

## Beyond the TOC: Evolving Current Awareness Services Through Collaboration

**Marisa Bendeich, Research Librarian**

**Blake Dawson**

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In the past, librarians have found it difficult to make direct links between the services they provide and improved organisational productivity<sup>i</sup>. A current awareness service that moves beyond simply telling lawyers what's new can strategically position libraries as providing a critical information service, through enhancing lawyer knowledge, minimising risk and reducing information overload.

Kumar (1980)<sup>ii</sup> defines current awareness as the "dissemination of information that keeps its users well-informed and up-to-date in their basic fields of interest as well as in the related subjects...".

Current awareness services have traditionally involved providing tables of contents (TOC) of new journals to users, often accompanied by news clippings and other relevant publications. It involves a review of "publications immediately upon receipt, selecting information pertinent to the programme of the organisation served, and individual items to be brought to the attention, by one means or another, of those persons to whose work they are related"<sup>iii</sup>.

As more and more information becomes available at an increasingly rapid pace, libraries are expected to provide faster, electronic delivery of current awareness, as discussed by Nina Platt (2007) "lawyers want immediate access to news about clients, prospective clients, industries, legal topics and more."<sup>iv</sup> This presents librarians with opportunity to provide a current awareness service that will:

- Decrease information overload
- Minimise risk
- Promote authoritative primary and secondary legal sources
- Provide a value added service to the organisation

Much of the literature on current awareness focuses on the many resources designed to keep lawyers abreast of new legal developments. There is no denying that a huge range of journals, case databases, newsletters, legislation alerting products, news feeds, looseleaf flyers, websites, RSS feeds<sup>v</sup>, blogs, and other free and subscription products are available to serve current awareness needs. In addition, in-house support teams such as knowledge management and marketing provide their own forms of current awareness for distribution to legal staff. The majority this information, is delivered by email.

Rogers and Agarwala-Rogers first coined the term "information overload" in 1975, defining it as the "state of an individual (or system) in which not all communication inputs can be processed and utilised leading to breakdown"<sup>vi</sup>.

The dramatic increase in the use of email as a method for workplace communications has contributed to the notion of "email overload", or email related stress<sup>vii</sup>. Research has indicated that while interruptions can improve performance of simple tasks, they significantly lower performance of complex tasks<sup>viii</sup>. This research goes on to reference an article by Trafton (2003), which found that on average, it took workers 64 seconds to recover from an email interruption and return to work at the same rate prior to the email.

Delivering a current awareness service poses a significant challenge to librarians when trying to manage potential information overload, and prevent "email related stress". How do we ensure that our clients do not become overwhelmed, potentially ignoring their current awareness and increasing their risk of missing out on new vital information?

### **Managing the current awareness challenge**

In 2008, Blake Dawson Library & Research Services conducted a library evaluation. This evaluation involved focus groups with a range of lawyers, from graduate to partner level, across all National offices and all practice groups.

One section of the evaluation sought feedback regarding current awareness services, specifically asking:

- Is there value in scanning tables of contents for journals and other generic publications (such as law reports)?
- How should current awareness be packaged?
- What sources are most important to you for current awareness?
- What is your preferred method of signing up to current awareness?

Lawyers cited in the evaluation that practice group-specific current awareness is of more value to them. All but one group interviewed stated that a weekly group bulletin, or similar, would not be useful for current awareness purposes. The main reasons for this included concerns regarding the length of an all-inclusive weekly update, timeliness (some information is critical to receive as it happens), and a preference for "bite-sized chunks" of current awareness that could be easily read and digested at one sitting.

Lawyers also didn't place high value on receiving generic tables of contents. Comments such as "Tables of contents of general reports aren't useful" and "It's hard to tell from the tables of contents

what it is you want" were common. The evaluation also highlighted the highly personalised nature of current awareness. Some felt that "where there is a legislation change, I'd like to get that ASAP... it has to come out as soon as it's available", while for others "case law is fairly important". Some lawyers mentioned very specific current awareness needs, such as "instead of getting an update on Civil Procedure, could you say I've got an interest in Part 33 of the Civil Procedure Rules... and get an update?"

We also received feedback about alternative current awareness services the lawyers were receiving from other areas of the Firm. In particular, lawyers struggled to make a clear distinction between the current awareness services they received from the library, and the alerts they received from Knowledge Management. The majority of lawyers interviewed expressed a clear desire to receive their current awareness in email format, preferably at a regular time ie in the morning. Suggestions such as RSS, Wikis and intranets were not favoured over email, but were discussed as potentially useful repositories of current awareness, for storage and retrieval.

Lawyers expressed a desire for a simple way of signing up to their current awareness services. This was particularly important for graduate lawyers who rotate into different practice groups, and are often responsible for providing current awareness updates to the rest of the team.

As a result of the evaluation, a pilot project commenced, with the objective to deliver a streamlined current awareness service to two practice groups (Group A and Group B). Following the pilot, recommendations would be made to other practice groups within the Firm.

The evaluation presented some key themes to guide the direction of the project. A current awareness service needed to be developed that would:

- Offer more than just tables of contents
- Be delivered by email
- Be easy to subscribe to, and easy to change preferences
- Meet a variety of needs dependant on lawyers role within the Firm and their area of law
- Address the lack of synergy between the library and knowledge management

The vastly differing needs of the pilot groups gave a clear indication that we could not deliver a "one size fits all" current awareness service. Delivering the same current awareness services across all groups and clients within the firm could no longer meet our lawyers needs. A strategy would need to be devised, which could be adapted to all practice groups within the Firm, and more effectively meet their current awareness requirements.

## Developing a current awareness strategy

The pilot project consisted of three phases:

- Analysis – one-on-one interviews with Partners and Lawyers. What sources are required? What is the preferred delivery of current awareness?
- Identify solutions – What options are available? Scoping external vendors to package current awareness.
- Implementation and recommendations – implement and trial the solutions from phase two and recommend the current awareness strategy to other practice groups.

The starting point for a current awareness strategy is to identify the particular information requirements to be met, and what sources can best meet these needs. For the pilot project, a distinction between time-critical and non time-critical current awareness needed to be made. Developing collaborative relationships with key stakeholders within the practice groups will greatly assist in identifying priority current awareness needs.

The most significant outcome from the one-on-one interviews was that lawyers place different priority on different aspects of their current awareness. Group A had a real need for instant awareness of new regulatory developments, client news, and government and industry developments. Group B, however, needed to know about new cases very quickly, as well as client news. Legislation and government developments were less important, as their area of law does not receive a lot of attention from Parliament.

This led to the development of five "streams" of core current awareness to be offered – cases, legislation, journals, client news and government and industry.

Identifying core current awareness needs means that new developments critical to the lawyers practice area can be delivered more quickly and more regularly than current awareness determined to be less critical to the practice area. For example, pilot group A receive a twice weekly legislation alert, and cases once a fortnight, while pilot group B receive their legislation alert once a fortnight, and new cases twice a week. News alerts on key clients would need to be delivered daily to all groups. Some areas of law that experience rapid change may also need to be supplemented with instant alerts, requiring a tailored approach for each practice group and advice from stakeholders within those groups.

Poynton (2008), states that "if there is one trend that looks likely to fundamentally impact library services, it is that of collaboration"<sup>ix</sup>. "Collaborative technology" (eg wikis) is the latest "buzz word" to hit libraries and knowledge management. For the purpose of this paper, however, collaboration is given the Macquarie Dictionary standard definition – "to work, with one another; cooperate". John-Steiner (1998) has also defined collaboration as thinking together, and sharing expertise, resources and authority<sup>x</sup>. These definitions are pertinent to delivering effective current awareness services.

Collaborating with Knowledge Managers and Precedent Lawyers (also known as Practice Support Lawyers or PSLs) can maximise the value placed on current awareness services and reduce information overload. Through collaboration, current awareness services will not only provide lawyers with the latest cases, legislation amendments or journal articles, but will contain information pertaining to the implications of these new developments.

By shifting focus away from trying to update lawyers on all new developments, towards greater collaboration with stakeholders closest to the practice groups, efforts can be concentrated on keeping lawyers up to date with information that is critical to their area of law – that which will have the biggest impact on their client relationships.

### *Define the sources*

Deciding what sources will be used for the current awareness streams becomes critical at this stage of developing your strategy. Much depends on the range of subscription sources available to you. Some external vendors provide subscription products to meet current awareness needs. These products may be convenient if you are a very small library team or have a small number of news and journal sources. After analysing the needs identified in the pilot project and the products available, we determined that an in-house solution using a variety of our subscription sources would best meet the current awareness needs of our clients. It is also quite possible to deliver current awareness without paid services, with the development of resources such as Barnet's JADE (judgments and decisions enhanced) free case alerter and Google news.

Other factors to consider when deciding upon sources might include:

- What is the quality and coverage of the information being delivered?
- How should hardcopy publications (such as journals available in hardcopy only) be factored in?
- Do any licence conditions or terms of use restrict delivery?
- What delivery options are available?

### *Collaborate, collaborate, collaborate*

The analysis phase of the pilot project further iterated findings from the evaluation where tables of contents were not deemed highly relevant and the link between the library and knowledge management wasn't made.

Receiving packaged current awareness was favoured in the library evaluation and the one-on-one interviews, but there were concerns regarding the size of updates – "I'd really want it to be in a manageable size because if you know its going to be a big email...[you] don't have time to read that",

and "There's a real risk with too much volume.." were typical of the comments received. By collaborating our efforts, we could effectively add value to existing current awareness services, reduce duplication and minimise information overload.

While the library can effectively manage the distribution of new legal developments, the ability to interpret, analyse and commentate on how these developments will affect external clients of the Firm, and therefore influence advice drafted by lawyers, must be performed by those with legal training. The analysis written by knowledge managers, precedent lawyers, or indeed junior and graduate lawyers within the Firm are integrated into the current awareness services packaged by the library. In this way of collaborating for current awareness the value of library and knowledge management services can be communicated to the organisation.

Marketing also play a key role in developing the business and commercial acumen of lawyers. Staying abreast of factors influencing lawyers' clients, their industry and their business is critical in developing ongoing and successful relationships. News is a key current awareness stream, and so collaboration with marketing is encouraged to ensure the relevance of current awareness services for news.

#### *Package a product*

With core streams of current awareness to be delivered, and collaboration between the library and knowledge management, a packaged current awareness service provides the library and knowledge management teams with a marketable product. A comprehensive current awareness product can minimise risk by keeping lawyers up to date with new developments that can affect their advice or client relationships. Collaborating with stakeholders in developing the product ensures current awareness is relevant, managing information overload.

Part of a successful strategy is to identify potential weaknesses<sup>xi</sup>. The current awareness packages for the streams of cases, legislation, journals, news and government and industry can not possibly meet every current awareness need of library clients. Instead, they are designed to meet the key themes of our current awareness strategy – minimise risk, reduce information overload, promote authoritative legal sources and add value.

The skills and expertise of librarians and the intricate knowledge of the scope and limitation of databases is critical at this stage. Where the current awareness service being delivered can't meet a discrete need, eg monitoring a potential client in the news or the progress of a particular matter in the courts, lawyers are encouraged to seek advice from their library.

The limitations of the current awareness service should be made very transparent. For the pilot project, this has meant developing current awareness guides and intranet pages to communicate what topics are covered, and when to seek further advice for other current awareness needs. Current awareness also forms a key part of the induction process. New lawyers are made aware of their

available current awareness services, their scope and limitation, and an overview of other current awareness services available.

### *Deliver*

The next step in forming your current awareness strategy is deciding how to deliver the current awareness packages. Email is very familiar and heavily used by lawyers. Emails are also accessible via mobile devices, and can be stored in a document management system and retrieved at a later date. With email determined as being the preferred delivery medium, a clear method for subscribing to current awareness, plus personalised options needs to be determined.

By default, all lawyers should receive the five current awareness streams. In some instances, for example at Partner level, some streams may not be required. This may also depend on the culture and practices of each group. Separate email groups for the different streams enable an "opt in" and "opt out" approach, whilst still managing the potential risk of lawyers missing out on critical updates.

Delivering current awareness email packages with an "opt in" and "opt out" approach also allows for lawyers within other practice areas to receive updates on areas of law that may not be directly relevant to them. For example, a corporate lawyer might be interested in regulatory updates for the environment group, keeping them up to date with how new climate change legislation could affect their client and increasing their general knowledge and awareness of this topical area.

### *Review*

Finally, cementing a process and reviewing current awareness services must be established in conjunction with knowledge management, marketing, or other stakeholders. The procedure for keeping your current awareness strategy current, will mostly depend on your organisation and your current awareness goals. A six monthly to annual review would be a good starting point.

## **Collaborative technologies and web 2.0**

There has been much recent hype about web 2.0 and collaborative technologies. RSS in particular has been highlighted as an exceptional new way to deliver current awareness. RSS is a great way to keep up to date with blogs, websites and general news items, however, at this point in time, it does not meet some of the primary requirements that were identified during the pilot project, namely:

- it is a pull, as opposed to a push technology – lawyers strongly favour email delivery
- the major legal publishers aren't yet fully on board with RSS
- hardcopy publications can't be integrated

RSS is also managed via an individual's PC. This means that the library has little opportunity to contribute to the lawyers current awareness or add any value and may not be accessible via handheld

devices. Lawyers may also remain at risk of information overload and missing crucial content by not regularly checking their RSS reader.

For tech-savvy lawyers, RSS may be a suitable way of delivering current awareness additional to the core service, eg legal blogs. Some web content management systems are also very successful at delivering RSS feeds to intranet portals. While feedback from lawyers indicated that they preferred email for their current awareness, RSS feeds of new content can prevent intranet pages becoming stagnant, providing a secondary tier of current awareness, and promote library products and services.

Intranets and wikis were cited as being ideal for retrieval of current awareness, or perhaps collaborating on new developments (ie further commentary or discussion about a new piece of legislation via a wiki), but were not deemed as being suitable ways of meeting current awareness needs.

External vendors continue to develop new products designed to meet the challenges of current awareness. Some firms in both Australian and overseas have also invested heavily in developing their current awareness technologies. One firm in the US has developed a system where a nightly search is run against lawyers time and billing system, updating the lawyers profile for client news based on the clients each lawyer was working with at that moment in time<sup>xii</sup>.

The needs identified during the library evaluation and the pilot project could not, at the time of writing, be met by any one external product for a number of reasons including:

- major publishers aren't yet fully on board with RSS
- our current awareness service need to be integrated with systems already being used by the lawyers
- level of external support required
- cost
- lack of ability to filter out irrelevant items
- lack of ability to add own content (ie new contents of hardcopy publications, commentary and analysis)
- delivery methods not consistent with the requirements identified in the pilot project

Current awareness should be more than just a peripheral service delivered by the library. Developing a current awareness strategy and collaborating with other support teams produces a value-added product that is an essential risk management and information tool essential to the operating goals of the organisation.

Successful current awareness can be measured best by the "difference between the information people want and the information people get stuck with"<sup>xiii</sup>. The current awareness products developed from the pilot project are designed to best meet this target.

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<sup>i</sup> Harris, Gwen. "Building a model business case: current awareness service in a special library". *Special Libraries*, 87(3) 1996, p181

<sup>ii</sup> Kumar, K. *Reference Service*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd Ghaziabad, 1980, in G. Mahesh and D.K. Gupta, *Changing paradigm in journals based current awareness services in libraries*, *Information Services and Use*. 28 (2008) 59-65

<sup>iii</sup> Atherton, P. *Handbook for information systems and services*. UNESCO, Paris, 1997, in G. Mahesh and D.H. Gupta, "Changing paradigm in journals based current awareness services in libraries", *Information Services and Use*, 28 (2008) pp 59-65

<sup>iv</sup> Platt, Nina. Current awareness Part 2 <<http://strategiclibrarian.com/2007/08/15/current-awareness-part-2/>> at 8 January 2009

<sup>v</sup> Really Simple Syndication. For a simple explanation of RSS, visit <<http://www.whatisrss.com/>> at 26 August 2009

<sup>vi</sup> Laura A. Dabbish and Robert E. Kraut *Email overload at work: an analysis of factors associated with email strain* <<http://delivery.acm.org/10.1145/1190000/1180941/p431-dabbish.pdf?key1=1180941&key2=0562674611&coll=GUIDE&dl=GUIDE&CFID=15151515&CFTOKEN=6184618>> at 21 January 2009

<sup>vii</sup> Quentin Jones, Rafaeili Sheizaf and Ravid Gilal. "Information overload and the message dynamics of online interaction spaces: a theoretical model and empirical exploration". *Information Systems Research* Vol 15, No 2, June 2004 pp 194-210.

<sup>viii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>ix</sup> Poynton, Caroline. *Managing the Evolution of Libraries and Information Services*. Arkgroup, 2008.

<sup>x</sup> John-Steiner, V. "The challenge of studying collaboration". *American Educational Research Journal* 35(4), 773-783, as cited in Montiel-Overall, P "Teacher and teacher-librarian collaboration: moving toward integration". *Teacher Librarian*, 34(2) p 28

<sup>xi</sup> Hart, Brooke. "How to develop a successful business strategy" eHow.com <[http://ehow.com/how\\_2305829\\_develop-business-strategy.html](http://ehow.com/how_2305829_develop-business-strategy.html)> at 3 August 2009

<sup>xii</sup> Platt, Nina. Current awareness Part 2 <<http://strategiclibrarian.com/2007/08/15/current-awareness-part-2/>> at 8 January 2009

<sup>xiii</sup> Soloman, Marc. "When push comes to pull: serving current awareness applications in your company" *Searcher*, June 1999 7(6) p 70