

## So you want to be a law librarian?

Have you ever wondered what a law librarian is? A rewarding area to work in, being a law librarian is dynamic and challenging, fun and interesting, requiring a diverse range of skills and a high level of professionalism. And the diversity of libraries is wide; they can be found in private or public sector, courts, law firms, tribunals, government departments, universities and law societies.

### Law –what's the difference?

Law librarians do everything librarians in other disciplines do. The main differences are the formats and terminology used. Law is a knowledge-



Staff at the NSW Law Court Library

based discipline, and the collection of a law library comprises the tools of trade for judges and legal practitioners. Government publications, court judgments and legislation have a very specific structure and in order to find them it's important to know when they would be produced and by whom, if they would be available publicly and what effect they have on laws already in force. One needs to be familiar with legal jargon - seemingly everyday terms may have a specific legal meaning that can affect the search process. Importantly, a law librarian must understand the legislative & court system in order to confidently provide clients with material that is still 'good' law.

### How do you become a law librarian?

Advertisements for law library positions often specify 'legal experience' as essential selection criteria. The Australian Law Librarians Association (ALLA) has identified a set of competencies for law reference librarians available on their website [http://www.alla.](http://www.alla.asn.au/nat/docs/competencies.pdf)

[asn.au/nat/docs/competencies.pdf](http://www.alla.asn.au/nat/docs/competencies.pdf). Some apply to all librarians, but in addition they outline some essential legal competencies which include; a knowledge of the legal system and legal profession; understanding the distinction between primary and secondary legal materials; a comprehensive knowledge of the Australian court system and comprehension of the court systems of other common law countries; familiarity of legal research materials (in all formats) and a knowledge of the legal publishing field to name a few.

There are a range of pathways to guide you into a library career in law. You don't need a law degree, but formal legal studies will assist your understanding and give you a competitive edge above other candidates. You can choose law subjects in your undergraduate degree, or undertake postgraduate legal studies.

The ALLA state divisions offer short courses in the legal system and legal research <http://www.alla.asn.au>

Other less formal options include; starting out in an environment where you can get exposure to legal research – such as large academic libraries, government department, or the State Library and working in a library where legal materials form part of the collection or joining ALLA - getting to know other law librarians and attending their professional development events.

### Where can law libraries take you?

In both the private and public sectors, law libraries can range from large institutions with a range of specialist roles, to small one person operation. You could specialise in reference work, or information systems, training or subscriptions management. Some private firms have subject specialists who provide broader knowledge services to particular legal practice areas. The skills of the librarian can also be used in knowledge management, intranets, indexing and thesaurus construction – all skills that organisations are needing more and more.

Experience as a law librarian can act as a gateway to working overseas, as Australian law librarians have transferable skills, particularly in

reference to the United Kingdom. Foreign, comparative and international law librarian positions can be found in university libraries in the US and UK, and in international courts and tribunals.

Being a law librarian is real and relevant and as one colleague neatly says, "(being a law librarian is) working with intelligent people doing interesting, challenging work with high quality resources and a sophisticated information infrastructure".

Could law be for you?

*Melanie Elron*

*Library Manager/Blake Dawson Sydney  
melanie.elron@blakesdawson.com*

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