

THE INTERVIEW

Julie Christmas – President of BIALL

Abstract: The current BIALL President, Julie Christmas, talks to LIM Co-Editors **Mike and Jas Breslin** about how she became a legal information manager, how she's trying to upgrade the technology to allow the organisation to function smoothly, and why she believes that the job title 'law librarian' should – just perhaps – be consigned to history.
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There are many ways people become involved in the legal information game. Some find it by accident, some come to it from other areas of the profession, and for others it's a long-held ambition. But for Julie Christmas, the current President of BIALL, it was very much a case of third time lucky. First, she had tried a Geography course at university, but then she switched to something more practical, Hotel and Catering Management, only to spend six hours cutting vegetables on the first day and to realise it was perhaps not for her. She then decided that perhaps what she should do was what she enjoyed most.

And at that point in Julie's life this was research. "I really liked researching family history, so I thought, well genealogy, that's a career," Julie remembers. "So I looked for university courses that involved research and I came across information and library. I thought that sounded

quite interesting, and I ended up doing a three-year undergrad at Aberystwyth. And thought: 'actually, I quite like this. Maybe I'll just do this as a career.'"

Since then Julie has worked in a number of library sectors, including public, university and health, but she finally found her niche in law, and then a job at Allen & Overy, where she has worked for the last 22 years. These days, though, as a senior manager in the library team at the firm, research is no longer the thing she loves most about the work. "I prefer problem solving now, because my job's changed so much over the time I've been at A&O. So, from doing, I now manage other people doing the doing, as it were."

GOING GLOBAL

Julie actually joined A&O at an exciting time for the library team. "They had decided that they wanted to have a global service across the offices," she says. "They wanted to have a global library management system with all of the offices all using the same system for their catalogues. So that was kind of a big thing for us, going off around the world, convincing them to put all their stuff into our library management system. It was brilliant, because I was about 25 and I was travelling to Budapest and Luxembourg solo to train them on how to use our library management system. That was cool. Very exciting, back at the beginning."

It was also quite tricky, at times, though. "I think the biggest thing was trying to get to grips with being part of a growing global firm. It was: 'I don't know anything about the legal system in South Africa. Okay, let's learn, let's find them some resources', and that kind of thing. And I think that's the thing I really actually like about this work; just having to go off and dig into that. I have no idea where to start, but I'm still at heart a researcher, and I think: I can do this, we can figure this out."

This global outlook is very much at the heart of the work that Julie does now as a senior manager for the firm. "Now we run services for several of our other offices who don't have any kind of information or library staff or knowhow staff on the ground, so we run their services completely remotely out of the UK," she says.

TERM TIME

After over 20 years with A&O there will soon be more change, with the upcoming merger with Shearman & Sterling, under the new name of A&O Shearman. But another big change for Julie has been becoming President of BIALL, something that she admits took a great deal of thought before she agreed to it, largely because of the time it can take up. And indeed, this has proved to be the biggest challenge as President so far (six months in at the time of writing). “It is the time thing, definitely,” she says. “But it’s not just me finding the time, but also the fact that the term as President just goes so fast. It feels like you have loads of time and then suddenly you’re, ‘oh, I’m six months in!’”

This is something that the previous President, Diane Miller, mentioned in her interview (see LIM, Spring 2023), too. Which begs the question: should the term for BIALL President be extended to two years? “Well, it’s interesting. I think a lot of the sister associations have their Presidents doing a longer period,” Julie says. “We were talking to Yemisi in Canada [Dina, President of CALL – see LIM, Autumn 2023], and I think it works out as four or five years in the end for them, because they have the vice president thing and so on. And I think it might be something that we need to have a think about, so as to give the President longer to actually achieve things, because our three roles [President Elect, President and Immediate Past President] are very different in BIALL.”

Yet despite the time limitations Julie is definitely enjoying her time as President, and she puts this down to the very same thing that led to her becoming involved in the profession in the first place: the curiosity that’s part of the makeup of all good researchers. “I’m basically quite a nosy person, so I like having the opportunity to just go and stick my nose into things and ask questions, and go to all of the different committee meetings and working groups and special interest groups and just hear what they’re doing. I like to meet people in different areas of the profession. Because I’ve stayed in corporate law for most of my career, the academic side of it and the Inns and helping barristers, is something that I don’t really have that much experience of at all.”

This has also helped Julie gain an insight into some of the problems librarians outside of corporate law are facing, particularly those working on the academic side. “When I worked for a year in a university library, back then everybody had a subject specialism, and that was your subject and that was it,” she says. “And now it’s really hard for the academics, because they’ve got to wear about six different subject hats, and how are they supposed to do that? I am in awe of that. And then they do proper teaching as well, whereas we’re just training some trainees, or apprentices, and that’s kind of it. But for them it’s actual proper teaching.”

TALKING TECH

Beyond finding out what everyone else is up to, Julie’s main focus as BIALL President is trying to standardise the technology that’s used by the organisation. “At the moment we’re looking at what technology tools we need across the association,” she says. “Because that’s proving a bit of a struggle in some areas, certain things aren’t working. So we’re looking at that, thinking about different options, how we can make it better and easier for people in their BIALL roles, basically. I hope that at the end of my time as President we’re a good way towards having some kind of decent tech that works for all of the different parts of BIALL.”

Practically speaking, this will mean things like ensuring everyone’s working on the same systems, so that institutional knowledge does not go astray over the years, for example – something that really should not happen in an organisation representing information professionals. “It’s about making sure there is somewhere you can easily share that knowledge with others, and also store it, so it’s not just in somebody’s head, or in somebody’s work email.”

But while sorting the technology that will help BIALL function more efficiently is a key aim, Julie recognises that there are even bigger challenges the organisation faces at this time. “I think part of it is making sure that we remain relevant,” she says. “So, understanding what our place is, because I think we might, in law firms – and I’m not sure if it’s the same in academic institutions – feel a little bit under threat at the moment, with the whole AI thing. People are saying, ‘it’s fine, we’ll just stick it into ChatGPT. That will give us the answer’. And then, also, we’ve had lots of people who now have to wear multiple hats within their firm. So first it was knowledge management, now it’s the legal tech. So it’s as if we’re constantly having to find different skills.”

This steady change of emphasis for legal information professionals also means that, just perhaps, we should think about renaming BIALL, for how many members are now simply ‘law librarians’? “I think we have always said we are the association of law librarians, but actually, much as I hate to say it, do we need to think about a rebrand? Because we do do so many other things.”

Indeed, Julie would even go further, maybe to the point where the profession drops the title ‘law librarian’ altogether. “I can see it happening. Probably about 10 or 15 years ago I’d have been completely scandalised by that. But actually, I think it can, rightly or wrongly, be a barrier. People see that word, ‘librarian’, and there’s a perception there.”

Beyond that, Julie believes BIALL needs to reach out more to the membership, to find out exactly what it wants from the organisation. “We need to make sure that we’re clear about what our purpose is. Positioning us as an association that is supporting our members and doing what they want us to do. So we want to go out to the membership and say: ‘what do you want us to be



AI is just one of the challenges facing the profession, says Julie

doing? What do you see our role as being? Essentially, how can we support you in your role?"

SISTER ORGANISATIONS

Improving the organisation is about looking beyond it, too, and with this in mind Julie is reaching out to the sister organisations to learn from them, and to cooperate more in what is becoming a much more global workspace. "I think we can certainly learn from each other, about the challenges we face," she says. "I've gone out to all of the sister associations and asked them: 'what technology, what tools do you provide for people with roles within your associations? What have you done? Why have you done what you've done? What works, what doesn't?"

"For example, we talked to Yemisi at CALL, Claire Mazer [the current President Elect] and I. We learnt about why they had moved away from a distribution list to having a more collaborative forum. And I spoke to Laurie [Atkinson] in Australia [President of ALLA] and they're thinking about launching a newsletter, so she's asked if I can share some examples of our newsletter with them. It's just learning from each other. We're trying to have more collaboration between our professional development committees with the Canadians as well, so

maybe some kind of reciprocal arrangement for courses and seminars that we do, just to give people extra member benefits.

"Lots of people work in global organisations, or have researchers who are looking at other jurisdictions," Julie adds. "So if we can have those closer ties and build up skills in those areas, I think that's an easy way to do that. Somebody else is already doing the work, so why wouldn't we partner with them?"

VOLUNTEERS

One thing that has been an issue for organisations like BIALL in recent times, especially in the wake of the pandemic, when attitudes certainly seemed to change, is the difficulty in getting people to volunteer. But Julie believes we have now turned a corner with this, to a certain extent.

"I get the impression that's eased off, because I think everybody is a little bit more used to the wider world again," Julie says. "Because we've had in-person events and that kind of thing. And I think people are beginning to remember the benefits of meeting up and going to events and they are realising that it needs people to keep those things going. I think, at the moment, for most committees and working groups things are actually looking quite healthy, as far as I am aware. Catherine [Bowl, past president] and Diane [Miller] did a fantastic job getting people to sign up, so I think I'm cautiously optimistic that we're in a good place. The membership is looking quite healthy, so if we can easily sell the benefits that people are going to get from volunteering, then things should get even better."

The benefits of volunteering for BIALL are very real, too, Julie believes. "Ultimately, I think it's that you get to do things that you wouldn't necessarily get to do in your day job," she says. "Or even to do more of what you do in your day job, if it's something that you really love doing and that's your skillset. It doesn't have to mean getting out of your comfort zone, it can just be: 'I'm really good at organising training courses, so I want to go on PDC [Professional Development Committee] and help them organise courses.'"

NETWORKING

But the biggest benefit from an involvement with BIALL is the people you meet. "I think the biggest thing for me has always been the network of people that I've met through BIALL," Julie says. "I can use this, not just for BIALL, but I can use it for my job as well. 'Has anybody come across this? How have you dealt with that?' That sort of thing. Because I've met people through BIALL, I can drop them a quick email and say, 'any chance we could have a chat about how to tackle this issue?' It's that network of people I've built up, who are colleagues I can call on for that kind of thing, but also who are now friends as well."



There's no better networking opportunity than Conference – this is Belfast last year

Of course, one of the best places to meet people, and even make new friends, is the Conference. For seven years Julie was on the Conference Committee, so naturally she's a big fan of the annual event, but she does find aspects of the feedback that some attendees provided a little frustrating. "Often, we would get, 'there wasn't enough for academics, or there wasn't enough for this or that', even though you balance the sessions very carefully to make sure there is a bit of everything," she says. "But the thing is, just because the session isn't delivered by an academic librarian, it doesn't mean to say you can't learn something from it, and vice versa.

"And that, I think, is one of the really important things, that exposure to other sectors through the sessions," Julie adds. "But also talking to people, that networking side of things. Again, I'm back to making those connections that you can utilise later on. It's also getting away from the office and putting yourself in a different headspace, to actually learn something. Online learning is great, and the fact that we kept things going through the pandemic and it made it more accessible is wonderful. But you quite often can't learn in quite the same way because you're distracted by your email, or if you're in the office you've got your colleagues around you. And I think it's important to walk away and be in a different space, physically, but also a different headspace, to take that break and learn."

THE CHALLENGE OF AI

As far as the profession as a whole is concerned, Julie is optimistic that it still has a future, but she acknowledges that there are some obvious concerns, citing the squeeze in the academic sector where librarians are being asked to be less specialised – as mentioned earlier – which she also says is a growing issue in law firms, too.

But the main problem the profession faces, Julie believes is, unsurprisingly, the rise of the robots. "Now there's that perception that, 'oh, you don't need researchers because you've got AI tools, so you just stick your question in there and out comes an answer'. So I do think there's a threat there, and we need to make sure that we defend our position, or defend our relevance, I guess. We need to use the skills that we've got to demonstrate how we can contribute.

"Somebody's got to buy these AI tools, for a start, and to manage the increasingly eye watering budgets that are going to be required when everybody's stuck an AI bit into all of their resources," Julie adds. "And how do you work out which is the best one for each circumstance? So it's making sure that we continue to be involved in that conversation, and we don't let ourselves be pushed out by IT, for example, who quite often end up being the custodians of these tools, when they used to sit separately. It's not how we maintain control,



Attending Conference sessions to do with other sectors is a great way to learn about different approaches and to find new ideas

exactly, but how we make sure that we're still part of the conversation."

NEW ENTRANTS

At the start of this we outlined Julie's path into law librarianship, but what of those entering the profession now, is there a shortage of people interested in this work, are many perhaps sticking with geography and cutting carrots? "I think for the legal part of it, possibly," Julie says. "There are fewer information and library or library school courses around now than there were when I was 18. Yet there are also more routes now. You have got the apprenticeships and I think that's going to be really exciting, how it will make the profession a bit more diverse as well, bringing in different skills. Within our firm we are less attached to somebody having an information library qualification now, if they've got the relevant experience, we're not requiring that they did the course, depending on the role. And I think the profession is definitely moving in that direction, which is a really good thing, people coming in later, coming in through different routes; again, it's bringing different skills, different experiences, and that can only make the whole profession richer and better."

The above leads us on to another issue with the librarian profession in general, and that's the distinct lack

of diversity. Julie is well aware of this, but she also recognises that it's not an easy task to put things right in the shorter term.

"I think it's difficult in the legal information sector, because we're working with a limited pool of people in the first place," Julie says. "First, you've got to attract people into the information profession, and then you've got to attract them into law."

But while that might be a worry, Julie is generally optimistic about the future of the legal information profession. "We're just kind of diversifying, I think, in terms of our skills. Again, all the AI tools, I don't think they're going to replace us, because somebody needs to understand how to use them and teach people to use them in the most effective way. So we're just evolving, the way that we always have in developing those new skills and taking them in different directions."

And she certainly thinks there's a bright future for BIALL. "I would like to see it having evolved, but still being relevant and still supporting people in the profession," she says of where she thinks the organisation will be in five years' time. "I think we're still going to be there. Still bringing people together to collaborate and learn from each other."

Whether it will still be called BIALL, though, well that's another matter entirely.