

# BIALL Covid-19 Industry Survey 2020: an Introduction

**Abstract:** The British and Irish Association of Law Librarians (BIALL) carried out a survey of BIALl members during May 2020 in order to gain a view, at a point in time, of the impact of Covid-19.<sup>1</sup> National lockdowns in both the United Kingdom and Ireland had come into force in March 2020. The survey was a way of gauging how the legal information community was responding to the challenges and changing circumstances brought about as a result of the pandemic. This brief introduction by Karen Brown, President of BIALl, sets the scene for the results of the survey which appear in the pages that follow.<sup>2</sup>

**Keywords:** national lockdown; Covid-19; legal information professionals; legal information managers; law librarians; surveys

BIALL carried out a survey of BIALl members in May 2020, to get a view of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic at that time. The survey was a snapshot of respondents' feelings at that point, when perhaps many thought we were coming to the end of the worst of the pandemic. Of course, it has lasted much longer than many of us expected and if the survey were to be run again now I'm sure many results would be different.

As we know, library, information and KM professionals are resourceful and adaptable. The pandemic has been an opportunity for many to demonstrate how indispensable they are and how they can add value in many contexts. Members have reported getting involved in projects they might not have been able to before or finding opportunities to work with teaching staff/lawyers/other teams in their organisations in new ways. This tallies with the predictions of survey respondents, where 41% felt they would be expected to take on a wider range of tasks in their organisation and 54% thought that new specialisms would be developed in the industry. Library/information/KM teams were also shown to be essential looking at the fact that, while 53% of organisations surveyed were using the Government furlough scheme at that point, only 5% of respondents had themselves been furloughed.

Before the pandemic, 6% of respondents were already working from home all of the time and a further 30% were working from home part of the time. 93% of respondents (virtually everyone who hadn't been furloughed or made redundant) had been directed to work from home at the time of the survey. As the UK and Ireland have moved through various lockdown tiers and levels, some members have been back in their workplaces, either occasionally or regularly, since the time of the survey.

Many new skills have been developed since the start of the pandemic. The top three personal development activities reported in the survey were:

- Learning new ways to use technology to keep in touch with colleagues (75%)
- Embracing (further) activities to support your mental and physical health (51%)
- Participating in online training sessions around library/information topics (44%)

When quizzed on potential future impacts, the vast majority (91%) of respondents thought there would now be a more pronounced shift to virtual libraries. Perhaps unsurprisingly after the difficulties of accessing hard copy stock during lockdown library closures, 77% of respondents also predicted a reduction in hard copy collections. This may bring further challenges, with reports of e-book prices multiplying to breathtaking levels since the start of the pandemic coupled with a lack of understanding from some employers about the costs of online books compared with print.

On headcount reductions and the possibility of library teams being moved to cheaper locations there was less consensus (37% and 29% agreeing respectively). At the time of the survey, 1% of respondents reported being made redundant. At the time of writing, several organisations have announced redundancy consultations, although not necessarily affecting the library/information/KM teams.

Since the survey, achievements, projects and new initiatives that may have been harder to get approval for before the pandemic have been reported by members. Some examples have been having additional budget granted, moving to online access and getting approval to roll out SSO for online resources. In some cases this has increased visibility and prompted contact from users who don't usually engage with the team. Members have reported more requests for training and alternative resources from their users.

The accelerated pace of change is unlikely to slow down any time soon. Future instances of the BIALL Academic law library survey and the Law Firm library

survey will make interesting reading and show trends more clearly when compared with previous survey results.

## **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> N.B. The term COVID-19 is the convention used in the survey. However, this introduction follows an approach used in other articles published in this journal by referring to the pandemic in lower case as Covid-19.

<sup>2</sup> The full results of the survey were published on the BIALL website at an earlier stage in 2020, available to BIALL members only: <https://biall.org.uk/> For reasons of confidentiality some pages of the survey have not been included in this published version (ie. pages 20–21 and 23–24).

**Karen Brown** is the President of BIALL for 2020/2021.