

HARB()R

2024

Seismic shift: Law firm library strategies for 2024

Navigating change through times of uncertainty

In this edition

2024

Introduction	2
Areas of focus for 2024	4
Staffing & skills	5
Training as a strategic initiative	6
Conclusion	8
Connect with Us	9

Firms that **focus** on staffing & skills, generative AI & emerging technologies, and collection strategy will be **best prepared** to gain advantage.

Introduction

There is no doubt that 2023 presented law firms with an almost unprecedented level of change. In addition to continuing economic uncertainty and ongoing recovery from the pandemic, a technological leap forward comparable to the introduction of the internet shook the legal industry. This is an opportunity for firms to lead in delivering change to their clients.

Looking across the industry it is clear that law firm information professionals and the information service function (referenced here as the “library” for convenience) are integral to law firm operations and the support of clients. Over the past three years, our recommendations have focused on positioning firms to capitalize on their library to maximize investment and, in hindsight, prepare for a time just such as this.

For 2024, we recommend the following areas of focus: staffing and skills, generative AI and emerging technologies, and collection strategy. Building on the foundation firms have put in place in previous years, the time is now to capitalize on the seismic shift wrought by generative AI and position the firm to deliver future value.

The firms that prioritize these areas in 2024 will be best prepared to take full advantage of their library departments, and Harbor looks forward to contributing to those successful journeys. This paper will focus on our first recommendation, staffing and skills, while subsequent reports this year will highlight the other two.

We look forward to a productive year of sharing our insights and reflecting with our clients and colleagues on the near constant opportunities we see ahead.

Looking back

Since 2021, Harbor has set out annual recommendations for firms to fully leverage the value of their information professionals.

As we developed our new areas of focus for 2024, we saw some remarkable similarities, and some notable differences from our prior recommendations. First, how firms manage their collections remains a key focus. While this focus has evolved significantly since 2021, when winding down print collections remained a key challenge for many firms as reflected in [Harbor's Benchmarking Survey results](#). The principle in 2024 remains the same: purchase the right content, in the right format, to support the firm's practitioners at the best possible price. Ensuring that the collection strategy continues to support this principle is key to maximizing the firm's return on investment.

Second, in previous years we made recommendations around the evolution of library staffing to maximize service delivery. Once again, this proposition is embedded in our 2024 recommendations. It remains critical to have the right staff responsible for the right tasks, to enable either direct or indirect client-centric services. Starting in 2021, we recommended that roles and responsibilities start shifting as the needs of the firm changed, and this has only become more critical.

Third, responding to evolving technology has always been a strategic opportunity for law firm libraries. Libraries have often led the way in driving utilization and adoption of firm resources, and this has remained a consistent area of focus. In the current environment, however, with the changes being wrought by AI, the opportunity to make an impact on the firm has grown exponentially, and so should our focus on this important area of value delivery in 2024.

With the **changes** being wrought by **AI**, the opportunity to make **an impact** on the firm has **grown exponentially**, and so should our focus on this **important area of value** delivery in 2024.

Three areas of focus for 2024

Focus One	Focus Two	Focus Three
2024 Staffing & skills Create a competitive advantage by leveraging third-party service providers to support the non-strategic fundamentals of the function	Generative AI Respond to the transformative changes being wrought by AI through leveraging the expertise of information professionals	Collection strategy Utilize strategic purchasing processes to balance needs against new features and technologies that may not add actual value to the firm
2023 Cost management Implementation of strategic purchasing practices	Utilization & adoption Development of a holistic strategy to include onboarding, training, and usage tracking	Competitive intelligence Cross-functional collaboration between the library and intelligence functions to enable strategic insights
2022 Optimization of client services Supporting the firm's clients either directly or indirectly	Cross-functional collaboration Collaboration between operational functions enabling productivity and efficiency	Evolution of library structure & roles Maximizing operational benefits via the transformation of the operating model
2021 Cost management	Talent & service delivery	Client-centric focus

Staffing & skills



Law firm support staffing structures will always be scrutinized for cost and ROI. A key to unlocking that challenge is ensuring that information professionals can add value in a variety of areas, including, but not limited to, utilization and adoption efforts, competitive intelligence, data analytics, technology initiatives, and many others. This value allows firm leadership to think about staffing as something beyond overhead, and to evaluate their needs in terms of leverageable skills that will meet the growing and evolving demands of the firm. An information professional fluent in the tools required for the next generation practice of law is well positioned as someone the firm cannot afford to lose (or cut), as opposed to the old arithmetic.

The strategic opportunity for the library function in the age of AI is to take control of that value proposition and build a responsive team that not only supports but also drives change through the firm. However, this will require two major shifts within the department: (1) creation of the ability for the library to focus on strategically valuable pursuits, which is often compromised by the demands of non-strategic tasks, and (2) evaluating and potentially adjusting the skillsets of those in the department.

A competitive advantage can be created by leveraging third-party service providers to support the non-strategic fundamentals of the function, such as document retrieval, current awareness, password support, etc., and reactive research, while those with the internal relationships focus on the strategic work. This allows the firm to expand capacity without increasing headcount and to disaggregate commoditized tasks. It also enables staff to focus on the acquisition and application of new skillsets to support a variety of needs within the organization.

Training as a strategic initiative



Just one such example of a strategic initiative that will require focus, and potentially upskilling, is training. Although this has been a typical remit of the department, it takes on a completely new importance in the age of generative AI. Not only do firm personnel need to understand how to use a particular tool, but now there is an additional layer of complexity.

There are three areas of attention:

1. **Guiding users** to understand the nuances inherent in gen AI searching, evaluation of the results, and appropriate uses;
2. **Training key researchers** to be good prompt engineers; and
3. Incorporation of **client restrictions** on utilization of certain research resources.

With any legal research, especially with newer associates and other junior personnel, ensuring that “one search” is not interpreted as “research” has always been a focus of instruction. In many ways, the research process of selecting a database, crafting a search, and understanding the relevance of the results, may be slightly different going forward, but is more important than ever. However, the amount of time spent in creating and delivering training will increase exponentially, which requires a new level of focus, expertise, and collaboration within the firm.

In addition, transitioning more seasoned researchers into “prompt engineers” will require a comprehensive training plan. This is further complicated by the need to switch between tools that utilize traditional search vs. generative AI during the research process. A close partnership between library personnel and other departments, plus vendor partners, will be required to successfully manage these nuances and build training programs that are responsive to these new challenges.

The amount of time spent in **creating and delivering training** will **increase exponentially**, which requires a **new level of focus**, expertise, and collaboration within the firm.

As law firm clients demand their firms implement new technologies and efficiencies, they may also place restrictions on how generative AI is used to support their matters. This should also be addressed by the training plan, and should include any prerequisites for utilizing specific resources, as well as, tracking mechanisms and continuous updating to include new products and changing client requirements.

Training is just one example of the type of value that the library can bring to the firm with the right organizational structure and staffing. Use this example as a catalyst to explore the additional strategic initiatives where the information professional can be a vital resource.

Conclusion

2024

For those firms that have already begun, or maybe completed, the redefinition of their library function, their internal teams should be ready to support a variety of strategic initiatives. For those who haven't, now is the time to consider a review of the alignment between the library staffing and skills and the firm's strategic goals. Possible approaches include:

- Assessing roles and responsibilities within the library
- Identifying new skills and offering professional development opportunities for staff
- Considering how tasks could be disaggregated and the advantage that can be gained by adding third-party support across the function
- Expanding responsibilities to reflect the needs of the firm and build new areas of growth for valued staff
- Integrating the library and information professionals into firmwide strategic planning efforts.

Connect with our experts



Kris Martin | Executive Vice President, Research & Intelligence

O 312.425.4459

E kris.martin@harborglobal.com



Colleen Cable | Director

O 312.769.2507

E colleen.cable@harborglobal.com



Paul Kavanaugh | Vice President, Client Engagement

O 506.855.1501

E paul.kavanaugh@harborglobal.com
