

OPINION

Outsourcing arouses passionate debate



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OUTSOURCING AROUSES PASSIONATE DEBATE

Outsourcing – like Marmite, people seem to love it or hate it. Although outsourcing is gaining ground in law firms, information professionals' opinions and experiences of it vary greatly.

Iain Dunbar, Information World Review 12/07/2011



Many firms have successfully outsourced specific business tasks and have seen the benefits but, where library management and research tasks are concerned, there is healthy debate.

As a new entrant to the UK market (from an US company with over 25 years of experience in the area), LAC Group aims to make outsourcing a beneficial experience for staff whilst improving services and saving firms money. Its founder, Deb Schwarz, began as a legal librarian says: "We feel that a variety of options should always be considered - firms can gain external help in specific areas for a short time or on an ongoing basis, or can choose to outsource the entire spectrum of library services if required."

Our experience shows that the librarians and information managers engaged in the process have typically enjoyed greater focus, increased involvement in what they are good at and improved productivity to their own benefit and that of the firm.

Law firms work with us on a variety of discrete outsourcing projects as well as some firms preferring to entrust their entire spectrum of library services to us.

Typical examples of projects are:

Information resources auditing where we evaluate and benchmark the library collection, electronic content, subscriptions and contracts, library software systems and output/listings. This includes reporting on areas such as resource usage, costs, duplications, circulating/routing, request and delivery.

Identification of specific user needs and obstacles with respect to locating information and research. This has to be considered by taking into account lawyers' needs and current library staff operations. It must cover access methods and habits, workflow analysis and benchmarking against other firms, as well as comprehensive reviews of trends and best practices.

Undoubtedly quality of service is key to successful change of strategy. When we work with law firms to assess their current information management operations and to shape the organisations for the future, the activities have always resulted in an improved service at the same or lower cost.

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There are new opportunities for information professionals, such as negotiation for and procurement of electronic resources, digital copyright compliance, customised training and education programs, competitive intelligence in support of client-focused marketing projects, all of which provide value to the firm. Suitably qualified librarians are also increasingly being integrated and embedded into Practice Groups in a true collaboration.

For partners and lawyers, reshaping and improving the research function of the library is often most important. Outsourcing for legal firms encompasses the routine research work of law librarians and analysts as well as competitive intelligence research via secure digital portals. We have operated these functions on-site and off-site, both on-demand or on an ongoing basis. Specialists can advise on the most suitable applications for storing both structured and unstructured content, integration of systems and search/recovery methods. The researchers can work with lawyers to formulate strategy, execute research plans, identify expert witnesses and prepare research for submission as evidence or supportive argument.

In some cases clients may call us in to allow their staff to focus on these more complex tasks whilst outsourcing routine library maintenance tasks, such as ordering and receiving print items, checking in journals, cataloguing materials, printing spine labels, filing supplements, routing mail etc which remain essential to the smooth running of the operation.

Law firms are very good at practicing law but the specialised services of innovative information professionals can be instrumental in helping firms achieve a competitive advantage. Outsourcing specialists can help library directors, administrators and knowledge professionals craft and implement a strategic plan that ensures excellence and efficiency in acquiring, managing and delivering information resources.

Iain Dunbar is the general manager for UK operations, LAC Group