

# Organising a Chambers Information Service

**Abstract:** This article, written by Michelle Celik, outlines some of the working practices for an information professional in a barristers' chambers, highlighting how the culture differs to that of law firms. Michelle describes how the role has evolved since she began working in a set of chambers and the impact that Covid-19 has played on information provision in recent years. She discusses the importance of external libraries to the needs of barristers and her own relationship with the staff within chambers.

**Keywords:** barristers; legal profession; bar librarianship; law libraries

## INTRODUCTION

Whilst working as a freelancer, I answered an advertisement on the BIALL job board for a library manager, working two five-hour days a week at The Chambers of Iain Milligan KC. I had never worked for barristers but was familiar with the practice areas of that particular set, having spent many years working for a firm that instructed them on a regular basis. Their existing library was a room with books but, in anticipation of hiring, they had already invested in Knowall, a library management system that I had worked with previously, so I knew that they were serious about moving forward with an information service. Having been a freelancer for several years, I am now employed as a part-time member of staff.

On my first day in chambers, I discovered that unlike a law firm, only staff members were employees. Barristers or members of Chambers and arbitrators are self-employed. They pay rent for their rooms and contribute to the cost of running chambers, including the library. Some sets of chambers do not have a large, centralised library and may instead stock core titles but hard copy purchases, subscriptions and online services are paid for by the individual barristers themselves with information services managers administering the purchases. The information provision at Twenty Essex, as we are now known, is similar to a law firm, in that there is a centralised budget for book and online services that are of benefit to the majority of the members. Online provision includes key services like Westlaw, Practical Law, Lexis and i-law. Where only five or six Members want access to a more specialised online service, I administer the subscription, pass the invoice for payment and charge the cost back to the subscribing member's chambers' account. This way, they benefit from a group rate subscription. Usage of the personal subscriptions is monitored and if the library committee feels at a later date that a chambers'-wide subscription would be beneficial, the cost will be absorbed into the library budget. This happened during lockdown, when the Inn libraries were closed and it was not possible to obtain the specialist

resources that were needed. Hein Online had been subscribed to by a few Members but a decision was made to give access to everyone.

## PUTTING EVERYTHING IN ORDER

My first task on joining chambers, was to catalogue the books, online services and subscriptions. I introduced a simple classification scheme and spent months adding everything to Knowall. Previously the books had been arranged alphabetically, supposedly by author but I sometimes found three copies of the same book. One had been shelved by author's name, another by title and a third copy placed randomly on the shelf. This sometimes happened because a title could not be found, so a replacement would be purchased. Classifying the books helped to deal with that issue, and although at first there were grumbles that users had been used to knowing where to find an author's name on the shelf, once most of the text books had been classified with clear labelling, it didn't take too long for everyone to become accustomed to the new system. Browsing became easier because all books on the same or similar topic were found within the same area rather than spread across the alphabet. There were financial savings because only one hard copy of a title was purchased.

We decided not to use barcodes on the books, which would require a barcode reader and therefore an excuse for someone to say the barcode reader was not working, so not sign out the copy in their name. Instead, the number generated automatically by Knowall for each individual item was added to a label on the inside cover of the book. To sign out a book, a member could choose their name from a drop-down menu on the screen of the Library opac or if they walked out of the library with a book, they could borrow it using their own computer or tablet. The junior clerks could also borrow or return a book on behalf of a member. In chambers, when a barrister has finished with books, it has been customary for them to be placed outside the barrister's room door for

the junior clerks to return to the library. Luckily, our journal title holdings are online, so logging individual issues of journals has not been an issue.

## THE MOVE TO ELECTRONIC BOOKS

Twenty Essex invested in online books when they were first introduced. Our subscription to i-law and Lexis included some online titles and we purchased a package of commercial titles from Westlaw. Westlaw now allows purchase of individual titles, so over the years, titles that did not justify the cost have been removed and titles that we know will benefit the members have been added. Some titles are not available as an online book but do exist as an ebook. In that situation, I would arrange for a personal purchase to charge back to the member. Online books are available to everyone and can be accessed wherever the user can log on, whether visiting a client or attending a conference. The convenience was obvious from first subscribing because it meant the members did not have to travel into the library at the weekend if they needed to read a section of a book immediately. The electronic books are added to Knowall, either as an extra copy of one of the core text or as an online only copy. The links are added to the catalogue entry, so as long as the user is already logged into the relevant database, access should be seamless.

Lockdown called for more titles to be purchased and we also added other databases like Oxford Legal Research Library (OLRL) and Oxford Scholarly Authorities on International Law (OSAIL) so that our members had access to materials that we could not obtain from the then closed libraries. OSAIL in particular has a vast list of very useful titles. I-law, too has a long list of titles but due to licensing issues, there is a delay between the publication date and the title appearing online. Most of those titles are required texts, so there would also be a hardcopy purchase.

Barristers need to use old editions of titles, not just for cases they are working on but also for books and articles that they are writing. One of the issues that I have explained to the publishers since we first subscribed is that when a new edition is added to the database, the old one is removed which means that the user no longer has access or is unable to compare the two editions. Relevant text will not have the same page and paragraph number in a new edition. Some firms have policies where they do not purchase the hard copy of a title, if they subscribe to an online version but for us, that is not a possibility. The Inn libraries have vast archives but we still keep a large number of old editions ourselves. Westlaw have started to make changes regarding old editions and began with *Sealy & Milman: Annotated Guide to Insolvency Legislation* with the editions going back to 2015. Last year's edition of the *White Book* is still available online and has not been removed but more importantly, the *Rules of the Supreme Court Practice 1999* has been added, which is the last edition before changing to the current

annual copies of *The White Book Civil Procedure*. The Oxford databases do include some old editions but it would be useful to have more available online.

A useful feature of Westlaw books is the Preliminary Materials pdf which includes the title page. This was essential during lockdown, when we were unable to get to the hard copy of a title to produce bundles. Being able to download the section of a title exactly as it appears in the book format was precisely what was needed for court so it helped massively having access to the title page to add to the document. We also had to be able to edit the documents electronically so that they could be labelled for the authority lists. There were a few problems with the documents from some databases but most of these were resolved. Although I am not directly involved with creating the bundles, I help the junior clerks when they are looking for more obscure items to add to the authorities lists and always ask them for comments if there are any issues with our resources. The publishers are grateful for feedback to improve their services and during lockdown were keen to assist us whenever they could. I had many Teams meetings with them to discuss issues that were arising and the account managers that I work with were always very helpful.

## KNOWALL MATRIX – LIBRARY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Everything purchased for the library is catalogued using *Knowall Matrix* but all personal purchases made by the members have to be logged too. Despite our long list of electronic titles, there is still a preference to purchase hard copy for personal use. Many people find it easier to do hours of research from a book rather than staring at a screen. Initially, I expected there to be a stronger reliance on electronic access when a generation of students that had grown up accustomed to and adept at using technology began to qualify, but they still like to use hard copy. Consequently, I arrange the purchase of hard copy books on an almost weekly basis.

The most important title purchased by commercial litigators is the *White Book*. At Twenty Essex we have online access but do not purchase the hard copy for the library, as the members are expected to buy their own. Other popular personal purchases are Common Law titles like Chitty and Benjamin and key shipping or international trade titles. Books that our own barristers have written are also popular because they cover practice areas that we practise in. If the library committee decides not to purchase a particular title, a barrister will choose to buy their own copy.

On Knowall, the library copy is entered by allocating it to the central library and the members and arbitrators are treated as if they are satellite libraries, with each having a separate budget code. Not many libraries have over a hundred satellite libraries but Knowall allows for this, making the task so much easier. Knowall was designed by a law librarian and as a result benefits from

logical simplicity and changes are implemented after listening to feedback from the end user. The task of purchasing and administering the charge back for personal purchases is simplified by using Knowall. After ten years of using the system on a daily basis, there were initially several hiccups when we migrated to the newer Knowall Matrix but these are gradually being resolved and the helpdesk is at hand.

There are separate entries for the library hard copy and the electronic copy. A link from the relevant database is added to the electronic entry to take the user directly to the correct title. A picture of the book is added automatically when using the autocat feature, which auto-populates most of the relevant data for the catalogue entry, speeding up the process. Sometimes I order more than fifteen copies of a new edition or title for personal purchases, all with separate budget codes, adding more orders for copies, when requested. For *White Book* orders, the number is more than double that amount. Further orders of the same title can be added at a later date. Personal copies are not visible on the OPAC and the settings are changed so that they can only be seen in the administrator mode but I can create a report to list the titles a member has purchased.

## NETWORKING

In my first law library role, I was told that networking was an essential part of the job. This has proved to be invaluable advice over the years and membership of BIALL and the groups within the organisation have been an important part of my working experience. On becoming a Bar librarian, I connected with other information professionals in barristers chambers and Inn libraries and joined the Bar Librarians' Group. Working in the Bar throws up problems that are not found when working in law firms, often arising due to the different culture, so it was so helpful to be able to turn to others for advice and assistance and not feel as isolated. Although there are some employed full-time information specialists in chambers' libraries, many are part-time and freelance, often balancing more than one job in other sets, law firms or professional institutions. It is more difficult for a freelance worker to be able to attend conferences like BIALL, because not only would they have to pay the conference fees themselves but on the days that they are not working for their organisation, they don't get paid. Also, if the conference days span working days for two organisations, they would need to arrange time off from both, to attend. The Bar Librarians' Group helps to bridge the gap. There are informal meetings in cafes, over Teams or attending events like the BIALL quiz but there are also the more serious meetings. Publishers may be invited to a meeting to discuss problems that have been encountered when using a particular electronic product or perhaps issues that have been flagged when a new platform has been launched. When I first joined Chambers, I felt strongly that the requirements of the Bar were not

taken as seriously by the publishers as those of the large law firms with huge budgets. Once account managers began to feed back comments made by information professionals in chambers and the Inn libraries, that approach changed. The fact that the publishers are willing to attend the Bar Librarians, meetings shows that they are willing to listen.

Networking with suppliers is also necessary. The experience of running a Bar library differs to that of a law firm and so often this has to be explained to the suppliers. Building good working relationships with your account managers is essential, no matter where they are based in the world. Thankfully, the recent move to virtual meetings since Covid has proved invaluable when connecting with suppliers across time zones.

Mailing lists like Lis-Law and Int-Law are also good ways to connect with libraries overseas.

## SUPPORT OF EXTERNAL LIBRARIES

The go-to place for any resources that a set of chambers does not have is the Inn libraries, with their vast shelving containing current and archived materials and a number of electronic databases. Information professionals working in Middle Temple, Inner Temple, Lincoln's Inn and Gray's Inn libraries have decades of experience that the members of the Bar could not manage without. Our junior clerks often run over to one of the libraries to obtain a document for a bundle or gain help from the knowledgeable staff. The members can also sit in the libraries to work in a peaceful environment. Each library has particular specialisations with some being more relevant to our needs but we use all of them and are so grateful for their existence.

Our membership of the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies (IALS) is also essential. They have materials from other jurisdictions that we cannot obtain elsewhere and as Twenty Essex has so many Public International Law specialists, we often call upon the resources and expertise of the IALS library.

## DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WORKING IN LAW FIRMS AND CHAMBERS

Working in a chambers library requires the spinning of a lot of plates, as you are expected to do everything. There is a mix of administrative, strategic and management roles and you can do all of them on the same day. In many law firms, there tends to be a team with different members of staff responsible for the tasks according to their role. In chambers, you do every task associated with information provision.

You deal with every part of the implementation of an electronic database, from suggesting a subscription, negotiating the contract to passing the invoices for payment and cataloguing all of the details. You are then required to either provide training or arrange it via the publisher,

whilst being an expert user yourself. Usage is monitored to ensure that there is a return on investment, whilst keeping a tight control on the budget.

For hard copy materials the procedure is similar, but you often have to be able to purchase a personal copy of a book at a few minutes notice and send a clerk to the bookshop to collect it if it is required urgently.

When I joined chambers, I was asked to create a weekly newsletter listing the resources. I contacted the publishers for permission to list the contents of journals and sets of reports. Details of new purchases and subscriptions and any information about legal or technical developments that may be relevant are highlighted. The Members like it because it can be scanned quickly and they can link through to most of the items listed. There are alerting services available but this tailored version, covering both internal and external information, is preferred.

As barristers are experts in law and research, so the type of research work that is requested differs to that in a firm. They do not request the type of business or technical research that is required by solicitors, as the instructing solicitors will provide the barristers with that information I get a lot of requests for obscure documents, international materials or government publications. Sometimes there are requests for parliamentary materials, but the Inn libraries are the experts in that field. If a barrister is very busy, they will ask me to find materials for them and the pupil barristers, who are the bar equivalent of trainee solicitors, will often come to me when they do not know where to find something or need pointing in the right direction.

There is a large group of arbitrators at Twenty Essex in London and Singapore as well as in other parts of the world. In London, many are in a separate building with their own clerk and assistant but they still need the

resources and assistance of the library. Many are retired judges or KCs who have decided to take a different route in law but who are an equally important part of chambers.

I work very closely with the junior clerks, without whom my working life would be very difficult. They are extremely obliging and can be called upon to assist with almost anything that I need including physical tasks like moving shelves of books or furniture. Whenever they need help sourcing a law report, obscure book or article, or training on a database, they will come to me for help, so the relationship is very much a symbiotic one.

## CONCLUSION

I work part-time in both a law firm and a set of chambers, so see the distinctions in culture and a different side to the legal process. US colleagues are often confused that we have a two-tier system. This is starting to change slowly, as more solicitors have rights of audience and barristers have direct access.

Working in chambers is a contrast to life in a law firm but equally demanding and pressurised. The culture varies and the work is very involved. There is always a flurry of activity when a barrister is rushing off to the Royal Courts of Justice or the Supreme Court in their court attire, for an important case, whilst the junior clerks are trying to get everything ready that is needed for the days ahead. It is not all work and Twenty Essex is sociable and events can involve drinks in chambers, going to a silks party, or a celebration when a silk leaves the set to become a judge. It is an interesting and enjoyable place to work, adapting to a changing environment but still keeping hold of its own traditions.

## Biography

**Michelle Celik** began her career in legal information at the Law Society Library before moving into law firms. In 2009 she became a freelance consultant for a diverse range of organisations. For the past eleven years she has managed information services in the London office of a US law firm and Twenty Essex Chambers, originally in a freelance capacity but now as an employee.