This is a published version of the following:

Law Librarianship: It’s All About Legal Information
Kim Nayyer
2014

This article was originally published at:

http://www.cba.org/Publications-Resources/CBA-Practice-Link/Young-Lawyers/2014/Law-librarianship-It%E2%80%99s-all-about-legal-information

Citation for this paper:

Law librarianship: It’s all about legal information

June 01, 2014  |  Kim Nayyer

“Law librarian Kim Nayyer says...” If I’d seen these words together a decade ago I would have fallen off my chair, then looked around for the other Kim Nayyer in the law world. [Saved you a search: There isn't one.] That law librarian is, in fact, me.

Law librarianship can be an appealing alternative or complement to legal practice. It’s important to note that, for many positions, additional qualification is required: a Master of Library and Information Studies (or any of the titles given to a graduate degree from an American Library Association-accredited program). It’s equally important to note this isn't uniformly the case. Whether a lawyer should pursue an MLIS (Master of Library and Information Science) to carry out any of the varied functions of a law librarian is entirely context-dependent.

Law library manager. Legal information specialist. Knowledge manager. Competitive intelligence specialist. These and other titles describe the varied aspects of work broadly within law librarianship. Many such professionals have added an MLIS (Master of Library and Information Science) to their law degrees, and many have not. To have only a graduate degree in library studies, without a complementary JD (Juris Doctor), is also common. (And some successful professionals in these fields have neither degree.)

Though an MLIS (Master of Library and Information Science) isn't always essential it certainly can offer attractive options in the long run. Law firms, law society libraries, or corporations will hire the right lawyer as a resource manager, knowledge manager, or competitive intelligence specialist without requiring the lawyer to go on and earn the MLIS (Master of Library and Information Science). On the other hand, a university is unlikely to hire a lawyer for a law librarian position unless that lawyer has an MLIS (Master of Library and Information Science).

My own path to law librarianship was, as I hinted, rather unintended. I did earn my MLIS (Master of Library and Information Science), and I had specific reasons to do so. To rewind a moment: Before I found myself a law librarian, I found myself a research lawyer. Early on, I'd spent a couple of litigation-side years in a firm, and I found the lifestyle and culture didn't really suit me. But, intellectually, much of the work did. I loved figuring out legal puzzles, digging around and coming
up with solutions, communicating the outcomes. I wanted to do that and to do it better. I saw courses in the library and information studies graduate program at my local university that would help me, but I didn't know I'd eventually make the professional transition.

I chose to pursue an MLIS (Master of Library and Information Science) because the coursework was relevant to my work as a research lawyer. I also wanted to be able to make informed decisions about management of the information resources of the firm I worked for. I chose to complete my MLIS (Master of Library and Information Science) because it was interesting and made long-term sense. Truth be told, I also wanted it in my back pocket in case I wanted a reprieve from lawyering.

But I had a rewarding position in a great work environment, and I didn't want to give that up. Fortunately, an MLIS (Master of Library and Information Science) can be earned part-time. Equally fortunately, my employer saw the benefit and supported my pursuit. I took five years to complete my degree, and my employment yielded opportunities for immediate application of my learning.

I was a research lawyer then, but I was also already a “law librarian” without the degree. I managed the firm’s research resources — I had responsibility for reducing both expenditures for the library and its physical footprint, while retaining the research utility of the collection. I made recommendations to management about subscriptions to keep or cancel; print-to-electronic format shifts, and reorganization of the physical library. I planned and supervised the creation of a database of library research resources, and set up a classification system that worked for the firm. I worked with IT to develop an intranet and knowledge management system. Not least, I conducted a lot of legal and nonlegal research, in print and online.

Those all are tasks a law librarian would do, but often a managing lawyer or sole practitioner has to undertake them, or will oversee their outsourcing. If an enterprising lawyer is interested in information resources, is inclined to learn about budgeting for them, and wants to participate in the management of an organization, he or she can pursue “law librarianship” in this sense without completing an MLIS (Master of Library and Information Science). Continuing studies options are available to support these endeavours, through usual CLE (Continuing legal education) or continuing professional development opportunities from MLIS (Master of Library and Information Science) schools.

Because I remained a practising lawyer when I was employed in law firms or in the courts, I could go somewhat further in some respects than a non-JD (Juris Doctor) law librarian can. I could research and analyze issues presented to me from my colleagues’ files, or consider scenarios and determine the issues that needed legal research and analysis. As many law librarians do, I gave summer and articling students guidance in their own legal research, and then, wearing my research-lawyer hat, I could also check their work for accuracy and mentor them.

Connected to any career deliberation is a salary question. For lawyers in large firms, the courts, or government, to work as a law librarian may result in a reduction. Lawyers who tried out their own shingle, a smaller firm, or a not-for-profit could well see a better income and job security. Again, much depends on the sector and whether one chooses to invest in the additional degree.
So, years later, I get back up and sit myself back on my chair. I know what a law librarian can do and it is what I do: I understand the structure of legal information, improve its accessibility, share it, teach others how to find and use it. And as a law librarian with a JD (Juris Doctor) and legal experience I can go further yet. In a law school library, I can teach the beloved legal research and writing course from beginning to end. Though grading a legal research memo might not be the highlight of my work, it rounds out a pretty nice profession.

Kim Nayyer is a law librarian and a once-upon-a-time research lawyer.