhere. We also retained some titles that, whilst being available elsewhere, were usually requested for reasons which could not be justifiably charged to a matter number or cost code. The remainder were disposed of. Journals were largely recycled but old editions of books and law reports were given to an excellent service run by Sally Chorley that finds good homes in library collections or overseas law schools.

WHAT WE DID NEXT – LISTENING AND TALKING

We carried out the practical tasks, such as measuring all the current collections so we knew how much space we

would need. We also wanted to make sure that our ideas chimed with what our users required, so we talked to people. We spoke mostly to the PSLs of each practice group, who we work with closely on library resources anyway. There were concerns that fee earners were used to having some key books right by them, the titles that they needed to consult quickly and frequently. So, we found that the best solution was to have small 'core' collections closer to the fee earner areas on each floor, and the lesser used books, in the main library. As we did not need to house large collections within the groups we were lucky enough to be given some open shelved book cases by a big study table on each floor, which was perfect.

We worked with the PSLs to make sure that the core collections really were just the key books. This also gave us a good opportunity to weed out and remove items we just didn't need anymore. We wanted to avoid a situation where we tried to stuff as many books as possible into the core collections without thinking about how each title was used. In keeping with the new way of working, the core collections would be those books that needed to be grabbed quickly to check a point or a procedure – those that were used most frequently. The books in the main library would be those that people might need to consult at length, when doing a more substantial piece of work. In this situation, it would make sense for the user to work in the quiet area and have all the resources available there. We also hope to help foster the feeling that, in line with the agile concept, your desk isn't in a set space but it is wherever you need it to be for whatever you are working on.

We were also very fortunate in that we were able to discuss our needs and concerns with the decision makers. This was initially a challenge, as we spoke to a lot of people on the 'measuring' side of things but not the partner in charge of the project. This changed when we received our Yellow Tax Handbook order in December 2017. Like a lot of firms, we have people who just cannot do without their hard copy. When encouraging fee earners to use the online version, or take an eBook we had one partner who said that she would sit on her hard copies instead of a chair if she had to – just so long as she could keep them!

The large delivery caused some consternation and we ended up being asked why we were still ordering books! This highlighted an important need to talk to the higher up decision makers as well. We were fortunate enough to have a very constructive meeting, along with the PSL from the partner's team, where we were able to show that we were working with them, talk about how we were thinning hard copy collections and moving online where sensible – but also talk about books we did need in hard copy and why.

Following on from this we were also able to have questions added to a weekly 'working from home' survey that was run in preparation for the move, so that we could find out what resources people needed when not in the office, discover any problems with online access in general and understand concerns and issues with using books online. This highlighted some key issues, not least

that our password management system was not actually working on some people's computers – a fact that we hadn't realised before!

Also in the run up to our move we trialled different types of training for the fee earners. We ran a series of 10 minute skype sessions on key topics, such as looking up legislation on different services. They were tailored to particular groups so as to make them more useful. Fee earners were able to join in from their desks so didn't have to walk away from work they were in the middle of, and we also ran them at different times of the day so we could see which worked the best. We recorded some of these short training sessions and are looking at putting them on our new learning management system.

Finally, as we move some titles online we will have a crossover of formats for a while. This will help with accessibility but also hopefully encourage users to try the online version without feeling that they have lost anything.

AGILE WORKS FOR US TOO!

The library team also want to have the benefits of agile working too. Not just the opportunity to work from home but the ability to move around the office. Our aim is to be able to spend time sitting with the practice areas regularly so that we become more embedded in their work and can better understand and anticipate their needs.

We will be continuing to make sure our users have access to all the resources they need, wherever they are working. Hand in hand with this will be to continue to find the best ways to carry out training, and other different options and formats such as skype, video, and attending team meetings.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING IN AN AGILE ENVIRONMENT

Any knowledge management system in an agile environment has the potential to become even more important as people will not necessarily be able to rely on an office-mate to have that handy document or know where that useful precedent is. A robust and user friendly KMS will be vital, but it may also become even more important to ensure that knowledge does get shared and added to any KMS. A potential danger when people are in the office environment less or not necessarily sitting within their teams is that the communication channels of knowledge sharing may close up. Withers is lucky to have a fantastic KMS, which has been developing over the past couple of years and a great Knowledge Advisor who promotes and champions it widely throughout the firm.

CONCLUSION TO THE WITHERS STORY (SO FAR!)

We have been in our new building now for just under a month. The space is amazing, and concerns about noise levels have been largely unfounded. What is really nice is

that the quiet space is used every day by different people. The consolidated library looks great, and has received a lot of positive comments, although I think we will be tidying and rearranging for a little while! We have seen more fee earners visiting our space than we ever did in the old building. This is obviously due to the fact that the majority of the collections are with us but it means that we are far more visible as a team, even before we have ventured out to sit amongst the groups. It is still very early days but all the preparation and planning by the library team, and the firm as a whole, seems to have paid off and the future looks very exciting indeed.

GOWLING WLG (UK) LLP: OUR FIRM

Gowling WLG has been named as one of the best places to work in the UK for the 18th consecutive year by Great Place to Work®. The firm is committed to looking after the well-being of its employees and has a range of programmes and initiatives in place to support employees, such as mindfulness sessions, mental health champions and an option to buy an additional week of annual leave. In 2016 the firm began to look at agile working as another strand of its commitment to employee well-being that would encourage a work-life balance and also hopefully have a positive impact in other areas such as retention.

Initially, agile working was trialled amongst selected legal and business service teams with employees on the trial being encouraged to explore agile as a means of being flexible with working hours and where they worked those hours.

THE ROLL-OUT

By summer 2017 agile was rolled out to the firm as a whole in the UK. The message from the firm was that everyone had the opportunity to make agile work for them provided there was no detrimental effect on the business. An announcement of the roll out was accompanied by roadshows from our HR and IT teams to help people transition to this new mode of working.

Our team were already used to supporting a few lawyers who worked from home on a regular basis so surely supporting more people working outside of the office on a regular basis or working outside normal office hours wouldn't make that much of a difference... would it?

OUR CHALLENGES

As a team we faced two new challenges: how to facilitate agile working within our team; how to support the needs of our newly agile colleagues.

FACILITATING AGILE WITHIN OUR TEAM

The Information and Library Services (ILS) team at Gowling WLG is split-site, with five members of the team based at

our Snowhill office in Birmingham and two members of the team based at 4 More London Riverside, London.

The ILS management team were keen to make sure that we all had the opportunity to benefit from agile working and after some discussion it was decided that our team's interpretation of agile would encourage everyone to work outside of the office for one day a week i.e. a working from home day (thereafter referred to in this article as "wfh day") under the agile principles. As most of us have reasonably long daily commutes, that interpretation pleased everyone, offering a welcome escape from the grind of travel by public transport. Discussions about agile identified some concerns which needed to be addressed:

- How could we continue to support the enquiry rota? Could someone working agile cover a rota slot?
- How could we maintain the same standards of service delivery as a team and individually?
- How could we ensure desk/office based tasks such as cataloguing and book processing, which didn't lend themselves particularly well to an agile scenario, were incorporated into the new individual and team working routines?
- How could we ensure agile working didn't have a detrimental impact on communication with line-managers and between colleagues?
- How should individuals plan for a day of agile working?

ROTA

Initially, it was decided that covering the rota would continue to be an office based task: access to a full desktop, access to a phone (answering internal calls and making external calls), and access to hard copy materials were seen as crucial for someone covering a rota slot and therefore, responsible for answering enquiries made via our central email address or via our central phone number.

Supporting the rota was probably the main driver behind our interpretation of agile and our individual wfh days were chosen to work around our individual rota commitments. Because of this, it meant once a suitable wfh day had been identified, it was easier to have that as your regular wfh day rather than to change the day every week and disrupt the enquiry rota. However, we have found that having a regular wfh day has also helped with other things too such as planning when to undertake office based tasks.

Just over a year on from introducing agile we don't really view it as being a barrier to working a rota slot. Most of us now use work supplied laptops meaning that on wfh days we have the same access to our desktops as if we were in the office and we are also well into the swing of putting our work phones onto divert to an appropriate contact number. In addition we have access to a growing number of online commentary sources so can undertake a lot of research tasks without or before needing to access hard copy materials (if hard copy materials need to be consulted then we can call upon a colleague who is office based that day to help).

KNOWING WHO IS WORKING WHERE AND WHEN

As a split-site team we already appreciated the value of having a shared calendar where we noted individual meetings and holidays and we quickly realised it was also important to mark-up the calendar with details of our respective wfh days so that we all knew who was working where on any given day.

We can check the availability of a colleague to assist with an office based task (e.g. sending an item of stock from one office to the other) via the calendar rather than wasting time in contacting them only to find they are not in the office that day.

COMMUNICATION

Whilst a wfh day is frequently an opportunity to have some quiet time to work largely uninterrupted on a project or task, we know we still have to be contactable if we are to maintain the same standards of service delivery and communication within the team as if we were office based. So email messages still get checked (out of office messages switched off) and phone numbers are put onto divert to facilitate this. My last task of the day before a wfh day is to divert my phone in readiness and if I forget to do it I contact someone and ask them to do it for me.

We have also realised the benefit of the various communication tools available within the firm. My particular favourite is using the video conferencing product we have and I can make use of the quiet surroundings at home on my wfh day to do training sessions with the lawyers. I also regularly have video conferencing sessions with my line manager on my wfh day.

I am sure that there will be other IT products available to me within the firm that would be useful to help me with agile working and I intend to spend some time investigating this properly.

IT SKILLS

I think we have all had to improve our IT skills since starting to work agile. It hasn't just been about using the IT products but also about learning to use them in a smarter way and being able to do basic troubleshooting. I am my own first line of IT support when I am working from home. I do contact the IT helpdesk when I absolutely need to (and I have to say that on the occasions I have done so they have been brilliant) but I try to solve most issues myself so that I can learn how to sort them should they happen again.

FLEXIBILITY

We all enjoy agile working but appreciate that whilst an individual keeping to a regular wfh day works best for us as a team, sometimes we need to be flexible if there is a requirement to do so. For example, I change from my usual wfh day to another day every six weeks or so that I am in the office to participate in the visitor programme which our firm runs for local school children.

PLANNING

In my experience planning the wfh day is the key to making it work. I got to be quite good very quickly at putting my phone on divert and packing up my laptop and bringing it home but in the early days I would sometimes find myself frustrated because I had left something in hard copy that I needed e.g. notebook on my desk. I have found it useful to run through my plans for my wfh day with my line manager the day before. It helps give focus to the day, make clear my expected output and encourages that all important trust.

KNOWLEDGE OF RESOURCES

I think you need to make sure that you have excellent knowledge of hardcopy and online resources in order to both work agile and to support others doing the same. If I am answering an enquiry and I am not in the office, I need to know enough about the hard copy stock to be able to make recommendations to people without having to physically check contents and index pages.

SUPPORTING AGILE COLLEAGUES

Planning

In an ideal world we would have been thinking and planning for agile before it happened. Some tasks and projects that maybe were not a priority would have been moved up my priority list had I been more aware that the firm's introduction of agile was coming the summer of 2017. If you can, PLAN is what I would say.

Communication

As much as we thought everyone knew who we are, what we were responsible for and how to contact us, initially this proved not to be the case. In the first few months of agile working we found that most people who should have requested our assistance seemed to contact the IT Helpdesk in the first instance. It made me realise the importance of communicating our key messages around the firm and using all the channels of communication available to ensure we reached as many people as possible.

Accessing online resources

Having our customers working outside of their usual office location certainly seemed to flush out quite a few issues with regard to accessing our online subscriptions. Unsurprisingly IP authentication is not a method of access which translates well in an agile working environment and we have had to revisit how products are accessed to ensure that they can be used irrespective of the location of the user. Moving to individual usernames and passwords as the means of accessing resources seems to be the best option. Nowadays when we are considering purchasing a new product we know the means of access must work for the agile user.

But even getting usernames and passwords to work properly has been frequently problematic and unfailingly, users have found problems when I have experienced none. It has been really useful to work with a few people, to go through their usernames and passwords, to check everything works properly in the office and then to get them to try to access the same products when working outside of the office. More often than not the issues are specific to their PCs rather than to the products themselves.

We are fortunate enough to subscribe to a password management tool with which we had experienced modest success before the introduction of agile. Given that agile has pushed us away from access solutions based on IP authentication, getting people to use this tool properly has become very important.

Resources

The introduction of agile has given us added impetus to provide more access to more resources online rather than in hard copy. I think we would all agree that most lawyers love hard copy and it can be hard to wean them from it even when you are doing it for their benefit. But the best way we can support the agile lawyer is to broaden the resources available to them out of the office and this is now an important consideration when we are purchasing resources and having discussions about resources with practice teams and professional support lawyers.

It has also raised the issue of how people can best access commentary sources that are sitting within subscription services. We have pulled out links to individual commentary sources and put them onto relevant intranet pages as well as adding hover-over descriptions detailing key commentary sources against subscription links but this does require a lot of maintaining. The library catalogue can help us to solve these problems and the development work we have been intending to do for a while has now

become a priority, for example, providing individual usernames and passwords to enable personalisation, creation of saved links, signposts to collections of online materials and deployment of links onto intranet pages.

Training

We provide quite a lot of training to lawyers on using the resources we provide on their desktops. However, agile has changed the whole ball game and demand for training has increased. People are using resources outside of their normal office location and office hours and so they don't have a colleague easily available to confer with or delegate to and the ILS team is not available out of office hours either. Consequently, in order for lawyers to get the best from agile without any detriment to their productivity, they need to be able to use the resources on their desktops efficiently. Therefore, we have increased the training we provide and have also considered how to deliver training and make training materials available to agile workers.

Accommodate

We have had to appreciate that sometimes the agile lawyer needs additional support that you might not have provided normally if they were office-based. Sometimes this has meant having to scan something from a hard copy source (copyright permitting) and send it to them. Sometimes this has meant helping to solve problems which are more the preserve of the IT helpdesk by remoting onto a person's PC but involve them accessing online research resources.

A FINAL WORD

Our top tips are that for all stages of the process talk and listen, plan, adapt and train, and train again, and embrace it.

Further Reading

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Biographies

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