Law Faculty Publications   School of Law

2008

Building a Law Firm Library

Joyce Manna Janto
University of Richmond, jjanto@richmond.edu

Building a Law Firm Library

by Joyce M. Janto

OPENING A LAW PRACTICE is a daunting task. Renting space, equipping an office, and hiring staff are obvious first steps. But what about assembling a library?

Why Bother?

Last year I attended a conference on legal research at the Chicago-Kent College of Law. The most interesting session was the presentation by the school's legal writing faculty, who had surveyed alumni on their research habits. Two hundred attorneys responded, ranging in experience from fewer than five to more than twenty years in practice. All groups agreed that while the bulk of their research was done electronically, there was still a need for print resources.

When Print is Better

The biggest complaint of experienced lawyers (those with more than fifteen years of experience) about their juniors was that the associates were too quick to jump online. Being unfamiliar with an area of law, the juniors' online searches took longer and returned less relevant results. The senior lawyers felt that some background research in secondary sources would result in more productive online time.

Statutes were seen as being easier to use in print. This makes sense because statutes tend to be interrelated. When doing statutory research, a researcher commonly will consult multiple sections. Also, when statutes are drafted, concepts can be expressed as a negative, i.e., "it is not unlawful." This can make searching in a full-text database difficult.

When Online Is Better

There was universal agreement that some tasks, like Shepardizing, are accomplished more cost efficiently online. Case research also can be more economical, depending on the skill of the searcher. Those without sufficient training in the use of fee-based databases quickly run up billable hours with inefficient searches.

What Should You Own?

The *Code of Virginia*. Whether one purchases the LexisNexis or Thomson West version is a personal preference, as each has its own features. Either will provide an excellent index, the statutes, and annotations. If you are beginning practice in an area with a regulatory component, you also should have the *Virginia Administrative Code* and *Virginia Register of Regulations*.

When selecting secondary sources, a general practitioner should consider *Michie's Jurisprudence of Virginia* and *West Virginia and Virginia Forms*, both published by LexisNexis. A basic source is *The Virginia Lawyer: A Deskbook for Practitioners* edited by Thomas G. Voekler and published by Virginia CLE Publications. This how-to guide covers a variety of practice areas and has a companion CD containing forms. *The Virginia Practice* series, published by Thomson West, is very useful. Each title covers a specific practice area.

The choice of secondary materials is driven by the area of law as each has its bible. In personal injury law, they might be the Personal Injury Valuation Handbooks, published by Jury Research Verdict Service, and *Appleman on Insurance*, published by LexisNexis. How do you determine the bible in your field? You could ask an attorney well-established in that practice area. Or you could call your local law librarian for a recommendation.

What Should You Bookmark?

Another complaint of seasoned lawyers about their juniors is an overreliance on fee-based services. Young lawyers forget that much of the information packaged so conveniently on Lexis and Westlaw is available for free at government sites. Federal statutes and regulations can be found at **http://www.gpoaccess.gov**. This site also is a gateway to websites of federal agencies. These websites contain agency decisions, rules, or reports. Federal legislative materials can be found at **http://thomas.loc.gov** and federal cases at **http://www.uscourts.gov**. The latter site links to district and appellate court websites where full-text opinions may be available. Virginia legislative and court materials can be found at **http://.leg1.state.va.us** and **http://www.courts.state.va.us** respectively.

Need to Shepardize but can't afford a Lexis contract? Consider signing up with lexisONE (**http://www.lexisone.com**). Along with free access to forms and the past five years of state and federal cases, this service provides twenty-four hours of access to Shepard's for thirty-two dollars.

Many localities in Virginia have given up publishing ordinances. Instead, you can find them at **http://www.municode.com**. This site offers free access to most of the local ordinances in the state.

Conclusion

While electronic resources may predominate, there is still a place for print. A good library will contain a judicious mix of both.