



2020 Benchmarking + Legal Information Services Survey (BLISS) Highlights: Law Firm Research and Information Services' Response to the Pandemic

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered every aspect of our global economy, including legal information services within law firms. Law firm information professionals were required to quickly respond to the abrupt change and the myriad of challenges it brought, including the immediate shift to an all-remote environment. With no notice, librarians also had to support seamless access to services, remote researching and flexible work schedules, and to rethink current processes to allow for the integration and provision of external information resources.

The current environment has reinforced firms' perception of the strategic role information professionals can play in helping organizations adapt to changing client expectations and supporting change management among attorneys and professional firm staff. Now, more than ever, firm librarians are leveraging the unique value they bring to their firms as information experts and how they can help chart the course for their organizations post-pandemic.

The 2020 Benchmarking + Legal Information Services Survey (BLISS) included several "hot topics," focusing on the ways law firms are adapting their legal information strategy and services in response to the pandemic. Below, we summarize the findings of the 2020 Benchmarking + Legal Information Services Survey (BLISS) "Hot Topics" section, as well as the results from some live polling that was conducted during a webinar on October 20, 2020. Topics include the following:

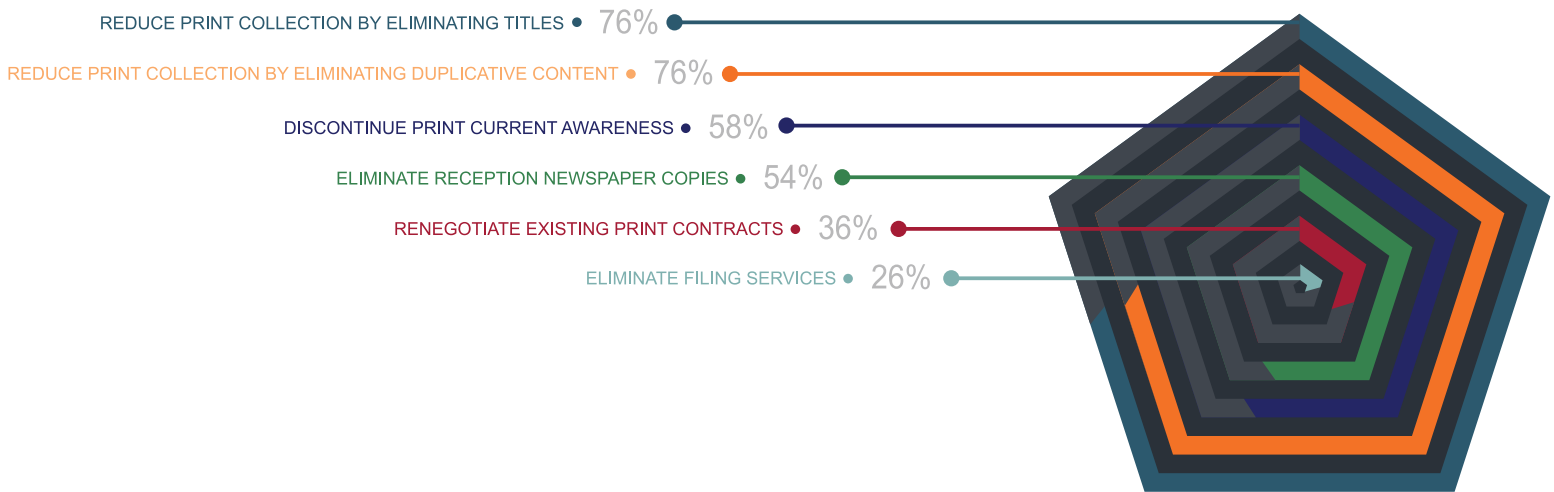
- Cost management opportunities
- Coordination of print materials
- Supporting firm innovation initiatives
- Research requests
- Work-from-home policies for information professionals

The survey includes data from 60 participating law firms across Am Law 100, Am Law 200 and Am Law 200+ segments.

Cost Management Opportunities

The office closures resulting from the pandemic have led to several cost management opportunities. According to BLISS respondents, most of the potential for cost management focuses on the elimination and reduction of print resources.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING IS YOUR FIRM CONSIDERING AS POTENTIAL COST SAVINGS OPPORTUNITIES DUE TO COVID-19? (PRINT-RELATED RESPONSES)



Given the abrupt pivot to a completely virtual environment, it is not surprising that firms have leveraged the opportunity to cancel much of their remaining print resources. Attorneys have been effectively practicing law with severely restricted access to print materials over the past eight months through necessity, so the test case for transition away from print has been successfully made in real-time.

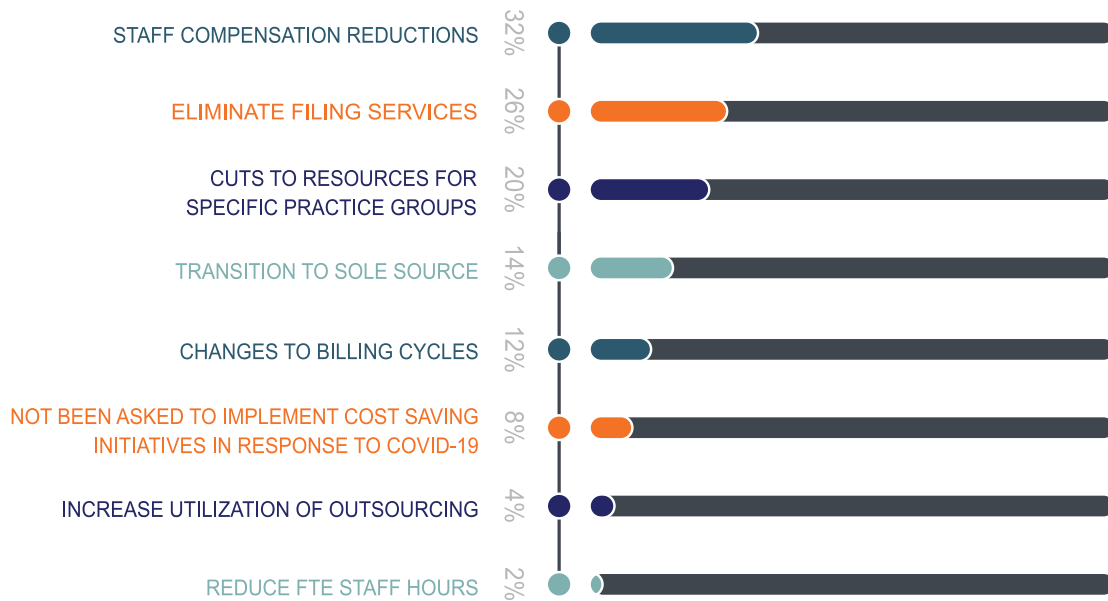
Previously, library leadership faced a challenge in convincing attorneys that they could give up their print resources. After months of using digital resources, attorneys are realizing they may not need print after all. Additionally, with increased scrutiny on firm costs, cutting print is accepted as a group effort to be good stewards of firm financial resources. By eliminating and reducing print resources, firms are also able to reduce costs associated with the maintenance of their print, including filing services and office costs to house the physical collection.

Most notably, these findings were consistent across all respondents, regardless of firm size.

However, 38% of webinar participants responding to a live poll indicated that “convincing attorneys to give up print” remains as their primary challenge, followed by “working with vendors to reduce print”. This may indicate, that despite all of the changes and even the inability to access print during this time, attorneys are still reluctant to move on.

Beyond print-focused savings efforts, the other cost management initiatives referenced by participants include the following:

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING IS YOUR FIRM CONSIDERING AS POTENTIAL COST SAVINGS OPPORTUNITIES DUE TO COVID-19? (OTHER RESPONSES)



For cost management opportunities not related to print, there were several differences related to the size of respondents’ firms:

- Responses regarding changes to staff were most frequent in the Am Law 101-200, including staff compensation reductions and reductions in FTE hours.
- Consideration of a transition to sole source (i.e., either Lexis or Westlaw as the primary provider) was the highest in the Am Law 51-100.
- Only the Am Law 1-50 and 51-100 segments responded that they had been asked to increase outsourcing.

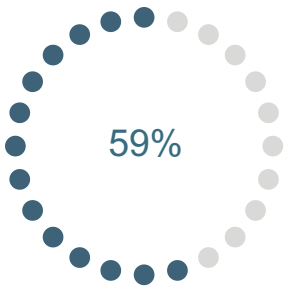
It is heartening that only 2% of responses indicated they had been asked to reduce FTE staff hours in their libraries.

Coordination of Print Materials

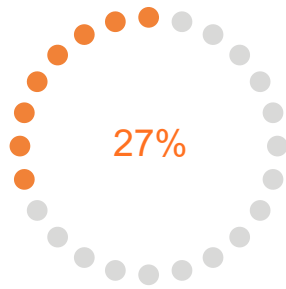
Since the start of the pandemic, law firm librarians had to make quick decisions regarding how to handle physical materials to mitigate the potential risk of virus transmission. As offices begin to reopen, law firms should consider, if they have not already, how to access these materials safely.

With so many urgent considerations drawing their attention, it is not surprising the majority of survey respondents (59%) reported that firm leadership did not mandate any safety protocols for handling print collections.

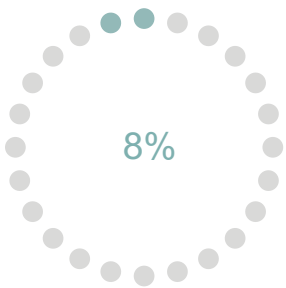
HAS FIRM LEADERSHIP CONSIDERED THE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH MAINTAINING SHARED PRINT RESOURCES?



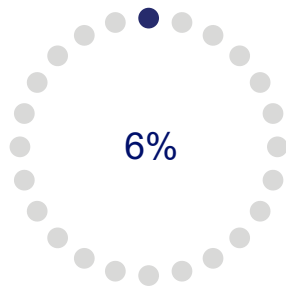
There were no safety mandates handed down from the risk/executive committee



The firm's risk committee created/mandated new safety protocols



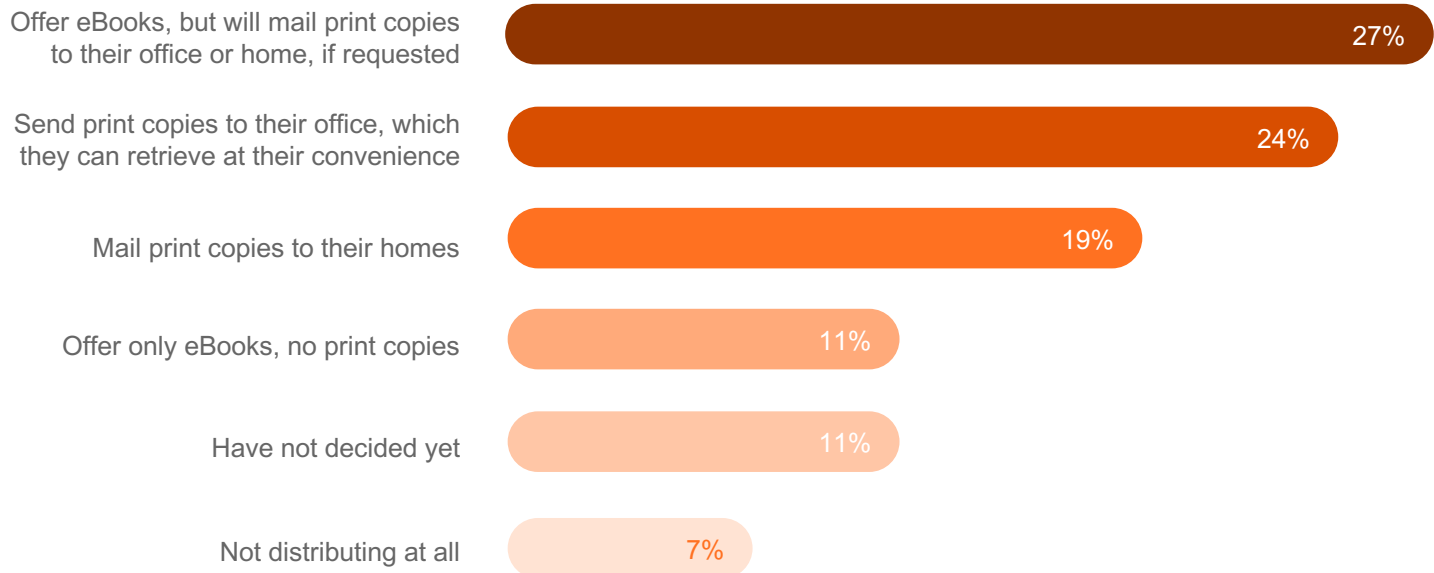
Each department can do as they choose, but they need to run the new protocols by the executive committee



Each department can do as they choose, but they need to run their protocols by the risk committee

For example, how firms are handling the distribution of office copies, such as court rules, remains an open question. We asked webinar participants to weigh in and the responses demonstrated the lack of a consensus.

WITH SO MANY ATTORNEYS WORKING FROM HOME, HOW ARE YOU PLANNING TO DISTRIBUTE OFFICE COPIES, SUCH AS COURT RULES?



Given the continued uncertainty around how the virus might spread via physical objects, firms are recognizing librarians' expertise and giving them the flexibility to develop tailored workflows and policies for mitigating the transmission risk associated with print materials.

While there is no uniform guidance for firm librarians, many librarians are relying on the guidance issued by their local public libraries and The Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC). The NEDCC recently updated its Emergency Management Preservation Leaflet 3.5 [Disinfecting Books and Other Collections](#), based on extensive research surrounding COVID-19. The NEDCC's findings indicate that quarantining materials before placing them back in the physical library space is the best way to combat the virus's spread. They recommend that, "...if a dedicated quarantine space cannot be established, staff can place items in bags until the quarantine period is over so that staff do not accidentally handle the items."

There is an opportunity for information professionals to proactively educate their organizational leadership and create policies that will help mitigate risk. This could include:

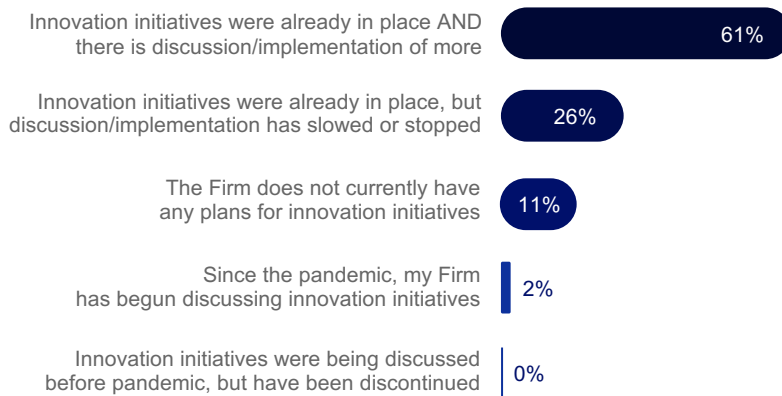
1. Quarantine procedures;
2. Disinfection processes and methods;
3. Requirements that materials stay at home or stay at the firm; and
4. Implementing signage in the physical library space restricting access.

Supporting Firm Innovation Initiatives

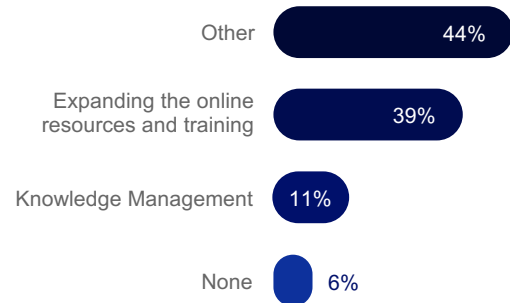
Information professionals are uniquely positioned to support their firms' innovation initiatives. Because access to quality legal information is essential to the practice of law, firm librarians are essential in supporting their firms as they restructure how their attorneys work and access legal information moving forward.

According to BLISS respondents, a majority of firms (61%) had innovation initiatives in place before the pandemic began and have been discussing and implementing more initiatives since then.

HOW HAS COVID-19 IMPACTED THE FIRM'S ADOPTION OF INNOVATION INITIATIVES?



WHAT TYPES OF INNOVATIVE INITIATIVES IS THE LIBRARY SUPPORTING?



Survey respondents indicated their departments are involved in a wide variety of innovation initiatives, from expanding online resources and training to knowledge management. Additional initiatives supported by information professionals include automating functions, such as dockets and alerting, upgrading the intranet, and supporting the implementation of business intelligence (BI) tools and document automation. The opportunities for librarians to contribute to their firms' innovation and efficiency efforts are abundant, and library management should emphasize to firm leadership the value they can offer in this regard.

During the webinar, attendees were asked: If you could only focus on one innovation initiative next year, what would it be? The answers were varied and show an even greater range of initiatives than initially reported on the survey. Responses included everything from robot process automation to SSO implementation to horizon scanning.

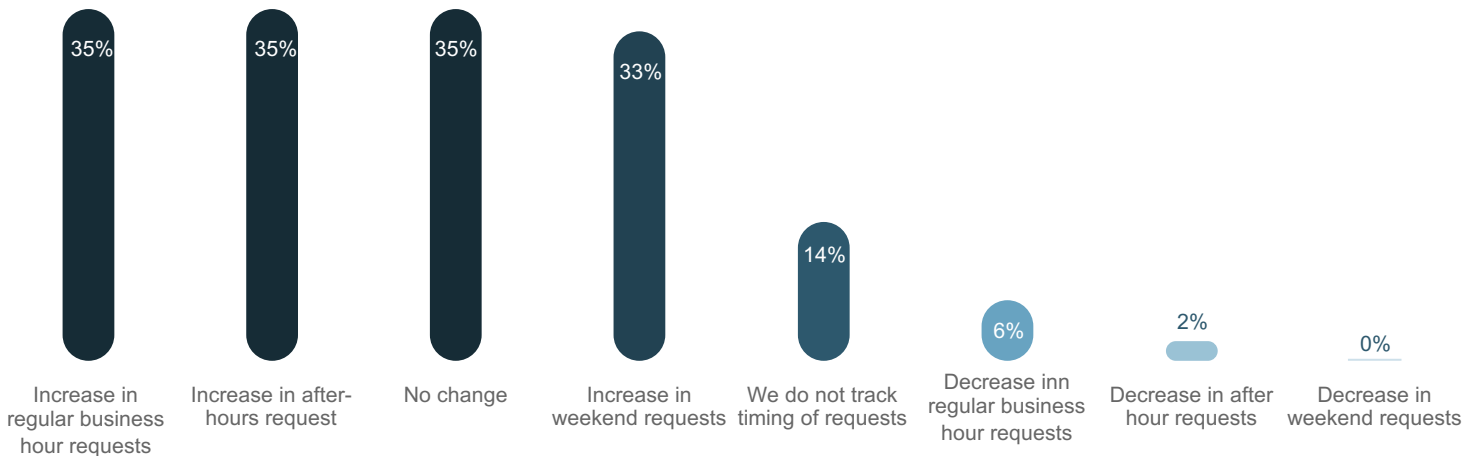
As was noted during the webinar, "innovation" does not necessarily mean a new product and does not necessarily relate to current buzz words, such as AI, but can also refer to a new process or workflow or just a better way of doing things. As such, law firm librarians are constantly innovating, even if they do not realize it.

Research Requests

It is hard to say what information professionals' work lives will look like after the pandemic, but we do know that more law firm employees, including lawyers, are likely to be working virtually than ever before. An open question is how this changed environment will impact expectations for supporting staff functions such as the law library. For example, will 24/7/365 support be expected and, if so, how will it be managed?

Since the pandemic and the resulting move to a fully remote workforce, over half of survey respondents indicated that their departments had experienced an increase in requests, not just during regular business hours, but also after-hours and on the weekends.

HOW HAS COVID-19 CHANGED THE TIMING OF WHEN REQUESTS ARE SENT TO THE LIBRARY?



Only a fraction of respondents indicated a decline in request volume, while 35% indicated that there had been no change, either way, in the overall volume of requests.

Given the probability that service levels are unlikely to be reduced and will, likely continue to increase, law firm and departmental leadership must find ways to support information professionals in the time of increased pressure. Possible operational changes could include:

1. Reallocating department responsibilities and priorities;
2. Utilization of innovation such as self-service tools, expanded portal offerings, use of bots, etc.; and
3. Exploration of the use of outsourcing to support departmental functions.

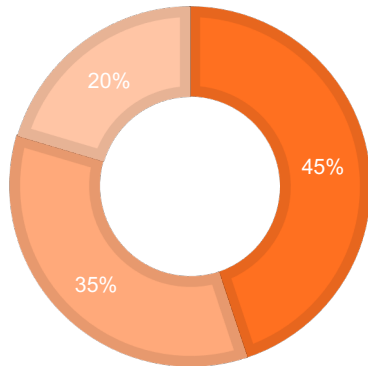
Work-From-Home (WFH) Policies for Information Professionals

Before March 2020, law firms were gradually adopting WFH policies as a tool to recruit and retain attorneys. Even so, according to BLISS respondents, only a slim majority (55%) of firms had a WFH policy prior to the pandemic and 20% of those firms' policies were for exempt employees only.

Once office closures became a reality this spring, law firms had to adapt to the new virtual workplace almost overnight. Firms have quickly adapted by implementing policies for the current environment and are examining how the workplace will look post-pandemic. In order to stay competitive as prospective employers for staff, as well as for attorneys, both large and small firms must continue to position themselves as remote-friendly environments. While 41% of survey respondents indicated that it was unknown whether their firms were going to allow personnel to continue to work from home, it is important to note that not a single respondent said "No."

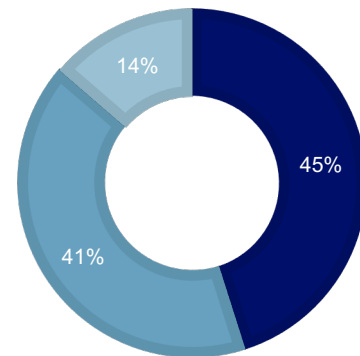
DID YOUR FIRM HAVE A WORK-FROM-HOME POLICY FOR LIBRARY STAFF BEFORE COVID-19?

- No
- Yes, for exempt employees only
- Yes, for all library staff (exempt and non-exempt)



DO YOU ANTICIPATE YOUR FIRM WILL CONTINUE TO ALLOW LIBRARY STAFF TO WORK FROM HOME, EITHER PART-TIME OR FULL-TIME, POST-PANDEMIC?

- Yes, for all library staff (exempt and non-exempt)
- Unknown, Firm leadership has not indicated how work from home policies might be applied in the future
- Yes, for exempt employees only



Perhaps the reason for so many "Unknown" responses is that the current state of remote working is too recent a development in large law firms for leadership to have a strong sense of what the future of will be for their organizations. Webinar participants agreed that the successful implementation of WFH since the pandemic has demonstrated earlier concerns regarding remote work were not entirely valid.

For library leaders, embracing remote work is one option to support extended research coverage without straining staff. While some webinar participants suggested firms may be inclined to monitor utilization and gather productivity metrics, others stressed they know their teams and the importance of trust in a remote environment.

At this point it is hard to draw conclusions on where law firms may end up on this question. This is especially true if offices remain closed throughout 2021 and, perhaps, even into 2022. It might be extremely difficult to fully revert to office working after an extended period of WFH.

Conclusion

The pandemic has brought many changes to law firm operations and research services, many of which will likely be permanent. Information professionals have found opportunities to manage costs and improve processes in the current environment, even while seeing increasing workloads in some areas. These successes highlight the value information professionals can bring to their organizations, as well as the opportunities to continue their forward-looking initiatives as law firms emerge from the current environment.

Connect With Our Experts

For more information about the survey or how law firms' information services departments are responding to the current environment, please contact:



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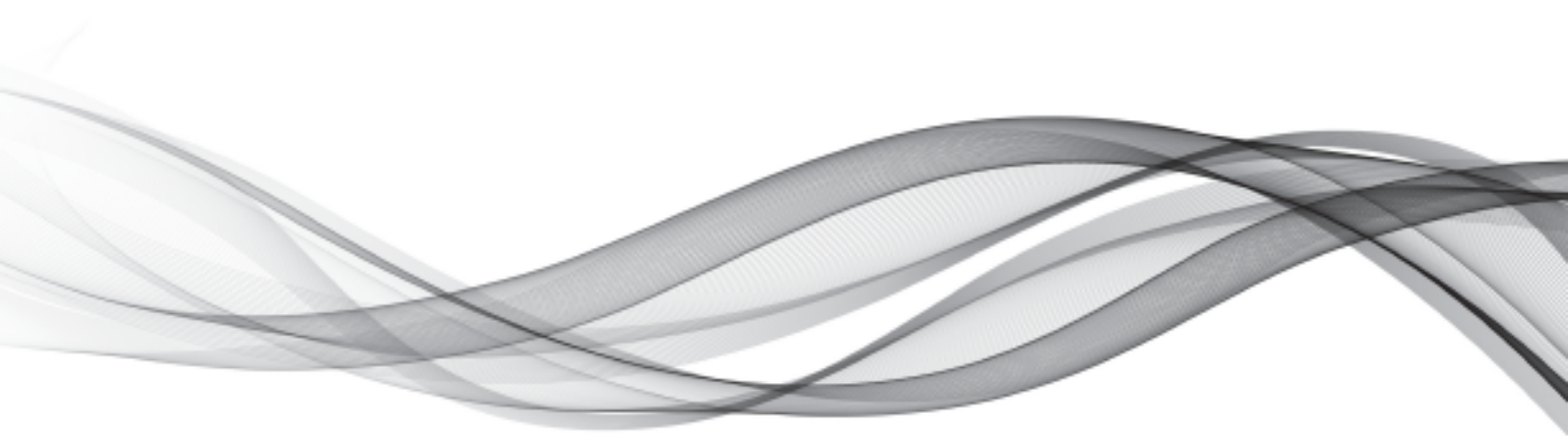
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