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# Law libraries play key role in evolving legal practice

*By Anne Sherry, J.D.*

A recent webinar presented by Wolters Kluwer explored how law libraries are adapting to—and driving innovation in—a legal landscape rapidly centering around technology and a deep understanding of business needs. *Future Ready Lawyer: The Evolving Role of the Library & Library Staff* is the latest in a series of discussions building on the findings of a survey that exposed a gap in firms' preparedness for emerging trends. A recurrent theme of the webinar was the evolution of research tools from traditional "find an answer" products to encompass a range of analytics, workflow, and practice tools.

**About the program.** The *Future Ready Lawyer* webinar series elaborates on the findings of a survey commissioned by Wolters Kluwer Legal & Regulatory in 2020. Seven hundred lawyers in the U.S. and Europe provided their insights on how client expectations, technology, and other factors are affecting the future of law—and how legal organizations are prepared to address these developments. Wolters Kluwer Legal & Regulatory will conduct another survey in 2021, allowing a view into how firms progressed over a year's time, particularly considering the transition to remote work necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ken Crutchfield, Vice President & General Manager, Legal Markets for Wolters Kluwer Legal & Regulatory U.S. (LRUS), set the stage for the webinar's panel discussion by highlighting some of the findings of the Future Ready Lawyer survey. The study revealed that technology is the biggest driver of forward movement in the legal profession, but there exist performance blockers: gaps in understanding, expectations, experience, priorities, and capabilities within law firms, as well as between firms and corporate legal departments. Crutchfield underscored a disconnect between the impact of trends and respondents' readiness to address them. While more than two-thirds of lawyers indicated that their firms or legal departments will be affected by ten trends in the profession, fewer than one-third believe their organizations are very prepared to address those trends.

**Panelists.** Against the backdrop of these findings, the webinar turned to a discussion on the evolving role of the law library and library staff. Nicole Jones Pinard, Vice President & General Manager of Legal Education for LRUS, moderated a panel comprising experts from both law firms and academia. Ronald E. Wheeler, Jr., is the Director of the Fineman & Pappas Law Libraries at Boston University School of Law; he also co-chairs the law school's Community & Inclusion Committee. Jean P. O'Grady serves as Senior Director of Information, Research & Knowledge at DLA Piper and also publishes the *Dewey B Strategic* blog. Finally, Steven A. Lastres is the Director of Knowledge Management Services at Debevoise & Plimpton, where he focuses on developing and implementing KM strategy for the firm.

**Remote work transition.** The panelists described the law library's role in helping law students, lawyers, and firms adapt to new technology and drive innovation in legal research. All agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a transition to online research and meetings, particularly among those who typically prefer printed materials. O'Grady and Lastres posited that the era of remote work will lead to a hybrid work environment in the future, with more people than before working from home: "I have no doubt this will fundamentally transform and shrink the footprint of law firms and what it means to be associated with a particular office," O'Grady said. Her work at DLA Piper has included building a digital library so that attorneys in small offices have the same resources as the New York lawyers.

The law firm librarians also offered insight into their recent summer and fall associate classes and the changes they had to make to onboard those new attorneys. Lastres said that Debevoise's truncated summer provided feedback that helped the library reimagine its fall associate program to respond to the needs of associates. This meant getting as many staff members involved as possible so that they and the associates got to know one another; delivering training in smaller, easier to absorb sessions; and centering those training sessions on typical research scenarios rather than platform-focused training. O'Grady added that she tells new associates that the training does not end with orientation; part of their responsibility as a lawyer is to keep learning the tools via training sessions throughout the year. Wheeler said that the BU law library takes its cues from law firms in terms of the technology they use, which goes beyond research into such tools as case management software.

**Diversity and inclusion.** Wheeler also observed that it is impossible to run a modern library without a significant technological infrastructure. He added that remote programs raise issues of inclusivity: some BU students lacked home Internet connections stable enough to attend Zoom classes, or lacked a distraction-free space to work from home. Library staff tend to connect with students more often than anyone else at the school and are in a strong position to try to level the playing field by getting students the resources they need to thrive in a remote environment. Wheeler also spoke about the ways in which BU is trying to "walk our talk" with respect to inclusion; for example, library staff are reviewing subject headings and collections to make the library more anti-racist and include diverse perspectives. The law school's dean, Angela Onwuachi-Willig, is African-American and has won awards for her work on critical race theory and diversity and inclusion. This in turn has encouraged applicants of color to seek faculty positions and to study law at BU. "Diversity brings diversity," Wheeler said, particularly when there is diversity in leadership roles.

**Evolution of research tools.** In terms of specific legal expertise and practice tools, all panelists agreed that the landscape has evolved. Lastres said that the law library is working closer than ever with clients to understand not just their legal needs, but also their business. O'Grady added that this means bringing in aggregation and monitoring tools that can pinpoint industry trends. Similarly, research tools have morphed well beyond just providing research into analytics, workflow, and practice tools, she said. Vendors should be careful not to misrepresent their products, such as saying everything is "predictive" when there are very few predictive tools on the market. While O'Grady doesn't expect trainers to be data scientists, they should have some understanding of whether the analytics are descriptive, diagnostic, or predictive, and they should help customers understand how to use the tool

within the parameters of what it can do. Lastres agreed: "Just as we have to explain to clients how we add value, vendors have to have that conversation with law firm clients."

In a similar vein, "research products have evolved into technology products," O'Grady said, and that means the library collaborates with the IT department in terms of vetting software and complying with clients' cybersecurity needs. Lastres said that a third party reviews software for potential use at Debevoise, and that the library's role is to conduct pilots with attorneys. Librarians are the gatekeepers who initially analyze and review potential products to see if they can take the place of another tool and do the job better, faster, more efficiently, and more cost effectively, he concluded.

**Webinar replay.** To view *Future Ready Lawyer: The Evolving Role of the Library & Library Staff*, please visit https://know.wolterskluwerlr.com/LP=2231.