

Information Managers in the 21st Century

Abstract: In a paper given at the 39th Annual BIALL Conference held in Dublin in June 2008, Samantha Steer covered key findings from the 2007 Sweet & Maxwell Survey *Information Managers in the 21st Century*. The survey was prompted by changes in the legal market, including those that will follow from the Legal Services Act, and the wider availability of new technology, altering the delivery of legal information. The findings cover past changes to the information management role, and perceptions as to how the role will continue to change over the coming years.

Keywords: legal information managers; surveys

Introduction

In September 2007, Sweet & Maxwell engaged an external research consultancy to undertake a survey to better understand the role of the information manager in the 21st Century law firm.

The survey was inspired by two factors: (1) Changes in the legal market, in particular the wider availability of new technology, altering the delivery of information to the legal market and (2) The introduction of the Legal Services Act, aimed at opening up the legal services market to greater competition and customer choice.

The survey aimed to give Sweet & Maxwell a better understanding of:

- How the information manager's role has changed recently and the profession's perceptions as to how it will change over the coming years.
- The information manager's ever evolving contribution to business/client development within the law firm.
- The way in which the information manager interacts with internal and external clients.
- What are the expectations of the information manager, in terms of imminent marketplace changes and the impact these changes will have?

Interviewees

The consultancy interviewed a sample of information management professionals across 50 large law firms. Thirty-two per cent of interviewees were employed in the top 50 law firms, and 74% were headquartered in the UK and 22% in the USA.

Thirty-two per cent of those interviewed were based at national firms with international affiliates. National only firms employed 28% of the sample, followed closely by international firms, employing 24% of the sample. Global firms employed 16% of those interviewed. As a result, the sample does not draw upon the experiences and perceptions of those information professionals employed outside law firms.

For those employed in academia, the author would commend the article by Nicola Wakefield and Emily Allbon¹, which predicts a future encompassing an increasing level of involvement of the university law librarian in legal skills training, for example in the area of mobile phone and live classroom technologies, and an increase in the number of law librarians pursuing professional teaching qualifications to improve their presence throughout the curriculum.

For bar librarians, the author would commend the article by Guy Holborn,² who foresees an increasing need for expertise in the organisation and understanding of content formerly available in print and now online. For those members of the bar who undertake publicly funded work and have limited resources, Guy further anticipates an ongoing requirement for a physical library, including using the Inn's library as an office, given the recent and continuing emergence of virtual chambers.

The information management function – fit within the law firm

In the Sweet & Maxwell survey, the information management function reporting in at a senior level was perceived to be strategically vital within the majority of firms. Twenty-six per cent reported into a partner, director or

management committee; 18% reported into a managing partner, MD or chief executive, closely followed by those functions reporting into a Chief/Director of Knowledge at 16%.

There was some evidence to suggest a move towards a wider remit of knowledge management. However, “Library” was still the title used by 38% of interviewees with “Information Services/Centre” in second place (24%) and “Library & Information” (16%) just pipping “Knowledge” for third place.

Function size – changes and future trends

With regard to headcount and recruitment, the trend for those information management functions surveyed represented one of stability and growth. Forty-six per cent of interviewees reported a growth in staff numbers in the preceding two years, 34% reported stability and 20% reported a decline in staff numbers. Looking to the future, predictions were for stability (56%) and growth (38%), with only 4% of interviewees predicting a reduction in staff numbers.

On average, the information management function comprised five people, with the vast majority being librarians/information specialists and researchers. Less than 2% of those employed within the function were marketing/market research or IT professionals.

Function profile and structure changes

Key trends noted from the findings were towards more integrated working between the information management function and the rest of the firm and, in particular, a greater overall commercial focus:

- 76% agreed, or agreed strongly, that they were working in a more integrated way with other departments than previously.
- 70% agreed, or agreed strongly, that they were under more pressure to deliver commercial benefits to the firm, whilst 60% agreed, or agreed strongly, that there is an increasing need to recruit more commercially focused employees.

Sixty-eight per cent believed that the information management function would exist in its current form in two years time, and were of the belief that many of the major changes have already happened. The remaining 30% were expecting further significant changes, including moves towards the use of online services and greater use of interactive technology. Additional emphasis was placed on training end users to source/use online information and the overall integration of the information management function with knowledge management, market research and marketing.

Current activities

The key focus of the role of the information manager in today’s climate is on managing suppliers, budgets, internal clients and conducting research. Over 90% of information managers are involved in dealing with suppliers, information strategy, interacting with partners/internal customers, budgets, research and staff training.

The most frequently mentioned top priority is conducting research (64%). Information strategy was a priority for 40%, whilst just over one third (36%) viewed interacting with partners as a priority. In contrast, only 14% perceived interacting with internal customers as a priority.

Provision of business intelligence

As law firms recognise, react and adapt to the competitive landscape, a trend towards the implementation of business development processes and functions is emerging. Although marketing/market research and business development staff currently sit outside the information management function, the majority (56%) of information professionals provide business intelligence to their internal clients.

Business intelligence provides profiles of existing/prospective clients including: company reports, annual reports, related news items, turnover and biographies of directors. It also includes market health, trends and analysis plus market sector/industry research.

Only one interviewee provided business intelligence directly to external clients. Thus interaction between the information management function and external clients remains rare.

The forward view (96%) was of an increasingly competitive legal market where business will be harder to win, and support from the information function would be critical to support new client pitches. Ninety-two per cent agreed that firms would need to “Provide better client service in order to retain business”, with 86% agreeing that “We’ll have to work harder to win new business”. Seventy-six per cent agreed that “Our pitches to new clients will require greater support from information professionals”.

Value to the firm

Interviewees were asked the question “Overall, to what extent do you feel that people in your firm value what you and your team do?” In the vast majority of cases, interviewees felt valued by the firm as a whole. Approximately 80% of those interviewed rated their perceived value internally from 7–10 on a scale of 1–10 (10 being highly valued).

Comments from those with positive perceptions of the function's value to the firm ranged from "Very positive feedback" to "We make everyone's job easier".

Less than 5% rated the information function as not valued at all. Negative perceptions of value were driven by a lack of awareness of the function or its capabilities, lack of penetration of services to all employees, and a high level of efficiency rendering the function less visible than was desirable.

Comments from those with negative perceptions included "Some really value us and some don't even know what we do", "When they want something I'm valued. When they don't, I'm forgotten".

Interaction with internal clients

Much of the interaction between the information function and internal clients was via email (62%). Telephone and face-to-face interaction were closely matched at 19% and 17% respectively, with only 2% of interviewees interacting via a web/intranet based system.

For an insight into integration initiatives, both internal and external/client facing, see a recent article by Susanna Winter,³ which provides examples of web 2.0 initiatives, such as the use of blogs. It discusses whether the role of the law librarian as the provider of current awareness is increasingly directed to the end user and looks at the rise of the Google generation, arguing that this generation lacks an understanding of structured information and will continue to require assistance from the highly skilled information professional.

For a view from the university law librarian, see Nicola Wakefield and Emily Allbon (op cit).

The majority of those surveyed (58%) did not network via internal boards or committees. Those interviewees working within the larger UK firms and US firms were more likely to be better connected internally through such boards or committees than others.

Of those who did sit on boards or committees, 18% were members of boards or committees involved in knowledge management. Twenty-eight per cent sat on other committees, including Corporate Social Responsibility, Quality Control, Legal Quality, Training and Know-How, Environment Management, International, Support Management and the Board of Directors.

In apparent contrast to the percentage of information functions that are providing business intelligence to internal clients (56%), only 4% are members of a business development board or committee.

Key challenges

Managing budgets was cited as the top challenge by 50% of those interviewed. This went hand-in-hand with the drive to migrate users from hard copy to online, which presented a challenge to 16–20% of interviewees. This cluster of interviewees also faced a number of other challenges: promoting

the function internally, keeping up to date with products, technology and managing the volume of information.

The third cluster of challenges comprised strategy development, resources/training new staff, volume of work, price of online resources, speed of turnaround of information and ensuring the provision of up-to-date resources. This cluster was seen as a challenge by 6–12% of interviewees. Internal information sourcing and negotiations with suppliers were named as challenges by only 4%.

Findings from other sections of the survey directly correlate to the key challenges. Although the information management function, reporting in at a senior level, is seen as strategically key within most firms and 80% of interviewees had positive perceptions of the value ascribed to them by the firm, 58% of interviewees were not networking via internal boards or committees.

Legal market changes

Seventy-six per cent of interviewees were aware of the Legal Services Act. The responses painted a general picture of increased competition in the legal market, new ways of doing business, new ways of law firm ownership and new market entrants. Fifty per cent, however, were unsure of the detailed provisions of the Act.

The general view was that the Act would have either a neutral or positive (14%) impact on the information management function. Twenty-eight per cent believed that the Act would introduce no major changes for their firm. Those who felt it would have an impact believe changes will be positive both at law firm level (34%) and the overall legal market (30%).

Future of the role

For the preceding five years, the key change noted was the impact of online services (40%) and the need to train end-users. Twenty-eight per cent of interviewees believed that online services would continue to drive change within their role. Over the next five years, additional integrated working practices were anticipated by 22%, with 16% expecting the emergence of a more strategic business role. Managing budgets remains a key challenge for 50% of respondents, whilst 70% agreed that they were becoming increasingly focused on understanding and communicating internally the value of services over and above their cost.

A change to the purpose of the research undertaken, with the increasing provision of business intelligence research, was seen positively by the majority – 58% enjoyed being involved in business and client development. Overall, the majority of information managers were positive about the change in focus of their role and 84% agreed that change would open up very interesting opportunities.

For comparative purposes, on the theme of the information professional in the 21st Century, readers are referred to the following articles:

Law librarianship and legal information provision in the 21st Century by Barbara Tearle.⁴

Barbara's article takes a look at the past and the present role of the law librarian. Painting a picture of the information professional of the future, Barbara concludes with a plea for all information professionals not to lose sight of their key strengths – understanding the status of the sources of the law and legal materials.

Law firm libraries in the 21st Century by Susanna Winter.

Susanna touches on the status and changing position of information professionals within law firms and focuses on their co-operation with the business development team, the impact of outsourcing and the move towards integration of information professionals with practice groups. Susanna also argues the case for promotion and internal marketing of the indispensable skills of the information professional - in particular in ensuring that new technologies are deployed and used in the most effective way.

Staying vital to the virtual learner – what role for future university law librarians by Emily Allbon and Nicola Wakefield.

Emily and Nicola concluded that the prospects for the university law librarian were very good. No other profession can navigate the range of resources and assess information in the way that the information professional can. There are increasing opportunities for collaboration with internal customers and students will continue to require assistance to guide them through the mass of content that will be available.

Conclusions

Overall, the Sweet & Maxwell survey findings demonstrated a positive perception for the future of the law firm information professional:

- **Strategic importance** - in many cases the information function reports in directly at a senior level, demonstrating the strategic importance of information to firms.
- **Value** - managing costs is still a major focus for the information professional, but the delivery of value for money is becoming more important.
- **Business focus** - there is a trend for the function's remit to include marketing and business development, as well as adopting an increasingly commercial focus.
- **Greater competition** - little direct impact from legal services reform is anticipated, but greater competition amongst firms is expected in the future as a result of a number of market forces.
- **Scope of the role** - as end-users are increasingly able to access information directly via online services, in relation to legal research, the role is developing towards a training and advisory role, enabling research rather than conducting it.
- **People** - growth in information managers' teams indicates a greater focus on recruitment, retention, people management and training.

Footnotes

¹Allbon, Emily and Wakefield, Nicola (2008). Staying vital to the virtual learner – what role for future university law librarians? *Legal Information Management*, 8(1), 46–50

²Holborn, Guy (2008). Inns of Court libraries in the 21st Century. *Legal Information Management*, 8(1), 46–50

³Winter, Susanna (2008). Law firm libraries in the 21st Century. *Legal Information Management*, 8(1), 28–31

⁴Tearle, Barbara (2008). Law librarianship and legal information provision in the 21st Century. *Legal Information Management*, 8(1), 4–11

Biography

Samantha Steer is Content Strategy Manager at Sweet & Maxwell. She transferred from a career as a solicitor, practising civil and commercial litigation, to a career in legal publishing in 1996.