

**A COMPARISON OF THE ROLE OF THE INFORMATION PROFESSIONAL  
IN THE LEGAL ENVIRONMENT  
IN THE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SECTORS**

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## Summary

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This dissertation presents a small-scale, illustrative, qualitative study of the landscape for, and roles available to information professionals within the private and public sectors, focusing specifically on organisations that provide a legal service.

Seven information professionals were interviewed, from a commercial law firm and a central government department, with questions aimed at obtaining information about their roles, the skills required for their roles, and perceptions of the information profession from both within and outside the profession.

Research findings are based on an analysis of the interview data using qualitative techniques and supporting literature. The literature review includes a discussion of the definitions of the "information professional", some of the most frequently identified challenges for the information professional and then moves on to consider those issues within the specific context of the commercial law firm and the government department, focusing in particular on the implications of the organisational environment on the role of the information professional.

The study finds that information professionals in both the private and public sector are - at the most basic level - driven to provide a service to their organisation - both lawyers and more widely - that matches the business need, that enables the organisation to fulfil its statutory obligations (where applicable) and provide an effective and efficient service with ever-decreasing resources. The study finds further that the drivers and skills needed are - broadly - common to information professionals in both the public and private sectors. The growth of the electronic information landscape in particular requires information professionals to broaden their skillsets to include information technology and project management skills and engage with all areas of the business.

Further research is recommended into the definition and relevance for an organisation - private or public sector - of the "information profession", particularly with respect to the acknowledged lack of recognition for information professionals.

## **Declaration**

This work has not previously been accepted for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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## Abbreviations

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DIS	Department of Information Studies
EDRM	Electronic Document and Records Management
FOI	Freedom of Information
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IM	Information Management
IT	Information Technology
KM	Knowledge Management
LIS	Library and Information Service
PSL	Professional Support Lawyer

## 1. Introduction

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This chapter introduces the study's rationale, aims and objectives. The structure of the study is also outlined.

### 1.1 Background to study and rationale for research

The Library Commission's report, *Cross-sectoral Mobility in the LIS Profession* (Dalton *et al.*, 1999), a comprehensive review of cross-sectoral mobility within the profession, considers the evidence behind a perceived difference between the skills requirements and staff development of LIS workers in different sectors of the LIS profession. The report found a number of institutional and individual barriers to moving sectors.

A report from consultancy Capgemini, *The Information Opportunity Report* (March 2008), put the financial cost of mismanaging public sector information at £21bn. In addition, losses of personal data have blighted both the public and private sectors in recent years, all of which have served to bring the issues of secure sharing, re-use and exploitation of knowledge and information into the foreground and forced both sectors to take a more structured approach to knowledge and information management. In the public sector this is evidenced by the *Report on Data Handling Procedures in Government* (the Hannigan Review), the review undertaken by Thomas and Walport on data sharing and the government strategy for managing knowledge and information, led by the Knowledge Council and published in November 2008.

Similarly, in the private sector the Financial Services Authority and the Information Commissioner both now have stronger powers to investigate and to take punitive measures against organisations who mishandle personal data (Pounder 2007 and OutLaw 2009).



At the same time, the financial climate has heightened the need for the provision of more effective and efficient support services, as highlighted by the adviser to the government's Operational Efficiency Programme:

"Senior civil servants will have to show more leadership on back office and IT efficiency if the government is to realise planned big savings." (Civil Service Network, 4 December 2009)

In the professional services sector, and specifically the legal sector, *The Lawyer* online (4 January 2010) reports increasing pressure on firms to seek efficiencies within their firms in order to maintain competitive fee rates while providing an ever more scrutinised quality of service in the current global economy. It quotes general counsel from one of the "magic circle" firms "We'll go on seeing firms moving their back-office staff to cheaper environments offshore." (Hollander 2010)

This would appear to be a timely (but potentially sensitive) opportunity to consider how information professionals in both sectors are responding to the heightened focus on their areas of expertise in a climate demanding greater efficiency.

The Library Commission's report points to the commonly held perception that it is difficult to transfer careers between the public and private sectors. This study aims to compare the landscape for information professionals in the current climate, and the roles available to information professionals within a professional services firm, and a central government department, focusing specifically on organisations that provide a legal service.

The report notes further that employers stand to benefit from the introduction of new ideas and best practice from other sectors, a wider pool of skills from throughout the profession and the creation of valuable links between sectors. (p.66) It considers one of the areas in which further

research could be conducted to be methods of investigating factors relating to the employment of LIS staff and cross-sectoral movement / barriers. (p.69)

This small-scale study aims to contribute to that area.

## **1.2 Aims and objectives**

### **1.2.1 Aim**

To provide an illustrative and indicative, small-scale comparison of the role of the information professional within the public and private sectors, focusing specifically on information professionals who provide a service within a legal environment.

### **1.2.2 Objectives**

- (i) Identify how the organisational drivers in both sectors impact on the service that information professionals provide.
- (ii) Explore the key skills required of information professionals in both sectors and the key differences (if any).
- (iii) Make recommendations for any transferable learnings that can be applied within both sectors.

## **1.3 Structure of the dissertation**

### **1.3.1 The literature review**

The study begins with a review of the literature to compare the landscape for information professionals within the commercial professional services arena and the public sector, focusing specifically on organisations that provide a legal service.

The review will consider some of the key organisational and environmental drivers and their implications for the skills required of information professionals within both sectors.

The literature review underpins this study, informing the structure and content of the methodology and interviews. The literature review also informs the discussion and conclusion.

### **1.3.2 Data collection**

This study uses a qualitative methodology to explore how organisational context affects the role of the information professional in both sectors. The main limitation was the small sample size, which means that the primary data on its own cannot be generalised to the information profession as a whole, although the results are considered to be nevertheless interesting, and in line with the literature review.

### **1.3.3 Research outcomes**

The findings of the interviews, together with further detail on the methodology used, are set out in Chapter 3 and discussed in Chapter 4, together with recommendations for further study.

## **2. Literature review**

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### **2.1 Introduction**

The following review of literature aims to compare the landscape for information professionals, and the roles available to information professionals within the commercial professional services arena and the public sector, focusing specifically on organisations that provide a legal service.

The review will consider some of the key organisational and environmental drivers and their implications for the skills required of information professionals within both sectors.

Given the relatively few numbers of government departments providing an exclusively legal service, very little literature was found relating specifically to the legal information professional in the public sector, so the scope for the public sector literature review encompasses discussion relating to the information professional within government as a whole.

In the first part of this study, definitions of the ‘information professional’ are considered, and some of the most frequently identified challenges for the information professional are highlighted. The review then moves on to consider those issues within the specific context of the commercial law firm, and the government department, focusing in particular on the implications of the organisational environment on the role of the information professional.

### **2.2 What is an ‘information professional’?**

“At the core of the concept of the ‘information professional’ are those people who manage the conveyance, organisation and dissemination

of information to an identifiable group of users in a professional capacity. The operation of these skills is undertaken in a diverse number of work situations.” (Biddiscombe 2001:57)

A review of the literature on the definition of an ‘information professional’ reveals a number of schools of thought. Gibson (2001), for example, uses the term to include “anyone who deals in information and who may have come to it circuitously – ie not through library school”, as well as “librarians who choose to ally themselves with those people”, while ‘librarians’ is used to describe “those who have library qualifications and describe themselves as librarians” (p. 29). O’Brien (2007) uses the terms ‘law librarian’ and ‘legal information professional’ interchangeably to mean “any persons whose primary function is to serve as a librarian or information professional for a law firm, or library specialising in law and whose role may include work related to knowledge management or know-how” (p.8). Gibson (2001) notes that “people generally do describe themselves as one or the other” but is aware that there is also a third group, those who “came to the profession through the acquisition of an information science degree”, for whom the above groupings may be too simplistic (p. 29). Mason (1990) considers information professionals to be “mediators” with one purpose in mind; “to get the right information from the right source to the right client at the right time in the form most suitable for the use to which it is to be put and at a cost that is justified by its use” (p. 122).

Many authors note a change in the role of the information professional in recent years. Gibson (2001), for example, states the “information professionals five years ago were largely involved with reactive information dissemination, but now they are gradually becoming more involved with the capture of knowledge” but considers librarians to be “wonderful at getting information in and extremely poor at pushing it out again”, resulting in having “a body of people who have not met their user group(s) unless they sit on the enquiry desk” and resultant “reactivity rather than proactivity” (p. 31). This is echoed by McKenzie (2004) who argues that in addition to our need to provide “timely, relevant and reliable information [...] in an accessible

form”, information professionals should not simply operate as a “gateway to information, but have skills in information organisation and retrieval” (p. 252).

This is one of the key issues behind what many authors perceive to be a lack of visibility within organisations. Owen (2002) notes the need for information professionals to work with other core operations, such as IT, while developing their own competence in ICT and core business processes to become more outward looking, proactive and able to identify the needs of the organisation (p. 5). Reid *et al* (1998) note that to be effective “an information specialist in a company must be as familiar with the business the company is in as they are with retrieving information.” (p. 88) while Abell and Wingar (2005) argue that this lack of engagement can be seen most clearly in the example of knowledge management (KM), noting that “it has taken some time for some organisations and information professionals to make the link” (p. 176). Abell and Oxbrow (1999) argue that the “new KM environment” sought out a breed of ‘can do’ people, “who relate more to opportunities than functions” and so while many of the traditional library and information services skills were invaluable the need for them “to be applied in a new context and linked to business processes and core operations” meant that the natural association between knowledge management and information professionals was not made within organisations “because of their perception of a profession that seldom engages with ‘the business’” (p.188). McFetridge (2004, p. 21) agrees that information professionals lack any ‘real status’ outside of their own profession. While Abell’s study took place in 1999, the result of McFetridge’s small-scale study in 2004 of legal information professionals seemed to support this, with only 11.4% listing knowledge management as part of their role, in organisations where either a knowledge management system or strategy was in place. (p. 56) Owen (2002) suggests the reason for this is a lack of understanding of the business they work in and a perception of information professionals as “a support function, not as project partners” who “failed to translate their theory into practice” (p. 5). Owen notes that information professionals are often not seen as “ambitious” or “risk takers”, something which is supported by TFPL’s study, which notes

that the “concept of equal partnership in working towards organisational roles needs to be reinforced” (p. 85). Abell and Wingar (2005) refer to the range of roles within the information profession – “information management, including library and information services, records management and document management” as being perceived to be “Cinderella services” within organisations, rather than “a critical part of organisational capability” and note that the principles of knowledge management “the learning organisation” call for multi-functional collaboration.

The need for multi-functional collaboration to support organisations is supported by Haynes (2002) “the LIS profession needs to build up alliances with professionals with complementary skills in order to benefit the organisations we work for” (p. 43) and is taken further by Abell and Wingar (2005, p.172), who argues that effective teams of information workers require a mix of specialist information and technology skills and TFPL, a consultancy in the field of knowledge and information management, notes “we are witnessing a merging of IM [information management] disciplines (library and information services, knowledge management, information management, records management, Web and IT) and the integration of new disciplines into the IM arena” (2006, p. 4). Cumming (2005) refers to an “emerging profession” within the public sector – a “hybrid” formed of “part librarian, part IT expert, part records manager, part knowledge manager” (p. 11). Broady-Preston refers to the widespread evidence of technological developments, such as social networking tools, driving not only the acquisition of differing skills within the information profession, but also causing professional boundaries to become blurred or more diffuse (2009, p.270) and further argues that the qualification, education and training infrastructure available to information professionals requires significant review to remain current and relevant in today's business environment.

Feather (2009) questions whether the information society needs the “information **profession**” and suggests that there might be benefit in

focusing "more on the application of our professed knowledge and rather less on the formal qualification." (p. 9)

The remainder of this paper will explore these issues further with reference to the private – and specifically the legal – sector and the public sector.

### **2.3 The role of the information professional in the public sector**

Various drivers are noted within the public sector, many of which have significant implications for the role of the information professional. Bailey (2007) notes the need for departments to comply with a range of information legislation, including the Freedom of Information Act 2004, the Data Protection Act 1998, which require sound information and records management practice within government departments.

Allardice and Smith (2007), however note the pressures on government libraries as a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review of 2007, as a result of which departments will be required to effect five per cent reductions in budgets, year-on-year, for three successive years and predicts a greater need for information professionals to justify their position "simply saying that we have to follow some legislation is not enough" (p. 43). Taylor and Corral (2006) citing O'Connor (2006), support this view, noting "mounting pressure on librarians to demonstrate the value of their professional skills and prove to top management that the information services they provide are a vital resource in improving organisational efficiency and effectiveness, not a luxury commodity" (p. 2). In addition, Smith (2007) notes that the Gershon Efficiency Review saw a "move away from the previously 'traditional' models of LIS provision in government departments" (p. 9). Westcott (2008, p. 21) supports this assessment, noting that a result of this and the Lyons Review, under which civil service posts were moved out of London and the South East to assist job creation elsewhere in the UK, has been a decline in physical collections within the library. Smith (2007), however also notes that while the profession faces greater challenges in this



area, there are also a “widening range of posts in the overall knowledge and information management field, areas like records management, EDRM and FOI.” (p. 12)

Information professionals have an important role to play in the development of government policy. Clark (2007, p. 29) notes that “advisors and policy people suffer from information overload” and notes that librarians have a key role to play in ensuring advisors and policy makers receive information that is tailored to their work, while knowledge managers and information architects are needed to ensure that there is “emphasis on building and expanding networks of contacts” and providing the systems and services to support that.

Ceeney, interviewed by Hyams (2008, p.18), notes that one of the key challenges facing information professionals in these times is the onset of the digital era. Ceeney argues that reviews such as *The Power of Information* and *Transformational Government*, which set out new ways for government to interact with technology and engage with citizens via interactive and collaborative platforms, have raised the profile of information management, while the highly publicized data losses in both the public and private sectors have propelled information risk management to the top of the organisational agenda. Ceeney argues that information professionals must take these opportunities to “talk the language of the business” and convince “the board and senior policy people” that it is important “to keep records for accountability, for risk and data purposes”. Ceeney notes that this ability to communicate “effectively and persuasively has not been part of the traditional information manager’s required skillset.” (Hyams, 2008, p.19)

Ceeney (2008) further argues that the information profession is made up of “silo” disciplines and professions, which are unhelpful to the organisation and restrict the ability of an individual within them to progress their careers to senior management (Hyams, 2008, p. 20). Smith (2006, p. 23) supports this view, noting the need for more librarians to work in information-related policy areas, such as Freedom of Information – to enable them to acquire the

skillset to clarify complex issues around public sector information copyright and publication schemes. Westcott (2008) agrees that removing the boundaries between the disciplines would “give us a critical mass and a much more cohesive professional voice, if we can make this work collectively.” (p. 21)

#### **2.4 The role of the information professional in the private sector: the commercial law firm**

“What has sustained the recruitment of information professionals into law firms is the sheer quantity of information to be handled from all sorts of sources, in particular electronic information. Even before the advent of email and the web, lawyers were suffering from information overload. Coupled with increasingly demanding clients, lawyers needed help with all aspects of external information processing. Added to this was the realisation that the knowledge in lawyer’s heads also needed capturing. Know how systems and databases had arrived and the need for more information specialists increased accordingly. Libraries were transformed into information units.” (Stanley and Eisenschitz, 2008, p. 2)

Bouthillier (2002) notes that “in the high-tech sector, as well as consulting firms, the stakes are particularly high because knowledge is considered as ‘the only meaningful resource’” (p. 3). Abell and Wingar (2005) support this view, stating that “commercial organisations trade on knowledge and grow through its application” (p. 173). Williams (2002) argues that knowledge found to be valuable could be used to differentiate one firm from another by exploiting their uniqueness (p. 47). While the definitions of information and knowledge will not be explored within this paper, clearly both are of significant importance to the legal sector, to remain competitive. Hill (1999), cited by Williams (2002), further notes that while “all enterprises use information ‘intensively’” some use it “by giving it added value by ‘proffering opinion and advice based on it’” (p.217). Williams (2002) argues that a law

firm is an example of this type of organisation (p.24). McKenzie (2004) notes that information professionals must know their practice, and specifically “What is the practice base? What sectors are being targeted, who are the clients, who are the lawyers?”. McKenzie notes further that such knowledge of how the firm is developing ensure that information professionals can communicate effectively with their users and “be one step ahead when considering material to be purchased or current awareness services to be developed.” (p. 251)

Wade (2004) notes a change of status for information professionals within the private legal sector, with over 20 per cent of senior legal librarians now either reporting directly to the managing partner or sitting on the most senior management board of their firms. Wade notes a corresponding change in titles, stating that over the past five years “55 per cent of legal librarians saw their job titles change [...] with many no longer having the words ‘library’ or ‘librarian’ appended at all.” Instead their elevated status is reflected in descriptions such as ‘head of knowledge management’ and ‘head of information services.’” An interview with a legal librarian reveals a prediction of increased investment in the future “as legal librarians use their research capabilities to assist marketing and management decision-making.”

Management of information risk is also high on the agenda within the commercial sector. Bailey notes that while transparency through the Freedom of Information Act does not apply, the Data Protection Act does affect the private sector, and those sections of the sector with operations covered by the US jurisdiction must also get to grips with the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, designed to improve standards of corporate accounting and governance in the wake of a series of high-profile corporate scandals. In addition, the Law Society issued guidance in 2007 on best practice in records management, - where certain legal documents (e.g. wills) are considered to be “assets entrusted to the firm” – to support law firms’ ability to respond to any legal challenges to their practice.

Gibson notes that lawyers generally consider formal information qualifications to be unnecessary, which has meant that “bright people who used to train to become librarians now pick up content first and then, if they are so minded, turn their attention to picking up what skills they need to carry out the information job they have been given.” Gibson (2001, p.30) notes that this type of information professional will never regard themselves as a ‘librarian’. Wood and Hill (2005) note, albeit of an accountancy firm, that “qualifications were unimportant”, the focus being on “personal accountability” and the need to “learn and use the language of accountancy, and participate in the work of the firm.” (p. 44)

Gibson (2001, p. 32) highlights the need for information professionals to work closely with technology team within the firm, in particular because the information professional is in “an excellent position to act as an intermediary between the end-users and the techies” but notes “frequent apathy” in this area. The need for information professionals to understand the business needs of the firm and of specific groups within the firm, is highlighted within the context of the role of the professional support lawyer (PSL).

Worley (2002) defines PSLs as qualified lawyers who support fee-earners with tasks that can include “training, developing precedents, creating know how, marketing and supplying the targeted information that lawyers need” (p. 23). Humphries and Carter (2006) note that the role has “developed in tandem with the growth of law firm knowledge management” while Booth (2001) summarises the role as “turning knowledge into value” (p. 4). Gibson (2001), however argues that PSLs do not generally see themselves as knowledge managers, but “as practising lawyers whose clients happen to be other lawyers rather than external.” (p. 29). O’Brien (2007) refers to a perceived threat from PSLs, whose work “in many areas is closely related to the work of the commercial legal information professional” (p. 7). Gibson (2001) notes that there is much scope for tension, where support lawyers can be involved in the provision of services and projects “which information professionals may regard as being their own terrain” (p. 29). McKenzie (2004, p. 251) states the importance of clearly making the distinction

between the role of the information team and the PSL to reduce duplication and support a more efficient system of delivering information, capturing and retaining knowledge but is more positive about the ability of both disciplines to work closely together to add value. Booth (2001, p. 7) observes that the PSLs are often embedded within teams and, together with their transactional experience, can bring an understanding of the commercial needs of the fee-earners, which, when combined with the information retrieval skills of the information profession ensures that knowhow and research functions are carried out efficiently and effectively. Stanley and Eisenschitz (2008, p. 134) found that tensions between PSLs and information professionals only arose where information professionals were hived off from the centralised information unit, or when PSLs were absent but noted a trend towards information professionals sitting within specific practices.

## **2.5 The public – private sector difference**

Wood and Hill note that, with some exceptions, it is rare for someone with a public sector background to make a successful transfer into the business environment, since employers in the corporate/commercial sector are looking for someone who has an understanding of the business needs and priorities (2005, p. 46) while Gibson (2001) notes that “persons in the private or business sector increasingly prefer to be referred to as information professionals whereas those in the public sector are more often described as librarians.” (p. 30)

Abell and Wingar (2005, p. 178) note that across both sectors “the role descriptions for information –related roles are not clear cut” and that there is not one profession or discipline that can take on the roles without some further development of their skill base. They note that certainly within the private sector, adaptable, “can do” confident individuals from many disciplines are willing to take on information-related disciplines with as valid a background and experience as that of an information professional. Ceeney, interviewed in Hyams (2008) echoes this for the public sector, noting that

confidence about people moving between information disciplines ensures that they bring “a whole skill-set to any senior management role” (p. 20).

On the advance of one sector over another, Burnes (2003) observes that “just because the public sector is not driven by profit motive does not mean it may not have something to teach the private sector” (p. 358). An interviewee in Wood and Hill’s study notes:

“In the public sector, we are often told that we need to learn from the private sector, and I did encounter some very good management, but I also encountered some that was excruciating. [...] The learning should be two-way.” (p. 44)

## **2.6 Summary of literature review**

The literature across both sectors points to the need for information professionals to adopt a business-focused approach to the provision of their services. The commercial legal sector has addressed this need through the use of non fee-earning lawyers, who, as subject experts, work to join-up the business need of the lawyer with the services of the information professional, although there is some debate as to how well this arrangement works for individual firms. The literature review does not show whether a similar mechanism is in use between policy makers and advisors and government information professionals.

The literature shows that information professionals must be able to adapt quickly in response to the changing information needs of their organisations and the new opportunities for the use of information, such as the growth of digital information, advances in technology and its implications for the way we work (e.g. collaborative working platforms) or the need for organisations to capture and re-use knowledge. Partnership working with other core functions, such as IT professionals, would also support a more joined-up approach to the design and maintenance of the information infrastructure for organisations in both sectors. The literature shows, however, that both

private and public sector information professionals suffer from a lack of visibility and must focus less on upholding rigid disciplines within their profession, and more with engaging with senior management on a strategic level – whether that is with respect to a law firm’s corporate strategy, or a government department’s policy agenda, to demonstrate their value, as those who come to the information profession from elsewhere in the business have already been shown to do. Perhaps partly in response to this, private sector information professionals are moving away from job titles such as “librarians” towards titles which more closely reflect the corporate or strategic nature of their work.

The literature shows that the law firm is driven by profit and the provision of competitive services, but the public sector organisation must also ensure efficiency in its operations, and both sectors are required to demonstrate legislative compliance and risk assurance with respect to the management of their information.

## **3. Research methodology**

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### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter outlines the methods and design employed in developing the research to underpin this paper, beginning with the literature review and moving onto the interviews. The methods of data collection and analysis are also outlined. Finally, the limitations to the study are discussed.

The key aim of this research was to compare the role of the information professional within the public and private sectors, focusing specifically on information professionals who provide a service within a legal environment.

### **3.2 Literature review**

The research in this study is based on qualitative methodology. This methodology was selected as it supports small-scale, in-depth focus, allows the study of “selected issues in depth and detail”, supporting an initial broad and open-ended approach and is “sufficiently flexible to allow issues and questions to be investigated as they emerge” (Patton 1990, p.13).

This dissertation began with a systematic review of the literature. This enabled the author to get an overview of the associated themes and to become familiar with the topic.

Flick (2006, p.62) highlights the importance of the relevance of existing literature for “grounding your argumentation, for showing that your findings are in concordance with the existing research, that your findings go beyond or contradict existing research.”



Similarly, Creswell (2003, p.46) notes that “researchers use the scholarly literature in a study to present results of similar studies, to relate the present study to the ongoing dialogue in the literature, and to provide a framework for comparing results of a study with other studies.”

Creswell states further (2003, p.46) that “in qualitative research, the literature helps substantiate the research problem, but it does not constrain the views of participants.”

Databases such as Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA), Online Computer Library Centre (OCLC), Google Web (including Google Scholar) search engine, internet search engines for specific legal journals, the Theses list supplied by the Thomas Parry library and the online searchable database of dissertations from the University of Sheffield were used to locate material. A variety of search terms were employed, often combined, including “information profession”, “information management”, “legal information”, “librarians”, “law firms”, “legal services”, “private sector”, “public sector”. In addition to these sources, the snowballing technique was used, taking works and papers cited in retrieved articles and further investigating them.

The search did not focus solely on scholarly works but sought to include also newspaper articles and interviews. One or two prolific writers in the area were investigated further and where they belonged to an organisation, their website was explored for further research or commentary – Angela Abell at TFPL being an example of this.

Preference was given to articles written within the most recent five years, although older discussions of issues that remain current today have also been cited.

### **3.3 Interviews**

Denscombe (2003) notes particular advantages of the interview method for its flexibility, validity, high response rate and therapeutic experience in allowing participants to use their own words and develop their own thoughts on the relevant issue. Gorman and Clayton (2005) also highlight the ability of the interview to support an immediate response to a question, and for both parties to explore any areas of ambiguity, supporting the collection of a large amount of rich data.

Interviews enable the researcher to explore an idea in a way that questionnaires are often unable to do. Using a qualitative approach implies the use of a semi- or unstructured interview schedule, as opposed to a structured interview schedule which can often just resemble a questionnaire. Semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to explore issues as they arise within a framework for areas for discussion. They also allow both parties to explore the meaning of the questions and answers and resolve any ambiguities and can provide a friendly emphasis to data collection (Gorman and Clayton, 1997, p. 124). Further, they encourage the participant to "tell the story" in their own words.

However, interviews (and particularly semi-structured ones) can also be time consuming, costly, overly personal and open to bias (Gorman and Clayton, 1997, p. 125). It can also be difficult to sift the useful information from the whole (possibly lengthy) interview. Interviews, even if completely unstructured, are not natural settings, and if the participant is reserved, unforthcoming or reticent, the "flow" of the interview may be less like a conversation than a question and answer session. Conversely, the opposite can also happen with a very talkative participant, for example, with the potential danger of a 'life-history' or narrative account being given, unless the interviewer is able to direct the focus of the interview.

It was felt that the interview would be the best method to explore the perceptions of information professionals within both sectors - by others and of themselves, and further, whether those perceptions, the roles available and the skills required were affected in any way by the changing information landscapes within the two sectors.

However, while the semi- or unstructured interview style was considered most desirable, given the time constraints on all participants and the need to provide as accurate an estimate as possible of the (short) time required to participate in the interview, the researcher considered it a more pragmatic compromise to adhere to the script as far as possible, probing only when clarification of a point was required.

### **3.3.1 Sampling method**

Further to a study of the changing role of legal information professionals, McFetridge (2004) notes that a questionnaire was not the most reliable means of collecting data. McFetridge states that were the study to be carried out again, a small representative sample would have been preferred.

Ritchie and Lewis (2003, p.79) note the two principal aims of purposive sampling – choosing members of a sample with a ‘purpose’ to represent a type in relation to a key criterion – as to ensure that:

- all the key constituencies of relevance to the subject matter are covered;
- within each of the key criteria, some diversity is included so that the impact of the characteristic concerned can be explored.

Denscombe (2003, p.172) states “People tend to be chosen deliberately because they have some special contribution to make, because they have some unique insight or because of the position they hold.”

Nonprobability purposive or judgmental sampling was used to ensure that representative information professionals from within each organisation were included.

Ritchie and Lewis (2003, p.107) argue that qualitative research samples are, by their nature, small since “there is a point of diminishing return where increasing the sample size no longer contributes to the evidence”.

The researcher, in seeking to target potential participants, used the following selection criteria:

- For the private sector study, the author selected a medium sized law firm with an established and well-developed information centre throughout the practice areas and a wide range of information professionals.
- For the public sector study the author selected a government department where more than 100 lawyers - or legal advisers - were employed, and again with an established information centre and a range of information professionals.

An element of availability sampling was also employed (Rubin and Babbie 2009, p.146), since the author was approaching people in highly pressurised roles in the current financial climate.

Furthermore the author has selected a sample based partly on her own knowledge of the organisations, having worked in both sectors and having professional contacts in the organisations in question. Rubin and Babbie (2009, p.148) refer to using "knowledge of the community to handpick key people who, in your judgment, best represented the range of those persons who would best know..." the situation under study, and consider this to be common practice in purposive sampling.

### **3.3.2 Design**

The interview was designed with a number of open questions, to allow the participant to elaborate on points of discussion and closed questions, where simple factual answers, or opinions requiring direct comparison were required. Initial questions were aimed at obtaining basic information about the role of the interviewee. The questions following revolved around topics regarding the skills and perceptions of the information profession (a copy of the interview schedule can be found in the Appendices).

Powell and Connaway (2004) argue that while open ended questions permit free responses, and support the exploration of complex issues, they present difficulties in the relative time required to analyse them. Therefore closed questions were also used to limit responses to alternatives, reduce the potential for variation and support comparison on factual information or clear issues.

Creswell (2003, p.188) describes the researcher conducting “face-to-face interviews with participants, interviews participants by telephone, or engages in focus group interviews with six to eight interviewees in each group. These interviews involve unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants.”

### **3.4 Data collection**

The author approached potential participants by email and telephone, explaining the nature of the study and requesting their time for a brief interview. Once participants agreed to take part the author then emailed to them a copy of the information sheet - which provided background to the study - and a consent form (a copy of which can be found in the Appendices). Participants were requested to contact the author with any questions about the study - none were received. Prior to conducting the telephone interview participants were sent a copy of the interview script.

On the matter of note taking, Ellis (1993, p.476) considered that a combination of note-taking and taping of the interview meant that the onus was not on the interviewer to select and filter information during the course of the interview (and therefore risk filtering out information which may later become relevant), while facilitating later coding work, serving as a back-up in the case of tape failure and acting as a preliminary index to the tape itself.

The researcher therefore took notes during the interviews, however it was not possible to record telephone interviews. Instead notes were made and typed up straight after the interview to maintain accuracy.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

The researcher employed qualitative data analysis on the transcribed interviews. Flick regards coding as the core of qualitative research (2006) as it directly influences the interpretation and analysis of the data.

According to Gorman and Clayton (1997) "the coding process is the key to meaningful data analysis" (p.205). Codes are labels used to assign meaning to the data and information collected during research (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Through coding, the researcher is able to extract desired or useful information by systematically identifying specific characteristics or themes of interest and organising the data around them. Using this method, information can be grouped according to chosen categories. This part of the analysis is the first step to differentiate and combine the data and reflect upon it (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The researcher began with a list of *a priori* codes which were then refined upon repeated reviews of the data, each time drawing out a level of themes and associated codes, using the constant comparison technique (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

To ensure confidentiality each interviewee was assigned a code - PU to denote a public sector interviewee, and PR to denote a private sector

interviewee, followed by a digit. A copy of the codified responses can be found in the Appendices.

### **3.6 Ethics**

A full literature review was carried out to ensure originality. Although the interviews were not of a sensitive nature, confidentiality was nevertheless observed to support openness. Explicit consent was gained from all parties (a copy of the consent form can be found in the Appendices) – participants were provided with an information sheet in advance and asked to confirm their agreement to participate.

The planning, progress and conduct of this research adheres to Aberystwyth University policies for Ethical Practice in Research and DIS Ethics Policy, which is based on the code of professional practice set out by the British Sociological Association.

### **3.7 Limitations and lessons learned**

Creswell (2003, p.182) highlights the inherent danger of bias due to the interpretative nature of qualitative research, stating that “one cannot escape the personal interpretation to qualitative data analysis.” Denscombe (2003) agrees, stating that while the researcher must assume an open mind, some subjective and some researcher bias is inevitable.

To limit bias in this area, the interview script was sent to all participants in advance, together with the same information sheet, and the researcher adhered to the questions as far as was possible - the exception being when clarification of a question or a point was required. This allowed all interviewees the same opportunities to interpret and answer the questions as they saw fit.

The interviews were carried out in a structured manner, and resembled on occasion more of a question and answer session than an interactive

discussion, so it is possible that salient points could have been probed in more detail. However it was felt that the priority was to obtain answers to all the questions on the interview schedule while acknowledging and working with the significant demands on the participants' time.

There is a further danger of bias due to the fact that the researcher selected interviewees based on an assumption of the definition of an information professional. However published guidance on the definition of an information professional (used interchangeably with a knowledge and information management practitioner in this case) notes that organisations will vary in how they define the scope of their information function, but that there is a core set of roles that tend to fall within this category irrespective of the organisation. This is referenced against the Government Knowledge and Information Management Professional Skills Framework (2009). To limit bias in this case, therefore, the researcher has used the definitions and guidance provided within the government framework as a guide to the roles which are relevant for the purpose of this study.

Generalisation is the "ability to draw defensible conclusions from the evidence once has obtained" (Gorman and Clayton, 1997, p.83). In this case purposive sampling was used for the reasons outlined above and so the sample could not in any way be said to be a representative sample in statistical terms. While the findings could be used to inform further research in this area, the nature of this study is illustrative rather than representative.

Due to the method of selection, the interviewees who took part in the study were largely at managerial level, or equivalent. No junior members of staff were included. This was not a conscious decision and given the nature of the study it is not considered to invalidate the results, although it is suggested that any future study of this area includes a broader range of roles in terms of seniority.

The researcher regrets that no records management participants were included from the private sector, as this would have been a useful point of



comparison, given the statutory significance of records management in the public sector. None of the private sector records management staff contacted wished to participate in the study.

### **3.8 Methods summary**

The research used an approach based on qualitative elements. Data was collected using telephone interviews. Findings were further enhanced by an extensive literature review.

The data collected was anonymised, coded and analysed using qualitative techniques.

The methodology has acknowledged limitations. The sampling method employed means the findings cannot be generalised to a wider environment. The nature of the sample selection and qualitative research means that the study may have been open to bias, but it is felt that the study nevertheless has value.

## **4. Results**

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### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the results and provides analysis of the primary qualitative data collected in the interviews.

Six telephone interviews were conducted between February and March 2010.

### **4.2 Characteristics**

Interviewees from the private sector were drawn from a large city law firm with over 1,600 lawyers. Interviewees from the public sector were drawn from a government department with over 400 lawyers. One interviewee had, at the time of the interview, left their post to join another organisation and so provided answers from the point of view of their past organisation.

One potential interviewee from another government organisation with a legal department who had agreed to participate was not, in the event, able to take part, but provided a brief summary of their viewpoint by email. This summary is included in the findings below and the participant is referred to as an interviewee, for convenience, but since the interview schedule was not followed, the coding table shows only reference to the interviewee number and omits specific question numbers.

Six of the seven interviewees had either direct line management or supervisory responsibility of between 1 and 70 members of staff. One interviewee had overall responsibility as head of department. Role descriptions included "Knowhow manager", "Departmental Records Officer", "Data Protection Co-ordinator", "Freedom of Information Officer", "Senior Researcher", "Head of Library and Records Management Services", "Library Services Manager" and "Professional Support Lawyer".

Two participants were practising lawyers prior to taking up roles within the information field.

The names of the departments in which the interviewees were situated ranged from "Knowledge and Learning" to "Research and Library" and "Libraries and Records Management Services". All interviewees sat within an overarching corporate services department.

### **4.3 Findings**

The purpose of the interviews was to provide an illustrative and indicative, small-scale comparison of the role of the information professional within the public and private sectors, focusing specifically on information professionals who provide a service within a legal environment.

The objectives to be achieved are to:

- (i) identify how the organisational drivers in both sectors impact on the service that information professionals provide.
- (ii) explore the key skills required of information professionals in both sectors and the key differences (if any).
- (iii) make recommendations for any transferable learnings that can be applied within both sectors.

#### **4.3.1 The impact on information professionals in both sectors of organisational drivers**

"A big part of my role is about reducing risk for the firm." (PR2)

Both private and public sector interviewees felt their role was driven by the need to reduce risk. A private sector respondent commented that the purpose of their role was to ensure that lawyers were not providing advice that was out of date. Two public sector respondents noted their statutory obligations. One public sector respondent noted that information lifecycle management - good records management processes - included the need to make sure that information was also destroyed in an effective and timely fashion, in line with government's statutory obligations. Another felt that their role contributed to the success of the organisation as a whole by ensuring that:

"our information is fit for purpose for the operation of the business and that our records are stored and retrieved according to legal principles..." (PU3(B3))

When asked who they considered their clients to be, five of the interviewees, both private and public sectors, stated that their primary clients were the lawyers in their organisation, but four of the seven interviewees also noted that their work also supported other support or corporate services teams.

"Our clients are internal - lawyers at all levels and professional support lawyers. Sometimes also to a lesser extent Business Development and HR." (PR1)

"The whole business. That includes litigators, legal teams, HR, finance, across the business." (PU1)

"Everyone in the department - solicitors and administrative staff." (PU3)

"Lawyers in the firm. Sometimes key clients can use our research services. We also carry out research work for other support teams, such as business development and compliance, for example on new companies and pitches." (PR2)

Two private sector and two public sector interviewees spoke about the need to match the service and information they provide to the business need.

"I also review new sources as they come onto the market to make sure that our resources match business need." (PR2)

"...looking at lawyers' needs on a transactional level and considering how we could make the process more efficient, and any gaps in knowhow." (PR1)

"Information to lawyers IS business critical. [...] provide what they need, when they need it and whatever form they need it in." (PU2)

"[Key driver] ... the provision of published information for business needs." (PU3)

A private sector and a public sector interviewee both felt that their role required a good understanding of the corporate objectives. The private sector interviewee took this point further:

"Support teams are often better than lawyers at seeing the key values of the firm - you can't do anything without the firm as a whole in mind, whereas lawyers will want what they want." (PR2)

Four of the seven interviewees felt that their roles had been affected by the financial climate, with one private sector interviewee noting that their team structure had changed because of cutbacks (PR1) and the two library-based interviewees - one private sector and one public sector - making similar observations as a result of cuts in resources:

"Cuts in the budget for purchasing and for staffing. We are expected to provide more for less, come up with innovative ways of providing the same service with fewer resources." (PU2)

"...we have been operating with fewer resources (subscriptions and people)" (PR2)

Three of the seven interviewees felt that their roles had broadened in the last five years. One public sector interviewee noted that they were increasingly being brought into contact with senior management in an advisory role (PU1); a private sector interviewee felt that they were increasingly "working with the business on a deeper level - supporting in more detail - rather than just providing the infrastructure and systems." (PR1); a public sector interviewee felt that their role had developed into a more "general administrative role" to include "project work, communications and marketing" (PU3).

#### **4.3.2 Skills and the information professional**

Two interviewees - a private sector and a public sector - noted information management skills as key for their roles.

Almost all interviewees noted people management skills for their roles, with two participants also stating that their roles required financial management skills.

Training skills were listed by two interviewees (PR1, PU2) as were presentation skills (PR1).

Six interviewees noted the need to liaise with and understand the business, with two public sector interviewees stating "Customer Care and Business Partnership" as their required competences (PU2, PU3) and one private sector interviewee highlighting business analysis as a required skill (PR1).

Four interviewees went on to highlight the need for legal knowledge or experience (PR1) in this respect, "so that you can influence decisions based on knowledge rather than guesswork" (PU1) and "so that you can translate what the lawyer is asking for into what information can be found" (PR2),

with the key objective being to "get information, filter out the red herrings, break it down and get it to the right people" (PR3) as well as applying that legal knowledge "in a commercial way" (PR3).

Five interviewees felt that they possessed - and that their roles required - good IT skills and all interviewees had some level of involvement in the organisation's systems, with three interviewees (PR1, PU2, PU3) having full responsibility for at least one of the organisation's systems and the remaining two interviewees having either advisory input into (PU1) or ownership of part of (PR2) the organisation's systems.

On the relationship with ITC teams, one interviewee highlighted a tension in the need for new systems and processes to adhere to good records management principles, where IT will only "see the toy" (PU1).

On the matter of partnership working more broadly, one interviewee highlighted their role as being "the main link between the library and the rest of the business" (PU2), with five interviewees stating that they worked with other support departments as well as lawyers.

#### **4.3.3 Perception and the information professional**

"We're seen as dusty, dull and not an efficient use of money." (PR3)

Common to both private and public sectors, interviewees identified a lack of recognition as one of the key issues for information professionals, and lack of visibility when all was well:

"The perception is that we don't provide as much value as we should, but then they don't really appreciate what value we could provide."  
(PR1)

"We suffer from a lack of recognition. People aren't interested until something goes wrong." (PU1)

"Overall I would say there is a good level of respect for what we do but a lack of awareness of the nitty gritty of what we do." (PU2)

"Many know that we provide a useful service but to many we are also invisible." (PU3)

The partnership working, referred to above, was noted to have contributed in part to some of the less favourable perceptions of the information professionals.

"Some of the older generation of partners did their training at a time when there weren't so many resources available and so although they would use us indirectly (through the Business Development team for example), they would have much less of an idea of what we do." (PR2)

This difference in perception between direct users and non-users was also mentioned by a public sector interviewee:

"Our colleagues in corporate services think we have nothing to do with them as our service is mainly focused on the lawyers, but they don't realise that the books they have on their shelves are supplied and paid for by our department." (PU2)

A private sector interviewee considered one of the contributory factors to be lack of business integration:

"We are traditionally a 'back-office' function and not as integrated in the business as, say, Business Development, who sit within the practice groups." (PR1)

Another private sector interviewee considered one the reasons for the perception as:



"historically the roles were taken by women with small children who decided that this was the easy option, so we weren't taken very seriously." (PR3)

A public sector interviewee notes:

"Records management is not sexy. [...] There was big interest when Customs lost their data but generally we are seen as a necessary evil and no-one wants to resource us well."

#### **4.3.4 Information professionals on information professionals...**

Definitions of an "information professional" varied greatly amongst the interviewees:

"...someone who is professionally qualified in an information or library field." (PR2)

"...someone who understands how information should be managed in all its forms." (PU3)

"It's a broad term encompassing ... all fields which involve some degree of knowledge organisation and information retrieval or data retrieval." (PU2)

"I actually think of a librarian. But it also includes Knowledge Managers, who work more in the business, information architects, people working with the web." (PR1)

"Nothing. It's a meaningless term." (PU1)

"...someone who is responsible for managing or holding information that is key to an organisation." (PR3)

Three interviewees would describe themselves as an information professional, while one public sector interviewee preferred the term "information management professional" (PU1) to describe themselves, and a private sector interviewee preferred the term "knowledge manager" (PR1) to describe themselves. Of the two participants who were legally qualified prior to taking up roles within the information field the private sector interviewee felt that they had a dual role and described themselves as an information professional (in addition to being a legal professional) (PR3), while the public sector participant described themselves as "a legal professional with an interest in knowledge and information management".

Three public sector interviewees opposed the addition of the word "knowledge" to form "knowledge and information profession":

"When you capture knowledge you're creating a record, so the knowledge bit is not necessary. It's about information, data and records." (PU2)

"Knowledge is a broader term. It involves the body of corporate knowledge. Information is probably better." (PU3)

"Knowledge management is a substitute for managing information properly. The skill is in capturing that knowledge." (PU1)

One private sector interviewee had no preference (PR2), the two remaining private sector interviewees preferred the addition of "knowledge", with one stating "people can have lots of information without being able to turn it into knowledge." (PR3)

Interviewees were largely in agreement that records management and library fell within the information profession, and the two private sector interviewees felt that information architecture, intranet and content management and knowledge management would also fall within the profession (PR1, PR2). A number of interviewees considered whether there

might be overlap with the IT profession (PU1, PU2) but one interviewee felt that their technical skills would likely not fall within the information profession (PU2).

All interviewees felt confident that their roles had an equivalent in private / public sector and that their skills would be transferable. One public sector interviewee felt that records management would be more highly valued in some parts of the private sector, such as the pharmaceutical industry, but that law firms were only recently beginning to develop good practice in this area (PU1). Another public sector interviewee felt that there might be more of an emphasis on the managerial side in the private sector and a need for more in-depth legal research (PU2).

When asked about whether they would consider changing sectors, all interviewees bar one responded that they would consider it. When asked about potential barriers to changing sectors, one public sector interviewee noted salary with respect to a move from the public to the private sector:

"Not from a skills point of view. Any barriers are likely to be cultural."  
(PU3)

"Not strictly. The limitation is potentially in the salary." (PU3)

Two private sector interviewees also noted salary as a potential barrier for a move from the private to the public sector, although this was qualified by one interviewee:

"Library work isn't that well paid and I couldn't afford to move sectors and take a pay cut." (PR2)

"Not really. The main barrier would probably be financial, but I know that you get better perks in the public sector so that probably wouldn't preclude me from changing." (PR3)

Another public sector interviewee considered that the only barrier might be cultural, and this was echoed in part by a private sector interviewee who stated "It's about self-confidence. I'm in my comfort zone - I know I could transfer my skills pretty easily between law firms but changing sectors is a bit more scary." (PR2) This was further supported by another private sector interviewee who stated that they would consider changing sectors "But it would be unlikely - my background - a law degree - and skills match the sector that I work in well." (PR1).

#### **4.4 Summary of findings**

Both private and public sector interviewees considered their primary clients to be the lawyers within their organisations, but felt that their roles supported the entire organisation. As such, the majority of participants were keenly aware of their corporate objectives and the need to engage with the wider business.

Both sectors found that their roles had developed further into the business in recent years and resource cutbacks had affected participants in all the organisations involved.

The majority of participants felt that their ICT skills were important and used them to an increasing extent in their roles, with a number of participants working closely with other teams in the business to ensure that information and information systems remain fit for purpose.

There was broad consensus amongst the participants that the role of the information professional was undervalued, but while some felt that this was a significant issue stemming from insufficient integration into the business, others felt that this was only where there was a lack of awareness in the service provided.

The biggest area of disagreement lay within the terminology used to describe participants with knowledge workers in particular not considering "information professional" to be an accurate description of their skillset.

## 5. Discussion

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The key drivers for the work of the information professionals interviewed in both sectors are quite clearly delivering a service that supports the corporate objectives, or business need, and as such the sector - in this respect - is largely irrelevant. All interviewees identified their clients as largely internal and the service they provide is tailored to the needs of those clients, having in mind the overall corporate objectives. Two interviewees in particular identified an almost identical objective to that set out by Mason (1990) as the sole purpose of information professionals, specifically "to get the right information from the right source to the right client at the right time in the form most suitable for the use to which it is to be put and at a cost that is justified by its use" (p. 122). In the public sector the key drivers may also be codified in legislation - as per the records manager; in the private sector those drivers are set out clearly as the need for the lawyer to provide an efficient and effective service to their client - as per the knowhow manager.

One factor that both sectors have in common is the need to provide "more for less". Both sectors face a reduction in resources, whether headcount or budgetary, but both sectors are required to adapt the service they provide accordingly. This revisits Taylor and Corral's (2006) point about the "mounting pressure on librarians to demonstrate the value of their professional skills and prove to top management that the information services they provide are a vital resource in improving organisational efficiency and effectiveness, not a luxury commodity" (p.2).

Of particular note is the number of respondents who highlighted both the importance of understanding "the business" or "corporate objectives" or who felt that their role had moved further into the business in recent years. This is in keeping with Ceeney's view of the changing role of the information professional (Ceeney, interviewed by Hyams (2008, p.18)) and appears to be common to both sectors. The fact that interviewees felt either that the higher level of business involvement was a recent development, or that there was

still further integration necessary, appeared in all cases to contribute to their reasons for the poor perception of their service, where this was the case (and it is to be noted that this was not, in any respect, always the case).

Technical skills and involvement in technical projects and systems featured in all roles and chimes with Owen's (2002) call for information professionals to work more closely with core teams such as ICT while also being proactive in seeking out opportunities - and indeed the need - to bring their skills to new and existing initiatives. This is also in keeping with the Library Commission's report, which noted that ICT, team working skills and resource management skills to be the range seen to be common to all or most sectors (1999, p.65). Although the report was written at a time when many of the roles in considered in this study were not yet in existence (because the technologies were not yet in existence), it is felt that the findings still hold some relevance.

Both sectors echo McFetridge's point about the lack of visibility of the information professional (2004, p.21) and their consequent poor perception outside the profession, by those who do not use them. Summed up by one of the interviewees:

" The perception is that we don't provide as much value as we should, but then they don't really appreciate what value we could provide and what they could get from us." (PR1)

The views of the both the professional support lawyer (private sector), and the former lawyer now working as a knowledge manager (public sector), support the findings of the literature review, specifically the variation that Gibson (2001) suggests that PSLs see themselves not (or not only) as knowledge managers but as "practising lawyers whose clients happen to be other lawyers" (p.29) while nevertheless being skilled at "turning knowledge into value" (p.4).

What is most interesting perhaps, however, is that the real split appears not to be between the public and private sectors - since none of the interviewees perceived any significant barriers (other than cultural / "comfort zone" and potentially salary) to changing and all felt that their skills would be transferable between sectors - but between those interviewees who would readily describe themselves as "information professionals" (or "information management professional", in one case) and those interviewees with some element of "knowledge" in their role title or description. The former were either against or ambivalent towards the addition of "knowledge" to the description, while the latter were less keen to use the word "information" at all, or ally themselves, preferring instead to describe themselves as "knowledge" workers [(or lawyers)]. This echoes Abell and Wingar's (2005) point about the reluctance of the information profession to acknowledge knowledge management and Gibson's (2001) use of the term to include "anyone who deals in information and who may have come to it circuitously". Clearly there is some question over whether this latter group would see themselves as belonging to the same skills family as the former group.

It is considered significant by the author that the "knowledge" interviewees felt that their roles were arguably more business based than information based and in line with all interviewees noting that their roles were becoming increasingly business focused, would support Ceeney's view (Hyams, 2008, pp.19-20) that the profession would benefit from further business integration and a collective identity in order to address the widely acknowledged lack of recognition ("Cinderella services effect" Abell and Wingar (2005)) that affects other corporate services to a lesser extent. This would further support the view of Reid *et al* (1998) that to be effective "an information specialist in a company must be as familiar with the business the company is in as they are with retrieving information." (p. 88). Indeed, as noted above, all interviewees certainly felt that their roles either were or were becoming more integrated into the business, so it is suggested that the differences might be grounded more in perception than in actual working practice.

Perhaps more pertinent a question therefore would be whether there is indeed a collective body of individuals with skills for managing knowledge and information (whatever title is given to this collective body), and further, whether there is value in bringing together these disciplines into a single business service with a collective identity, as argued by Ceeney (Hyams, 2008, p.20) and Westcott (2008, p.21). This would also contribute to the debate taken forward by Feather (2009) on whether an information profession is needed, and then further again by Broady-Preston (2009) as to the relevance and requirements of the training and education infrastructure.



## **6. Conclusion**

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### **6.1 Introduction**

The aim of this study was to provide an illustrative and indicative, small-scale comparison of the role of the information professional within the public and private sectors, focusing specifically on information professionals who provide a service within a legal environment.

Further, the author sought to:

- (i) identify how the organisational drivers in both sectors impact on the service that information professionals provide.
- (ii) explore the key skills required of information professionals in both sectors and the key differences (if any).
- (iii) make recommendations for any transferable learnings that can be applied within both sectors.

### **6.2 Conclusion**

Information professionals in both the private and public sector are - at the most basic level - driven to provide a service to their organisation - both lawyers and more widely - that matches the business need, that enables the organisation to fulfil its statutory obligations (where applicable) and provide an effective and efficient service with ever-decreasing resources. The growth of the electronic information landscape requires information professionals to broaden their skillsets to include ICT and project management skills and engage with all areas of the business.

This study used a qualitative methodology to explore how organisational context affects the role of the information professional in both sectors. The

main limitation was the small sample size, which means that the primary data on its own cannot be generalised to the information profession as a whole, although the results are considered to be nevertheless interesting, and in line with the literature review.

The study found that the drivers and skills listed above are - broadly - common to information professionals in both the public and private sectors and that this was recognised by those interviewed for this study and so it is felt that transferable learnings are not needed. What was identified as being more pertinent to this study, and would be recommended to anyone considering replicating this study design, is that further exploration be made into the definition and relevance for an organisation - private or public sector - of the "information profession", particularly with respect to the widely acknowledged lack of recognition for information professionals, and specifically:

- whether a profession exists, with respect to a collective body of disciplines;
- which disciplines are included / excluded;
- whether the collective body of disciplines can be properly referred to as "a profession"; and
- whether there is a benefit - whether to the business or to the skills workers that would sit within this body - of a recognised "information profession"

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## **Appendices**

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Appendix 1 Information sheet for interview participants

Appendix 2 Interview schedule

Appendix 3 Coding Scheme for interview data

## **Appendix 1 : Information Sheet for Interview Participants**

Information Sheet  
February 2010

### **A comparison of the role of the information professional in the legal environment in the private and public sectors**

#### **What is the project's purpose?**

The interview and wider project is the basis for a dissertation for submission to the University of Wales, Department of Information Studies, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an MSc Econ. It is taking place between February and March 2010.

The commonly held perception is that it is difficult to transfer careers between the public and private sectors. This study aims to compare the landscape for information professionals, and the roles available to information professionals within a professional services firm, and a central government department, focusing specifically on organisations that provide a legal service.

#### **The interview**

Thank you for volunteering to take part in the interview. During the interview, which will last for a maximum of 30 minutes, I will ask you a number of questions related to the project's aim. Please answer the questions in as much detail as you can provide in order to support a meaningful research outcome. Where relevant, please elaborate with relevant experience and opinions. If you feel unable or if you do not wish to answer a question, please make this known to the researcher (Caroline Williams) in advance.

#### **What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?**

There will be no adverse effect on you, and all your data from this interview will be destroyed.

#### **Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential and all my data anonymous?**

All information you provide in this interview will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be identified in this dissertation or any future publication. In addition, all data you provide will be anonymised.

#### **What will happen to the results of the research project?**

The results will be presented and discussed as part of the dissertation and may also be published in an academic journal in addition to being published on the Department of Information Studies website.

#### **Who is organising and funding the research?**

The project is organised through the Department of Information Studies and is self funded.

#### **Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

The project has been ethically approved via the Department of Information Studies ethics review procedure. The University's Ethics Committee also monitors the ethics process throughout the entire university.

Please contact me with any queries at [caroline\\_will@hotmail.com](mailto:caroline_will@hotmail.com)

The supervisor for this project is Dr Judith Broady-Preston, [jbp@aber.ac.uk](mailto:jbp@aber.ac.uk)

## Interview Consent Form

Title of Project: A comparison of the role of the information professional in the legal environment in the private and public sectors

Name of researcher: Caroline Williams

Please tick to confirm:

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated February 2010 for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions and clarify any points.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to Withdraw at any time without giving a reason.
3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses.
4. I agree to take part in the above research project.

Name of participant:

Date:

Your participation in this research is greatly appreciated.

Please send your completed form to:

Caroline Williams by 26 February

Email: [caroline\\_will@hotmail.com](mailto:caroline_will@hotmail.com)

Address: 18 Springcopse Road  
Reigate  
Surrey  
RH2 7HH

## **Appendix 2: Interview Schedule**

Below are the questions that you will be asked in your telephone interview. Please refer to the Information Sheet for background. If you have any questions please contact me at [caroline\\_will@hotmail.com](mailto:caroline_will@hotmail.com)

### **Section A. Your role**

1. What is your job title?
2. What is the job title of your line manager?
3. What is the job title of your head of department (if this is not you / your line manger)
4. Do you have managerial responsibility? (If so, how many)
5. If you work as part of a team, how many other members of your team?
6. Where within the organisational structure do you / does your team sit (e.g. department, practice area)
7. Please provide a bullet point summary of your main responsibilities (up to five)

### **Section B. Context of your role**

1. Who do you consider your clients to be?
2. What are the key drivers for your work?
3. How do you think your role contributes to the success of your organisation as a whole?

### **Section C. Key skills**

1. What are the key skills / competencies / attributes do you think are required for your role?
2. How has your role changed within the last 5 years, and particularly within the last year?

### **Section D. What is an information professional?**

1. What is your understanding of the term “information professional”?
2. Would you describe yourself as an information professional?
3. Do you prefer the term “knowledge and information profession”? Please explain.
4. What other disciplines within your organisation do you think sit within the information profession?



### **Section E. Perception by non-information professionals**

1. How do you consider information professionals are perceived by non-information professionals within your sector?
2. What factors do you think have contributed most to those perceptions (up to three)

### **Section F. Transferability**

1. Do you think your role has an equivalent in the public / private sector? If so, what are your perceptions as to what that role might involve and how it might be different?
2. Do you think that there would be any barriers to changing sectors?
3. Would you consider changing sectors?

### Appendix 3: Coding Scheme for Interview Data

Top level codes	Secondary level codes	Occurrences
A. Drivers for the role		
	Reducing risk	PR1(B2), (C1); PU1(B2), (B3), (D4), (E2), (F2); PU3(B3), (D1)
	Support lawyers for improved service to clients / customers	PR1(B3); PR2(B2); PR3(B2); PU4
	Support other support departments / corporate services	PR1(B1); PU1(B1); PR2(B1), (E2); PU2(E1); PU3(B1)
	Cutbacks / reduction in resources	PR1(C2);PR2(C2); PU2(C2); PR3(C2)
	Statutory obligations	PU1(C5), (F2); PU3(B3)
	For the whole client cycle	PR1(C1); PR2(B2)
	Matching information to business need	PR2(B1), (C1), (E1); PU2(B2), (B3); PU3(B3); PR3(C1)
	Broadening role	PR1(C2), PU1(C2), PR2(C2), PU3(C2)
	Corporate objectives	PR2(C2), (E2); PU3(C2)
B. Skills		
	IM skills	PR1(C1); PU1(B3), (C1), (D1), (D3); PR3(D1)
	IT skills	PR1(C1), (D1); PU1 (B3); PR2(A7);PU2(C1); PU3(C1)
	Legal knowledge / experience	PR1(C1), (F3); PU1(C1); PR2(C1); PR2(F2); PR3(C1); PU4
	Search / information retrieval skills	PU1(E2); PR2 (C1); PU2(C1); PU3(D1)

	Organisational skills	PR2(C1); PU3(C1)
	Promotion / marketing	PU2(A7); PR3(C1)
	Presentation skills	PR1(C1);
	Training skills	PR1(C1); PR2(A7), (C1); PU2(C1); PR3(C1)
	People management	PR1(C1); PU1(A4); PR2(A4); PU2(C1); PU3(C1); PR3(A7)
	Financial management	PU2 (A7), (C1); PU3(C1)
	Business partnership	PR1(C1); PR2(B3), (C2), (E2); PU2(B3)
	Advisory and consultancy	PU1(F3)
	Transferable	PR1(F2); PU1(F1-3); PU1(F1); PU2(A1), (A3)
C. Information Professionals		
	Difference in perception between users and non-users	PR2(E1); PU2(E1), (E2)
	Negative perception	PR1(E1), PU1(F1); PR2(E1); PR3(E1)
	Lack of awareness	PR1(E1); PR2(E1); PU2(E2); PU3(E1)
	Integrated into the business	PR1(E1)
	Leadership	PR1(E1),
	Knowledge management	PR1(A), (D1), (D3); PU1(D1-4); PR3(D3); PU4
	Records management	PR1(D4); PU1(A7), (B2), (B3), (C1), (D1), (D3), (D4), (E2), (F1), (F2); PU2(D1), (D2); PU3(D4)
	Librarians	PR1(D1), (D4); PU1(D3); PR2(A7)
	Web / intranet content management	PR1(A7), (C1), (D1), (D4), (F1);

		PR2(A7), (C2), (E2); PU2(B3), (E2)
	Information management	PU1(A7), (B2), (B3), (D1-4); PU3(F1); PR3(D1)
	Information lifecycle management	PU1(B2), (D3), (E2)
	Meaningless term	PU1(D1), (D3)
	Partnership working	PU1(B3), (D4); PU2(B2), (C1); PU3(C1)
	Capturing knowledge	PR1(C1), PU1(D3)
	Reducing information silos	PU1(D3); PR2(E2)
D. Public / private sector comparison		
	Culture	PU3(F2), (F3)
	Financial barriers	PU1(F1), (F3); PR2(F2); PR3(F2)
	Valued	PU1(F1)
	Background	PR1(F3); PR2(F2)
	Professional qualification	PU1(B3); PR2(D1); PU2(F2); PU4