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From Lawyer to Librarian to Librarian Lawyer: Transitioning to Librarianship from the Legal Field

April M. Hathcock

For many librarians, the library field represents a second or even third or fourth career. Making the transition from another field to library work does not necessarily have to represent a revolutionary career transformation. For this particular author, transitioning from private law practice to work in a number of different libraries, including public, academic, and law, has been a natural progression in further utilizing and developing advocacy-based customer service skills.

“So, why librarianship?”

This is a question I have heard a lot in my library career, beginning with my first library job interview after leaving a budding litigation practice at a large global law firm. I had ditched my six-figure salary and myriad late nights poring over endless corporate documents in order to pursue a position as a telephone reference associate for the main branch of an urban library system. I could tell the interviewers were intrigued by the woman sitting across from them, bouncing with eagerness to begin answering calls on everything from overdue fees on DVD loans to downloading e-books on Kindles.

“Why librarianship?”

At the time, the decision seemed clear to me, the reason for transitioning apparent, and it has only become more so with time. My work as a litigation associate required that I take large amounts of complex information and organize them into cognizable parcels that could be easily accessed by my clients. Lawyers, like librarians, are information professionals, committed to meeting the needs of their patrons through customer service that's rooted in advocacy.¹ I was wholeheartedly committed to these ideals and was looking for a professional space in which to exercise them, though within a different context. I loved reading, writing, and researching. I

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loved working with information and educating others on working with information. Those were the aspects of my legal career that I cherished and wanted to continue while leaving behind the dreaded billable hours and corporate work environment. In my mind, librarianship was a natural fit.

As I have progressed in my library career, that fit has never seemed so apt. I obtained the job providing phone reference and eventually worked my way through an M.L.I.S. while spending time as a research associate at a community college library. After library school, I accepted a position as an academic law librarian, bringing my legal background to the forefront, before serving in my current role as the Librarian for Scholarly Communications at a large research university, a position that is growing in popularity in the library world.

² I have been a reference assistant, research support specialist, and fully minted librarian; I have worked in a public library, a law library, and a large research library. My career path has taken a meandering trajectory, and through it all, I have maintained the commitment to client service that I first developed in my early days as a fledgling lawyer. In particular, I have found that when faced with the question, "Why librarianship?" I can easily respond by pointing out the parallels between legal and library work—both professions emphasize a commitment to patron service that arises from a position of advocacy.

Advocacy-based Customer Service

Perhaps the greatest overlap between the legal and library professions lies in their common commitment to advocacy-based customer service. This type of customer service stems from a commitment to bridging the gap between client needs and current resources as effectively and meaningfully as possible. Like good librarians, good lawyers promote the best interests of their clients, protect their clients' privacy, and provide service equitably without regard for

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personal beliefs or prejudices. Despite their differences in length—the American Bar Association Model Rules of Professional Conduct are over 150 pages compared to the one page Code of Ethics from the American Library Association—in many ways, the ethical code governing the librarian profession mirrors that of the legal profession in its commitment to protecting the interests of clients.³ Regardless of whether I was teaching students how to use online resources or counseling a client on navigating the intricacies of securities regulations, I knew that my ability to advocate for and meaningfully address patron needs was among the strongest tools in my arsenal of transferable skills.

While interviewing for library positions, whether public or academic, I focused on providing advocacy-based service to all patrons. As a litigation associate, my internal client service entailed drafting detailed memos and case briefs for partners and senior associates on the important issues arising in a particular case. This “in-reach” also involved organizing and crafting case summaries and document review workflows for teams of fellow young associates as we worked through the paper trail for any given piece of litigation. In the library world, providing service to internal clients involves a similar approach, focusing on the needs of my fellow librarians and of library administrators. Later, as an academic law librarian with an interest in digital pedagogy, I did a lot of work training my colleagues on the use of new technologies—some of which I had used in my legal work for presentations, such as Adobe Captivate and Screencast—to create flipped learning environments for our legal research courses. In my current role as a scholarly communications librarian, I provide service to subject specialists and library technologists in the form of training and workshops on the issues of copyright, fair use, and open access in the use of materials for teaching and research. Some of my work even involves stepping outside of my typical banker's hours to provide service to

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colleagues across the globe, such as a late-night copyright training sessions for fellow librarians in Shanghai. As a former associate at a global firm, I am accustomed to working with technology and time zones to provide service to internal clients. I also provide service to internal clients by serving as a go-between for the library and university counsel. Because I am fluent in both “languages,” I can easily translate the legal issues taking place in the library for counsel’s advice and communicate that advice comprehensibly back to the library. This particular skillset has been invaluable.

My experience as a lawyer has also prepared me for providing effective service to external clients. In the legal field, these were the actual clients of the firm, corporate executives, and agents, as well as pro bono clients, all seeking answers to their legal questions. In addition to drafting memos and briefs for other lawyers, I was also responsible for sending summaries and legal communications to clients, many of whom did not have a legal background. I developed the ability to communicate necessary information to clients in ways that would be easily understood. As a librarian, I continue to do the same kind of work. Whether it involves walking a student through citation software as a community college research support specialist or advising a faculty member on authorship rights for scholarly publishing, my work as a litigation associate has easily translated into effective advocacy-based service to external clients.

Regardless of where it is used, the key to truly effective advocacy-based service lies in the ability to tailor communication to meet the needs of clients in different situations and with individual educational backgrounds and knowledge gaps. As a law associate, my case memos to partners were markedly dissimilar to memos destined for client hands, even when they covered the same cases and involved the same legal issues and facts. One of the first lessons I had to learn as a new attorney was the technical knowledge gap that often existed between the client

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and the professional dedicated to serving them. This lesson continues to be pertinent in my library career. As a law librarian, I tailored my work in light of the information seeker sitting across from me. Conducting a research session for a law professor was markedly different than conducting the same session for a first-year law student. Moreover, that research session would be even more distinct if conducted for a member of the public with no legal background at all. In my position as a reference law librarian, I had to work with all of types of information seekers, and it was essential that I be adroit at adjusting my service accordingly. Likewise, in my current position providing copyright education to a large and heterogeneous campus, I call upon my skills of flexible communication, first honed as a law associate, to provide effective education for librarians, undergraduates, graduate students, and teaching and research faculty. From the law firm to the law library, from lawyer to librarian lawyer, my ability to engage flexible communication in the midst of advocacy-based service has been a significant contributor to my career success.

So, Why Librarianship?

For me, making the transition from law to librarianship was more than smooth and easy; it was worthwhile. From a reference associate answering phone queries to a law librarian managing legal database education, and now as a librarian lawyer educating the campus community about ownership and rights in scholarship, my career transition has been a very fulfilling one. While the titles, surroundings, and even specific tasks have changed, the essential element of my work has not. My work as an attorney began based in advocacy-based client service, and my work as a librarian lawyer continues in that same vein. What is more, I am increasingly finding fellow attorneys leaving behind the billable hour for the online catalog (Fig. 1).

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Fig. 1 Screenshot of Twitter exchange with John R. Wallace (@jrplib)⁴

As more and more lawyers enter librarianship there will be less need for the question of “*Why librarianship?*” Hopefully, there will instead be more focus on integrating the transferable skills associated with advocacy-based service from a successful legal to a successful librarianship career.

Endnote

¹ Wendy Werner, “Customer Service for Lawyers,” *Law Practice Today*, November 2006, <http://apps.americanbar.org/lpm/lpt/articles/mgt11061.shtml>.

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² Craig Finlay, Andrew Tsou, and Cassidy Sugimoto, "Scholarly Communication as a Core Competency: Prevalence, Activities, and Concepts of Scholarly Communication Librarianship as Shown Through Job Advertisements," *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication* 3, no. 1 (2015): 12, <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/2162-3309.1236>.

³ American Bar Association, *Model Rules of Professional Conduct* (Chicago: American Bar Association, 1995), Rules 1.1-1.6; American Library Association, *Code of Ethics of the American Library Association* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2008), <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/proethics/codeofethics/codeethics>.

⁴ April M. Hathcock and John R. Wallace, Twitter posts, July 9, 2015, <https://twitter.com/AprilHathcock/status/619237207975571456>.

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Biography

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