

# The Impact of COVID-19 on the Legal Information Profession within Law Firms

**Abstract:** The purpose of this research is to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the legal information profession within law firm libraries in Britain and Ireland. As the pandemic only began the year before commencing this research, few studies had been conducted on the topic, thereby a clear opening for this study emerged. This study uses a survey research strategy comprised of a mixed methods research approach. Desk research in the form of a literature review opens the study. A questionnaire and 5 semi-structured interviews were subsequently conducted. To understand the impact of the pandemic on the legal information profession within law firm libraries, the research objectives break the topic down into 4 areas that give insight into the consequences of the pandemic. The research found that A) working from home was the major impact faced due to the lockdown in spring 2020; B) use and spending on print resources declined; C) the role of legal information professionals has not significantly changed; and D) future legal information professionals will need to upskill due to technological developments and improve the image of the profession. Owing to the recent outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to compare the findings of this research to similar future studies to determine the validity of the results.

**Keywords:** legal information professionals; law firms; Covid-19

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 virus was officially discovered in Wuhan, China by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2019. The situation quickly deteriorated, with cases increasing in number globally. On 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020 the WHO categorised COVID-19 as a pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

In the UK, the first lockdown officially began on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020. However, despite preparations, businesses across all sectors and industries were left in the lurch by frequently changing government guidance.<sup>2</sup> According to Maher, 'when the pandemic hit, the UK law firm market was impacted alongside just about every other business area'.<sup>3</sup> However, the legal information profession within law firms was faced with a variety of pressures and tasks as it was responsible for ensuring continued access to vital legal information resources. It is important to reflect on the impact that COVID-19 had on legal information professionals (LIPs) in the initial stages of the pandemic as this will allow them to reflect on the actions taken and to understand the positive and negative impacts of COVID-19.

As the pandemic began only a year and a half prior to this research, limited studies had been carried out to determine the impact of COVID-19 on the legal information profession within law firm libraries. There was therefore a significant information gap that needed to be filled.

This research aimed to understand how LIPs within law firm libraries in Britain and Ireland have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and to fulfil the below research objectives:

- To understand how the COVID-19 pandemic immediately impacted the legal information profession within law firm libraries in the spring of 2020;
- To examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the use of print and online information resources held by law firm libraries;
- To determine whether the role of LIPs within law firm libraries has changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic;
- To assess how LIPs see the profession within law firm libraries evolving due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## METHODOLOGY

This research used desk research in the form of a literature review to establish the scope of the literature that had previously been published. A questionnaire structured with 4 sections to reflect the research objectives above was distributed and received 70 responses. Finally, 5 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a similar structure to the questionnaire in that they were

split into 4 sections. The overall study followed a survey research strategy.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Immediate impact

The literature overwhelmingly conveys the difficulties that LIPs faced in the spring of 2020 due to the quick, global rise of the pandemic. They were unprepared for a lockdown in which LIPs and lawyers alike would be working from home for a prolonged period, with no access to the office or print resources.

#### *Working from home*

For many, the move was not as simple as taking a laptop home from the office. Lastres, Director of Knowledge Management Services at Debevoise & Plimpton, explains that in the weeks building up to the New York lockdown, LIPs were trained in online resources and tested their computer equipment at home to ensure a smooth transition. Further, many LIPs were sent equipment, such as monitors and printers, to make working from home as familiar an environment as possible.<sup>4</sup>

From 20th May to 1st June 2020, BIALL carried out a questionnaire to assess the immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the employment of LIPs in all sectors, and found that 93% of respondents were instructed to work from home. They also found that despite 53% of institutions using the furlough scheme, only 5% of LIPs were furloughed, a clear vote of support for the profession.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Catalyst*

Much of the literature touches on the role that COVID-19 played in accelerating the rate of change within the legal information profession. At the 2021 BIALL conference, Steer presented findings from a research project executed by Jinfo, an information strategy organisation, which investigated the impact of COVID-19 on legal information management. The results demonstrate that the pandemic sped up the industry's rate of change and highlights key trends that have been significantly influenced by the virus, namely information access points and an increased interest in new legal research topics.<sup>6</sup>

Significantly, the use of digital services was positively impacted by the pandemic and subsequent lockdown. Bailey, Managing Director of Bailey Solutions, a library management organisation, explains that LIPs who used advanced pieces of technology prior to the pandemic were able to transition to home working with greater ease than those with more manual processes. This subsequently forced a 'digital uptake' on law firms.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Showing their value*

Despite the difficulties that the profession faced in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, large amounts of the literature advocate that LIPs were able to quickly demonstrate their value to their users and law firm management.

Cross writes about this topic under the sub-heading 'Demonstrating Value'. To summarise, she argues that the pandemic put a 'spotlight' on the legal information profession. Many lawyers were shown the vital role that LIPs play in law firms when they desperately required access to resources that they had never used outside of the office. Although their capacity reduced due to the demand these requests placed on their services, Cross argues that it is evident that LIPs were able to demonstrate their value to their firms.<sup>8</sup>

### Immediate impact on print and online resources

Overwhelmingly, the literature supports the notion that the use of print resources was already declining at the start of the pandemic.<sup>9</sup> Maher vividly describes the impact of COVID-19 as 'fuel to the hurdle of accessing library print material'.<sup>10</sup> Further, Hanny states that the pandemic accelerated this rate of change to 'warp speed'. It is important to note that some LIPs attempted to move resources from print to online formats prior to the pandemic but e-books and online subscriptions were often too expensive.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Lockdown of libraries*

Although many law firm libraries had already closed by 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020, this marked the official start of the lockdown in the UK.<sup>12</sup> An analysis of the literature clearly demonstrates that many LIPs were unable to work with print resources whilst working from home.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Impact on budgets*

Maher provided a detailed description of the impact that the pandemic had on his print and online budgets at the 2021 BIALL conference. He explained how the print budget for his law firm, after declining by approximately 10% year on year, fell 'off the edge of a cliff' and dropped by 30% for the financial year 2020–21.<sup>14</sup>

HBR Consulting, a legal advisory and management firm, conducted a questionnaire with 60 law firms to understand the effect of COVID-19 on their information services. They found that 76% of the firms were considering reducing their spend on print resources.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Role of vendors and publishers*

As the pandemic took hold, the literature demonstrates that publishers were exceptionally flexible in their approach to information provision. Articles overwhelmingly suggest that discounts, free trials, and emergency remote access were offered by key vendors and publishers, and some sent print resources directly to users instead of libraries.<sup>16</sup>

However, Jones states that some items were still not made available online which led LIPs to encourage vendors to further increase their offerings.<sup>17</sup> The literature asserts that this forced LIPs to engage in negotiations with vendors and publishers to expand licensing deals and increase remote access.<sup>18</sup>

## Future of the legal information profession

### Required skills

Bailey believes that the essential skills of LIPs are their ability to quickly find information from a variety of sources, assess, add value, and present their findings on demand.<sup>19</sup>

The literature argues that LIPs need to improve their IT skills to carry out more engaging online training sessions which, during a discussion group at the 2021 BIALL conference, an attendee described as like 'speaking to a wall'. Although Howard also emphasises the importance of IT skills, specifically regarding the use of data, he explains that the development of so-called soft skills and attending emotional intelligence training is vital.<sup>20</sup>

### Impact of reduced print resources

In his speech at the 2021 BIALL conference, Maher explained that his firm were reducing the size of their practice group libraries and incorporating their holdings into the main library's collection, creating a larger centralised library that would hold key titles.<sup>21</sup> CBRE, a commercial property firm, carried out an investigation into the future of law firm workplaces after the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that in some cases, law firm libraries were being drastically reduced in size or repurposed completely. In turn, they found that offsite storage will be used at an increased rate.<sup>22</sup> Although law firms will approach the reduction of print resources in different ways, the literature demonstrates that a decline in physical library spaces is inevitable.

According to Steer, the reduction in print resources will lead to increased communication between LIPs and vendors.<sup>23</sup> Vendors are increasingly offering bundles in which multiple titles are offered to law firms for a fixed price which removes the need for LIPs to engage in collection development.<sup>24</sup>

Conversely, in their talk at the 2021 BIALL conference entitled 'Books vs Online – A Courtroom Drama', Dennis and Rowles made the case for maintaining print collections. They provided evidence in which the use of online legal resources is inappropriate or inaccessible. Their arguments included the fact that courts must receive submitted documents in the format of the hardcopy edition that the text is published in, and that legal databases, such as Westlaw UK and Lexis Library, only hold the most recent edition of a text, so access to previous editions can only be obtained via print.<sup>25</sup>

## FINDINGS

### Immediate impact

Regarding the change to working patterns triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, the questionnaire found that 94% of respondents had to work from home from March 2020. All of the interviewees confirmed that they moved to home working at this time.

The questionnaire also found that none of the respondents worked from home 4 or 5 days per week prior to the pandemic. Only 1% of respondents worked from home 3 days per week, 13% 2 days per week, and 23% 1 day per week. 63% of respondents did not work from home at all.

The questionnaire found that changes triggered by the pandemic made the management of hardcopy resources more difficult, as stated by 91% of respondents. Further, 36% stated that training became harder. The respondents discussed the difficulties that LIPs faced when training online, and these comments ranged from training not being as effective, to difficulties in onboarding new members of staff. 19% found legal research harder, 7% management of online resources, and 6% found nothing harder.

The questionnaire also asked whether anything became easier due to the pandemic. 26% of questionnaire respondents believed that training became easier. A respondent explained that training became 'better in that more staff spread across the UK and overseas offices were able to attend via Zoom', therefore increasing participation. This contrasts with the 36% of respondents who found training more difficult.

The questionnaire also found that 24% of participants found the management of online resources to be easier, 14% found legal research easier to conduct, and only 3% stated that the management of hardcopy resources became easier. Notwithstanding the benefits highlighted, 46% of the respondents stated that no areas of their role became easier due to the pandemic.

### Immediate impact on print and online resources

61% of questionnaire respondents lost access to their print resources due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Of those that lost access, 49% lost access for 1–4 months, 26% for 5–8 months, 16% for over 12 months, and 9% for 9–12 months. 4 out of the 5 interview participants lost access to their print resources as the pandemic began.

84% of questionnaire participants stated that they were asked to trial or procure new subscriptions. Interview participant A onboarded Lexis PSL, a key database that contains a 'wider range of resources available digitally'. Participant D set up trials to ensure as much content as possible was accessible online. They stated 'at the time we didn't know whether COVID was going to be 1 or 2 weeks or a month', and that they had to participate in negotiations to extend trials while negotiating contracts.

The questionnaire found that 77% of participants increased spending on online resources, and 80% stated that hardcopy spending decreased. Conversely, 1% saw a decrease in online spend, and 3% increased their print spend. 17% of respondents experienced no effect on online spending, whereas 4% found no effect on print spending.

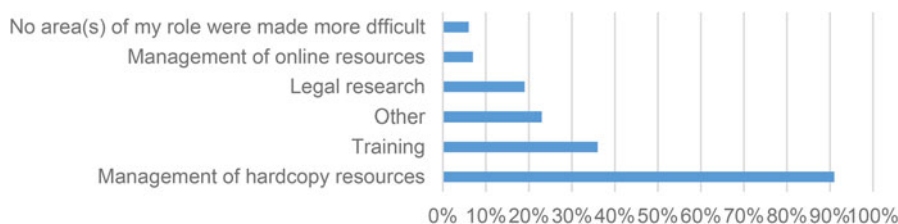


Figure 1: Which area(s) of your role were made more difficult due to changes triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Findings from the interviews demonstrated a range of views regarding the role of vendors and publishers during the COVID-19 pandemic. On one hand, each interviewee touched on the support that they were offered by vendors and publishers, especially at the start of the pandemic. Participant A explained that their firm was able to procure a deal that effectively gave them 2 years free access to a vital legal database. However, the interviews also implied that the price of resources has increased since the pandemic began. Participant B predicted that vendors and publishers will increasingly attempt to push deals with multi-year discounts. Similarly, participant D explained that they had experienced price disagreements and that vendors and publishers may 'take advantage of the situation' by increasing prices.

### Changes to the legal information profession

83% of the questionnaire respondents found that their responsibilities did not change due to the COVID-19 pandemic. When questioned as to whether working virtually impacted the extent to which they could carry out their responsibilities, 47% stated that their work was impacted, whereas 53% did not.

Further, respondents were asked to state which, if any, of their responsibilities had become more important, with 59% stating that virtual training had grown in importance. From this, 29% chose change management, 21% intranet management, 19% budget management, 17% vendor management, and 16% stated that their responsibilities remained the same.

When the interviewees were posed a similar question, wellbeing appeared to be a responsibility that had grown in importance. Participant B explained they had to give 'more pastoral care'. Similarly, participant D affirmed that they 'became more of a leader, rather than a manager during COVID'.

### Future of the legal information profession

When asked which skills would become more important to the legal information profession post-COVID-19, all the interviewees mentioned IT. Participant E touched on the range of IT skills that they look for in their team, including experience using the Microsoft Office suite and the ability to create spreadsheets and use pivot tables. Participant D discussed their interest in implementing AI resources such as chatbots and request management systems, which would require technologically competent LIPs.

Furthermore, communication and soft skills are of increasing importance. Participant B explained that to continue to demonstrate their value, it is important that LIPs 'are going to meetings with the PSL's and the practice groups... showing people within their meetings about what we can do'. Additionally, participant D argued that due to remote working, people management and leadership skills have become more important.

90% of the questionnaire respondents believed that print resources will continue to decline. However, 66% of respondents do not think that future library budgets will be reduced due to the financial impact of the pandemic.

99% of the questionnaire respondents stated that agile working will become more common post-pandemic.

The external image of LIPs and the challenge this poses was flagged a number of times in the interviews. Participant A stated that 'it's something that the profession has faced all of the time, we are regarded as librarians, librarians are custodians of books'. They also explained that senior management within law firms often do not realise 'the additional values and skills' such as 'procurement, training, SharePoint administration' that LIPs bring to their firms. Participant A went on to state that the pandemic has provided an opportunity for the profession to demonstrate value and skills other than



Figure 2: Which area(s) of your role were made easier due to changes triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic?

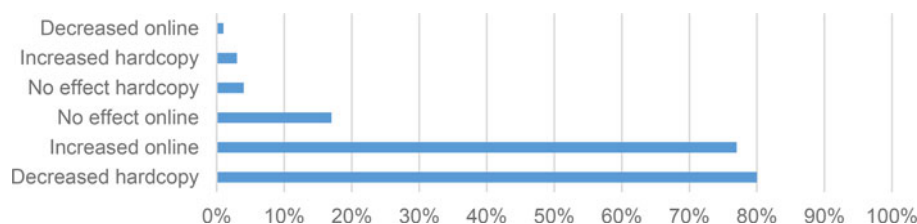


Figure 3: How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect spending on print and online resources?

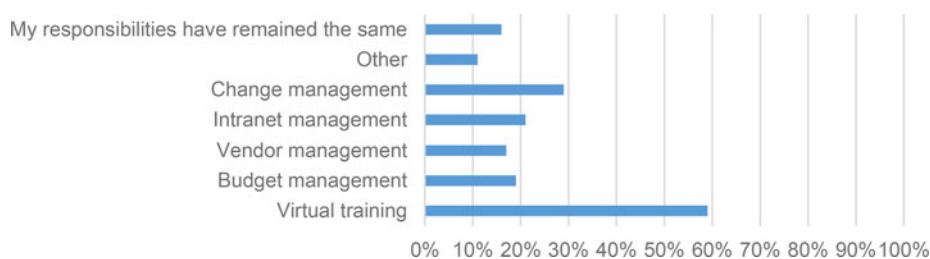


Figure 4: Have any of these responsibilities become more important to your role?

print resource management. Similarly, participant C stated that LIPs can be considered ‘an overhead’ and they therefore need to ‘educate people and get your name out there and advertise’, which would help bring the value of LIPs to the attention of library users.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

In regards to the immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, each of the points outlined in the literature review and findings are connected to the sudden move to home working. Working from home can therefore be identified as having the biggest impact on the legal information profession within law firms in the spring of 2020 due to the pandemic.

It is also clear that the pandemic reduced the use of, and spend on, print resources, which subsequently impacted budgets and the actions of vendors and publishers during the crisis.

Further, despite the huge number of changes that LIPs had to deal with at the start of the pandemic, it can be

determined that LIPs continued working to provide information services to their users as they did prior to the pandemic, and that their role did not change.

Evidently, COVID-19 has triggered many changes and points for LIPs to consider when the pandemic comes to an end. LIPs will need to focus on their IT skills to stay up to date with the ever-increasing number of technological changes. Furthermore, focussing on promoting their services and having a positive impact on their respective firms will help LIPs to improve the somewhat antiquated image that external parties appear to have of the profession.

Overall, this research has demonstrated the impact of COVID-19 on the legal information profession within law firms in Britain and Ireland, however it would be interesting to conduct a comparative study that focuses on other jurisdictions. Similarly, an investigation into the impact of COVID-19 on LIPs within institutions other than law firms would be a fascinating comparison. It will be extremely interesting to compare the findings regarding the future of the legal information profession to the changes that unfold over the coming years.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organisation, ‘Listings of WHO’s Response to COVID-19’ (WHO, 29 June 2020) <<https://www.who.int/news/item/29-06-2020-covidtimeline>> accessed 5 September 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Felicity Cross, ‘COVID-19 and a Change in the Legal Information Landscape’ (2020) 20(3) *LIM* 137.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Maher, ‘COVID-19: and the Impact on Print’ (2020) 20(4) *LIM* 209.

<sup>4</sup> Shira Megerman and Marcelo Rodriguez, ‘COVID-19: How Did Your Staff Respond to the Pandemic?’ (2020) 25(4) *AALL* 37; Shira Megerman and Marcelo Rodriguez, ‘COVID-19: How Law Libraries Succeeded by Going Virtual During the Pandemic’ (2021) 25(3) *AALL* 31.

<sup>5</sup> British & Irish Association of Law Librarians, ‘COVID-19 Industry Survey June 2020’ (2021) 21(1) *LIM* 4.

<sup>6</sup> Samantha Steer, ‘The Law Librarian of the Future’ (BIALL Conference, June 2021).



<sup>7</sup> Penny Bailey, 'Bailey Solutions. Responding to Change: Surviving the Financial Crisis, the Pandemic and Everything Else!' (2020) 20(2) *LIM* 85.

<sup>8</sup> Cross (n 2).

<sup>9</sup> Jas Breslin, 'Shelved Forever? How the Pandemic has Helped Flick the Digital Switch' (2020) 20(3) *LIM* 133; Clare Brown, 'Law Libraries and Technology: "The Times They Are A-Changin"' (Vable, 19 June 2020) <<https://www.vable.com/blog/law-libraries-and-technology-the-times-they-are-a-changin>> accessed 6 September 2022; LAC Group 'Another Coronavirus Tipping Point: Digital Libraries' (LAC Group, 20 May 2020) <<https://lac-group.com/blog/another-coronavirus-tipping-point-digital-libraries>> accessed 6 September 2022; Maher (n 3).

<sup>10</sup> Maher (n 3).

<sup>11</sup> Bill Hannay, 'Speakers Discuss COVID-19 Issues for Law Libraries' (Charleston Hub, 12 June 2020) <<https://www.charleston-hub.com/2020/06/speakers-discuss-covid-19-issues-for-law-libraries-guest-post-the-rumors-blog/>> accessed 6 September 2022

<sup>12</sup> Cross (n 2).

<sup>13</sup> Breslin (n 9); Maher (n 3); Steer (n 6).

<sup>14</sup> Michael Maher, 'The Future of Print Collections in Light of COVID-19' (BIALL Conference, June 2021).

<sup>15</sup> HBR Consulting, 'Law Firm Research and Information Services' Response to the Pandemic' (HBR Consulting, 2020) <<https://info.hbrconsulting.com/benchmarking-legal-information-services-survey-highlights-2020>> accessed 6 September 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Hobson, 'The Future of Print Collections in Light of COVID-19' (BIALL Conference, June 2021); Ian Hunter, 'Managing a Law Firm Research Service From Home: From "What's Zoom?" to Trainee Induction Week From a Bedroom' (2020) 20(3) *LIM* 140; Maher (n 14); Megerman and Rodriguez (2021) (n 4); Thomas Sneed, 'The Effect of COVID-19 on Law Libraries: Are These Changes Temporary or a Sign of the Future?' (2020) 60(1) *Washburn Law Journal* 107.

<sup>17</sup> Faye Jones, 'Talking Tech: Disaster Planning and The Virtual Law Library' (2020) 25(1) *AALL* 39.

<sup>18</sup> Brown (n 9); Hannay (n 11); Megerman and Rodriguez (2020) (n 4); Sneed (n 16).

<sup>19</sup> Bailey (n 7).

<sup>20</sup> Stephanie Godley, 'Tech-Savvy Law Librarians for the New Era' (Slaw, 26 April 2021) <<https://www.slaw.ca/2021/04/26/tech-savvy-law-librarians-for-the-new-era/>> access 6 September 2022; David Percik, 'Careering into the Future' (BIALL Conference, June 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Maher (n 14).

<sup>22</sup> CBRE, 'The Law Firm Workplace of the Future' (CBRE, 2020) <<https://www.cbre.co.uk/insights/articles/the-law-firm-workplace-of-the-future>> accessed 6 September 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Steer (n 6).

<sup>24</sup> Percik (n 20).

<sup>25</sup> Tracey Dennis and James Rowles, 'Books vs Online – a Courtroom Drama' (BIALL Conference, June 2021).

## Biography

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