How can law libraries leverage LibGuides?

By Melanie Cofield and Kasia Solon

"What resources do you recommend for researching the law in the land of X?" a patron asks. You have no clue, as you live and work in Y. Have no fear. You quickly search for a guide online but, as you compare search results, do you feel like you just found a guide with a startling resemblance to other guides you know you've seen before? If so, the explanation may be LibGuides, librarian-authored research guides from Springshare LLC that are for public consumption or specific courses. LibGuides, which all have a similar look, with tabs and columns of boxes, have made significant inroads into the law library community.

Among law libraries, LibGuides is currently most popular in academia. (About 64 of 200 American Bar Association-approved law schools show up in a search of the LibGuides Community site for "law.") But as word spreads about its ease of use, it is likely other types of law libraries will adopt the product, as well. At the Tarlton Law Library at The University of Texas, we welcomed the chance to use LibGuides—we saw it as an affordable, easy-to-launch solution to some persistent web publishing challenges. And though by this stage we have had success with LibGuides for more than two years (steady use of more than 40 guides created by more than 10 contributors), now seems to be a good time to step back and reflect. What else can we do with LibGuides? And what the heck is everyone else doing with it?

The main function of LibGuides is to simplify the creating and updating of guides while handling a variety of media. Librarians suddenly have time to create guides on topics further afield than pure legal research; Drake Law Library's Starting a Law Practice guide is one such example. Librarians can take on subjects that require constant updates, as UCLA Law Library's guide on the ever-growing field of mobile apps demonstrates. Tarlton's federal legislative history guide contains more multimedia and dynamic features than ever before, from video to live RSS feeds.

There are more examples to be sure, and we are always interested to learn about new research guides. But can law libraries leverage LibGuides in unexpected ways? Here are some possibilities for doing so from our ventures at Tarlton.

Staff Training and Collaboration

Besides public, or "published," guides, LibGuides allows for private guides available only to those with the URL. At our library, we have created a few for staff training, starting with one on how to use LibGuides. We began with another school's public guide as a template, customizing it as needed (after seeking permission and providing attribution, of course). By repurposing an existing guide, we avoided redundant effort and got a jump on training. Our other staff-use guides cover blogging, Twitter, and RSS feeds, serving both as self-paced training resources for new staff and as handy references for recurring how-to questions.

We have also used LibGuides for more short-term needs, like an internal collection development survey for products under consideration. LibGuides' built-in feedback tools provide a quick and dirty mechanism for polling staff and displaying results. Sometimes LibGuides is the perfect tool to just "git 'er done."

Instruction

Another approach we tried was to turn the creation of a guide into a class project. As part of an advanced legal research class, we blocked out the major portions of a guide on the legal research process and then "invited" students to add content to an assigned topic. At the end of the class (and after some professorial edits), a guide was born. Students not only learned something about their specific topics but also about the existence of..."
Following are some helpful LibGuides links:

LibGuides:  
www.springshare.com/libguides

LibGuides Community:  
libguides.com/community.php?m=5&ref=libguides.com

The Springshare Lounge:  
springsharelounge.com

Drake Law Library's Starting a Law Practice:  
lubguides.law.drake.edu/startAFirm

UCLA Law Library's Mobile Applications for Law Students and Lawyers:  
libguides.law.ucla.edu/mobilelegalapps

Tarlton Law Library's Federal Legislative History Research:  
tarltonguides.law.utexas.edu/federal-legislative-history

Tarlton Law Library's Legal Research Process:  
tarltonguides.law.utexas.edu/legal-research-process

Georgia State University College of Law Library's LibGuides:  
libguides.law.gsu.edu

Tarlton Law Library's Resources for UT Law Students:  
tarltonguides.law.utexas.edu/student-resources

Both the firm and the client may be too busy to conduct this follow-up. However, in many situations clients will appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback, and the information gathered can be invaluable in helping to avoid past mistakes or leverage best practices for future transactions. Because the lawyers at the firm will often already be moving on to the next deal, there is an opportunity for law librarians to wear their knowledge-management hats, sit on project-management teams, and help coordinate after-action reviews, whether in person or through the use of online surveys with the client.

8 Internal administrative projects:  
Although LPM is most often discussed in the context of client-facing initiatives, realize that the principles of project management apply equally well to large, internal administrative projects. Such projects can include a wide variety of activities, ranging from the adoption of a new document-management system to figuring out improved workflow processes for vacation requests or expense-reimbursement forms. Or more directly: the tasks of merging expense-reimbursement forms. Or more directly: the tasks of merging document-management system to integrating library catalogues in a law library print collection or reorganizing the content into a LibGuide in time for fall orientation. This has simplified the process of adding and removing items as events come and go. A portion of our website that once required the work of two people now only requires one.

Next Steps  
We want to stay abreast of new legal research guides and new ways to use LibGuides. How can LibGuides users find such information? The LibGuides Community site is one avenue, serving as a portal to published guides across institutions. LibGuides also provides mechanisms to send registrants email or RSS notifications when new content is published. However, these options lack efficiency; people must either actively seek out new content or create multiple individual notification subscriptions to stay current about LibGuides developments.

Web Content Management  
LibGuides has provided us relief from some of the challenges in keeping our web content current. Earlier this year, we took a portion of Tarlton's website, the Resources for Law Students pages, and quickly transferred, updated, and reorganized the content into a LibGuide in time for fall orientation. This has simplified the process of adding and removing items as events come and go. A portion of our website that once required the work of two people now only requires one.

We envision an alternative, with the automatic aggregation of update notifications (whether email or RSS) from law libraries using LibGuides pulled into one web portal. Currently, the notification options in LibGuides do not seem to readily accommodate this strategy, but we suspect a third-party tool and some ingenuity could yield something promising.

The Springshare Lounge: a networking site for Springshare product users that was recently retooled to improve information sharing, seems an interesting venue to explore. This resource now includes groups in which micro-communities can discuss and share ideas. If we build a law library group there, will they come? Of course, a similar but more immediate strategy would be to solicit and share LibGuides news on established law library listservs.

As more law librarians use LibGuides, our hope is that we can all learn from one another. The proliferation of one research guide platform is creating a novel situation of law libraries being more interconnected than ever before in terms of our intellectual content. Research guides are only one aspect of our roles in legal research, but here's hoping we can work together to make the most of it.

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Get On Board  
I have long felt that law librarians are underappreciated in their knowledge-management abilities (and have not been active enough in promoting their skills in that area). To the extent there is overlap of knowledge management and LPM relating to research, precedents, checklists, and technology, I also see a role for law librarians in supporting LPM. Given the importance of LPM, librarians should get involved. Are you on board?

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