

# The Evolution of Law Librarianship and the Role of AI

**Abstract:** The transformative journey of law librarianship has been marked by significant milestones, from the transition from hard copy to online access, to the current development and implementation of artificial intelligence (AI). This article is based on a presentation at the BIALL Conference in June 2024 by **Melissa Mills**, Knowledge Manager at William Roberts Lawyers, and explores this evolution, focusing on her experiences and insights gained over the years, particularly in the Australian context.

**Keywords:** law librarians; artificial intelligence (AI); Australia

## INTRODUCTION

The field of law librarianship has undergone a remarkable transformation since the early 1990s. This journey began with the shift from large hard copy libraries to the accessibility of publications online, and now, to the integration of AI in managing legal knowledge. This article reflects on the timeline of this progression, the influences that facilitated these changes, and the future implications of AI in the legal industry.

## AUSTRALIA'S LEGAL LANDSCAPE

Australia, a common law jurisdiction, shares many features with the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. The country's legal system practises the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy and is a federation of states and territories, each with its own independent court system. The High Court of Australia has been the final court of appeal since 1986, marking a significant shift from the previous reliance on the Privy Council in London.

## THE EARLY DAYS OF LAW LIBRARIANSHIP

In the late 1990s, law libraries were often the jewel in the crown of legal offices, a place to take clients and visitors. When I started in 1998 at Allens (formerly Allen Allen & Hemsley) in Sydney, Australia, the library was a beautiful space, housing rows of bookcases filled with law reports, loose-leaf folders, and various publications. The library also featured internet terminals, tables, chairs and lounges, as well as a reference desk and a borrowing terminal. Law firms were proud to have a library to show to clients, and prospective employees.

The online resources were predominantly on CD-ROM with some early access to Lexis online and AustLII (Australasian Legal Information Institute) the first 'free' online legal provider, and room for information was considered essential despite the cost of office space.

## THE SHIFT TO ONLINE RESOURCES

The transition from hard copy to online resources was gradual but transformative. As online publications became more accessible, the need for physical collections diminished. This shift was driven by the growth of online legal information sources such as Lexis, Westlaw, and CCH, as well as free services such as AustLII. The move to online resources was not without challenges, including cost considerations and the need for extensive training to ensure effective use.

Over the 10 years of my employment the Allens Library diminished year by year. Firstly, books were removed to create offices, and the hard copy law reports soon followed. By the end of my tenure at Allens, we were placed in the basement with a few shelves for 'rare' books and legislation.

Legal information in that 10 years had become digitised, and our role as knowledge specialists was to train and promote these new tools.

## THE DECLINE OF PHYSICAL LIBRARIES

Despite the decline of physical libraries, law librarians embraced the developments in technology that made their roles more effective. The transition to online resources allowed law librarians to focus on more meaningful tasks, such as providing research support and training staff on the use of new technologies. Today many firms have no physical library at all, most publications are either online or take up very little shelf space.



*There was a time when law firms were proud of their bookshelves and what they represented*

## CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS

The transition from hard copy to online resources was not without its challenges. One of the primary obstacles was the cost associated with online subscriptions. In the early days, online resources were expensive, and single sign-on and IP fixing were in their infancy. Law librarians had to negotiate with publishers to secure the most economical deals and push through these challenges to ensure the successful adoption of online resources.

Another significant challenge was the resistance from some lawyers who were reluctant to move away from hard copy resources. Many lawyers preferred to update volumes with their notes, making the transition to online resources difficult. To overcome this resistance, law librarians had to provide extensive training and support to help lawyers become comfortable with the new technology.

This will again be required as law librarians and knowledge managers drive the push to new AI tools – cost, education and marketing will also be needed. The difference with these new tools, in my experience, seems to be that lawyers and partners are eager to use and adopt them. I have found lawyers and partners are wanting to adopt AI and embrace these tools, not just for time and money saving but also because of the fear of being left behind, and the firm not looking ‘innovative’. This is unusual, as in the past I have found lawyers to be

reluctant to adopt new systems, due to cost and lack of ease of use. Law librarians and knowledge managers have had to fight to get these tools and push their use on to reluctant lawyers.

## THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of online resources. With lockdowns in place, accessing hard copy resources became nearly impossible, prompting a significant shift towards online services. Publishers like Lexis and Westlaw provided gratis services, facilitating this transition. The pandemic underscored the importance of online access and highlighted the need for law librarians to champion new ways of working.

In my role at Hall and Wilcox, a mid-tier law firm in Sydney, the need to transfer all hard copy loose-leaf services to online access was apparent at this time. The copies were shared amongst practice groups, so sharing whilst in lockdown was impossible. The online access given by the publishers saw lawyers using the services out of necessity, as online was the only access point.

After the pandemic had eased, staff had embraced the online services and agreed to the majority of loose-leaf publications transferring to online. The knock-on affect of this was the acceptance of online books and other services. Staff began to expect that if it was available then it should be at their desktop, not stored on a shelf.

Partners were asking that if it was available in hard copy could the online version also be made available, or they decided buying the online version was preferable. They had adopted these versions readily, as they realised it wouldn't disappear and was available to multiple staff at a time.

## **THE ROLE OF AI IN LAW LIBRARIANSHIP**

The advent of AI presents both opportunities and challenges for law librarianship. Generative AI tools like ChatGPT and OpenAI have the potential to assist in various tasks, but their accuracy and reliability remain concerning. AI's role in the legal field must be balanced with human interpretation and reasoning to ensure the validity and accuracy of information.

The promise of AI relies on the knowledge it is drawing from being accurate, and this is where we, as experts in knowledge storing and retrieval, will assist in the AI used by law firms. The AI is only as good as the data stored by the firm.

Law librarians and knowledge managers will have to educate themselves on the tools available, then extend this to staff. The profession has done this successfully over many years.

## **IMPLEMENTING AI IN LEGAL FIRMS**

Implementing AI in legal firms requires careful consideration. Key questions include defining objectives, securing executive approval, assessing system capabilities, and addressing security issues. Law librarians play a crucial role in this process, leveraging their expertise to ensure the correct data is used and that AI tools are implemented effectively.

Implementing AI in my firm, William Roberts Lawyers, a mid-tier firm in Sydney, involved creating a user group to gather feedback, which was challenging given the busy schedules of our lawyers. Ensuring the tools met their needs was crucial. Rolling out the AI to all legal staff posed a financial risk, so we invested heavily in training and marketing to raise awareness about its availability and capabilities.

Addressing the lawyers' concerns during implementation involved several steps. Open communication saw us holding regular meetings about what the AI could and couldn't do, how and when it would be implemented and how we could make sure we stressed the importance of keeping clients' notes secure. Training sessions were comprehensive and organised to familiarise legal staff on the tools and we had a continuous feedback loop even after the rollout. These steps allowed for ongoing tweaks to the tools and the lawyers felt their input was valued and the tools were being designed to meet their needs.

The eagerness of lawyers to adopt these tools makes this transition easier than past transitions, as most staff are keen to be involved and to have access to AI. In many

cases the more youthful staff have a lot of knowledge and are great at making suggestions and getting others to think of solutions.

The issue of policies and procedures also arose; to make sure the AI was being used with the correct security and compliance, and within our external contracts with clients. When contracts are signed now we are asked for assurance their data is not used in AI tools, or if it is used the firm has to seek approval from the client.

## **THE ROLE OF LAW LIBRARIANS IN THE AI REVOLUTION**

The evolving AI revolution presents new challenges and opportunities for law librarians. As AI tools become more prevalent, law librarians will be at the forefront of education, testing, and recommending how these tools can be used effectively in legal firms. Law librarians' expertise in information literacy and their ability to sift through vast amounts of data will be crucial in ensuring the successful implementation of AI.

Law librarians and knowledge managers will draw on the skills we have honed through past IT iterations, such as CD-ROM to online, online to IP-fixing and SSO. Our profession will be at the forefront of keeping all stakeholders informed and aware, and trialling and recommending what is best for our workplaces.

## **THE FUTURE OF AI IN LAW LIBRARIANSHIP**

The future of AI in law librarianship is both exciting and uncertain. While AI has the potential to revolutionise the legal field, it is essential to balance its use with human interpretation and reasoning. AI tools must be implemented thoughtfully and carefully to ensure their accuracy and reliability.

Law librarians will play a critical role in this process, leveraging their expertise to monitor and maintain the quality of data used by AI tools. By championing the correct use of AI and providing training and support to legal staff, law librarians can help ensure that AI is used effectively and responsibly in the legal field.

## **KEEPING ABREAST OF AI**

The biggest challenge and hurdle is keeping up to date with the rapid changes to AI, because the speed of change is mind blowing. I have found reading everything you can on the topic is the best way to keep abreast of changes, but also follow experts on LinkedIn and sign up to any blogs that are specifically on AI and the law. The publishers put out some great articles, and signing up for alerts is also a useful way of keeping on top of the rapid changes.

Suggested sites to follow include: Legal Generative AI Community – LinkedIn; Terri Motorshead – LinkedIn;

and Martin Ebers – Robotics and AI Law Society –  
LinkedIn

## **CONCLUSION**

The evolution of law librarianship from hard copy to online resources and now to AI integration has been a

remarkable journey. As the field continues to evolve, law librarians must remain at the forefront, championing the correct use of AI and ensuring that the information provided is accurate and reliable. The future of law librarianship lies in balancing technological advancements with human expertise to support the legal industry effectively.

## **Biography**

**Melissa Mills** is a law librarian with over 25 years of legal experience in Sydney, Australia. Melissa has a passion for legal research and a commitment to facilitating access to legal knowledge. Melissa started working in the world of law in the '90s at Allen Allen & Hemsley (now Allens), and has worked in both large and mid-tier firms. She is currently the Knowledge Manager for William Roberts Lawyers in Sydney. Melissa is the President of the Australian Law Librarians Association (ALLA) – NSW branch – and the CPD coordinator for ALLA – National. Melissa has a keen interest in AI and its application in the legal environment.