

## Legal Professionals' Perception of Law Libraries in the Digital Age: A study on how legal professionals view the relevance of traditional law libraries today

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### ABSTRACT

This article looks at the perceptions held by legal professionals with reference to the merit, relevance, and status that traditional law libraries hold in this digital age. It is quite apparent that legal research has seen a revolutionary change, with the prominence held by sources like online databases and e-books, challenging traditional law libraries to continue being relevant and significant. The study examines the frequency of visits to physical libraries; the use of digital legal databases; and the opinions of legal professionals on whether productivity is enhanced by a physical library environment. Furthermore, it delves into the limitations of digital resources, as well as the evolving role of law libraries functioning as hybrid spaces by combining both digital and physical resources. The findings reveal that while convenience is the prime reason for digital resources being widely favoured, there are many legal professionals who still value traditional law libraries for their unique offerings such as providing access to rare materials in particular and fostering a conducive research environment.

**Keywords:** Legal professionals, Law libraries, Digital resources, Hybrid law libraries, Legal research

### Introduction

The transformation that has been rendered by digital technologies in a vast arena, including many industries, certainly does not make an exception of the legal field. Law libraries, which at one time, were the active and indispensable hubs for seeking case laws, statutes, commentaries, and treatises by legal professionals, presently face the challenge of staying relevant in the digital age. With the growth of online legal databases, e-books, and digital repositories, an evolution of the role of traditional law libraries is also apparent. This article explores how legal professionals perceive the importance and relevance of traditional law libraries in this digital era. "Allowing citizens access to the courts and to legal information is a cornerstone of judicial administration in democratic societies and is a human right under international law" (Francioni, 2007).

#### 1. The Shift from Physical to Digital Resources

The proliferation of online legal databases like Westlaw, LexisNexis, and Manupatra, legal professionals has greatly increased the options available by which to access legal resources. Further, the ease of access to digital materials has reduced the necessity of frequent physical visits to law libraries. "Presently, information professionals and law librarians are in a race to harness the potential of new technology by providing users with a wide range of current information across the world via digital or electronic platforms, enabling the user to access library resources from the comfort of their homes or offices thereby breaking the geographical barriers that exist in a traditional library setting." (Bedford et al., 2015) The perception of law libraries as physical space is shifting, and many professionals now use these facilities for resources that are not available online, such as rare legal texts or archives of historical case law. "The Internet and digital revolution have led both to an information overload, with information coming from many different directions, and the simultaneous increased speed of information, where almost instantaneous responses are expected from the easy flow of information" (Germain, 2007).

**1.1. Frequency of library visit by legal professionals**

Table 1. shows data related to the frequency of visits to a physical library, based on gender. Analyzing this data gives an understanding of library usage patterns among different demographic groups, particularly males and females. Identifying the visit frequency of individuals gender-wise for utilizing library services helps the institutions gain insights into user behavior, preferences, and the levels of engagement of library spaces in physical terms.

*Table 1. Frequency of visits to the physical library*

Gender	Frequency of visits to the physical library					Total
	Daily	Several times a week	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	
Male	66	312	22	82	4	486
	14%	64%	5%	17%	1%	100%
Female	9	54	18	3	0	84
	11%	64%	21%	4%	0%	100%
Total	75	366	40	85	4	570
	13%	64%	7%	15%	1%	100%

The data available in Table 1, shows that gender wise, the library is visited regularly, several times a week, by most males and females, with this frequency being exhibited by 64% of respondents from both genders. The library visits by male participants in terms of total numbers is significantly higher but the proportions of frequent visitors are similar across genders. Females are consistent visitors to the library, as none reported never visiting. The data suggests that physical library usage by way of frequent visitors (several times a week) is seen across both genders. Females, although more likely to visit occasionally, they still have an engagement level which is reflected by the fact that never visiting the library shows to be nil. “Student-based outreach is encouraged because college students today are less dependent upon the traditional library. With the rise of electronic and Internet resources, students may never feel the need to step inside the physical library or use a librarian in their research” (Dickson & Holley, 2010).

**1.1 Use of digital resources in a law library**

Law libraries have transformed into hybrid libraries with the acquisition of e-resources. “In many countries of the world, official documents are now available on the Internet, based on the policy of governments to provide better access to legal information for the public. The Internet has thus greatly facilitated worldwide access to legal information” (Germain, 2007). Table 2 presents data on the usage frequency of legal databases, based on gender. This data when analyzed aids in understanding gender-based engagement with legal databases, which act as the crucial tools for legal research and information retrieval. This analysis, by providing insights into user behavior, identifies usage frequency patterns and highlights disparities if any with regard to how male and female users access or engage the databases.

*Table 2 Frequency of use of legal databases (digital)*

Gender	Frequency of use of legal databases					Total
	Daily	Several times a week	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	
Male	12	45	388	35	6	486
	2%	9%	80%	7%	1%	100%
Female	2	2	67	9	4	84
	2%	2%	80%	11%	5%	100%
Total	14	47	455	44	10	570

	2%	8%	80%	8%	2%	100%
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The data in Table 2, when analysed shows the majority of both males and females use legal databases occasionally (80% for both genders). This figure is indicative of the predominant use of legal databases that happens occasionally as per need and not on a daily or frequent basis. Respondents using legal databases daily are a minuscule: 2% for both males and females, suggesting that daily use of legal databases is rare for both genders. Occasional use which is need-based and not on a regular use basis, dominates for both genders. The frequency of legal database usage for males is more than for females, as seen from the higher proportions of weekly users, although both genders are similarly inclined in the use of databases occasionally.

**2. Digital Platforms and Their Limitations**

In spite of the many advantages linked to digital law resources, such platforms have their share of limitations. Legal professionals many a time have perceived digital databases to be incomplete or lacking in historical depth. While all the existing legal materials have not been digitized, there is the possibility of gaps in older case law, legislative records, or rare commentaries as existing only in print. Traditional law libraries, therefore, continue to retain their relevance as repositories for historical and unique legal texts.

Figure 1 provides data regarding male and female-based opinions related to the convenience of legal databases as compared to physical law libraries. This analysis is crucial in understanding how the different genders perceive, prefer and relate to digital legal resources. With legal research increasingly becoming dependent on legal databases, it is imperative to assess user satisfaction and convenience as they are important for strategizing future strategies in library services, digital infrastructure development, and user support. This analysis can reveal the notable differences if any in the gender-based perception of these resources, thereby helping institutions make informed decisions on resource allocation, training programs, and the promotion of digital tools.

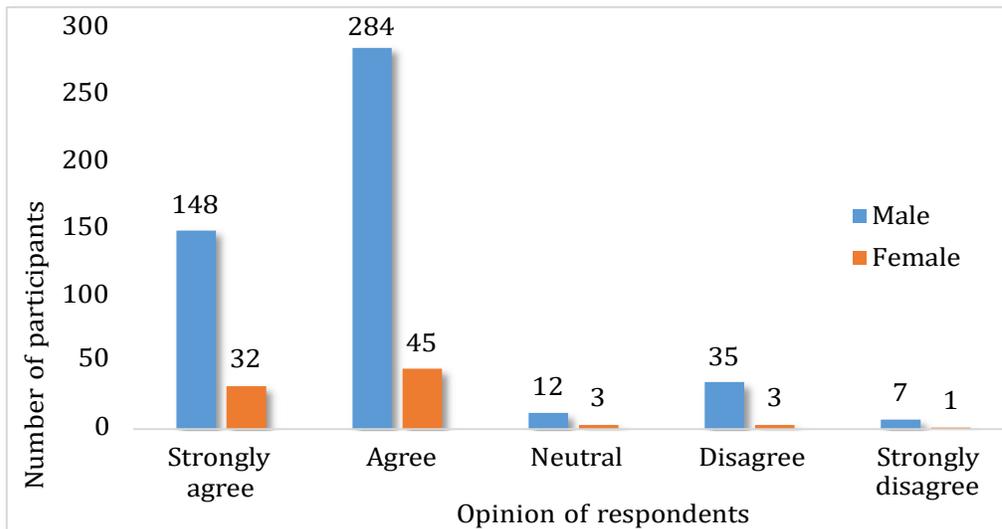


Figure 1. Opinion of respondents: Online legal databases are more convenient than physical law libraries for accessing legal information

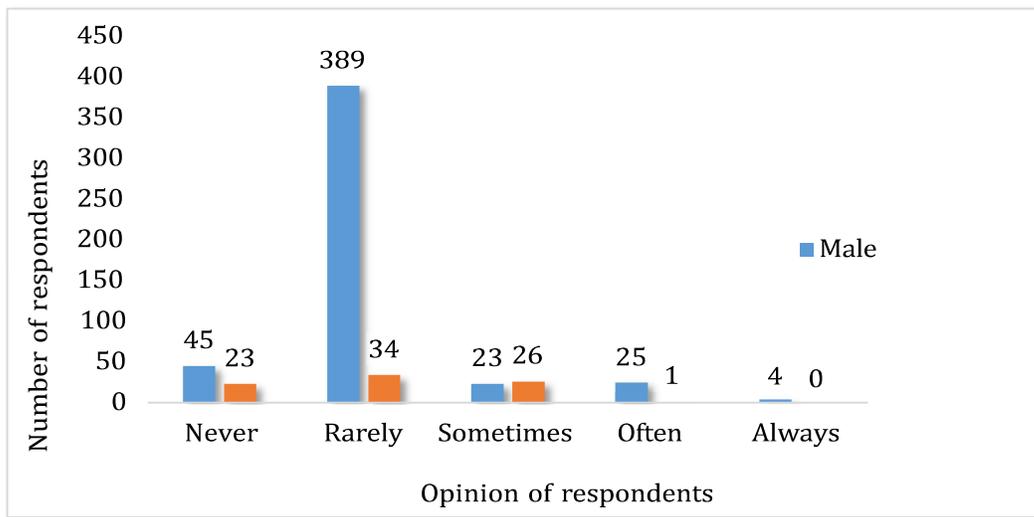
There is a major acceptance across genders of the convenience of legal databases over physical law libraries. 88% of males (30% strongly agree, 58% agree) and 92% of females (38% strongly agree, 54% agree) support this view, indicating a strong overall preference for legal databases. Only 2% of males and 4% of females remained neutral. This indicates that most respondents have a clear stance, with 90% of respondents (32% strongly agree, 58% agree) across both genders preferring legal databases. This reinforces the notion that legal research perceives legal databases as more convenient than physical law libraries.

The data is indicative of both males and females widely regarding legal databases as more convenient than physical law libraries. The small percentage of neutral or disagreeing responses indicates the strong support for digital legal resources, which is consistent across genders, there is only slight variations in the degree of agreement. “In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that more legal information is being produced than ever before:

there are more legislative documents, regulations, and judicial opinions produced today than at any time in the past. (Leiter, 2015)

**3. Lack of Information in Digital Resources**

Figure 2 presents data on user opinions regarding the lack of information in legal databases, categorized by gender. Conducting this analysis is important to assess the perceived completeness and reliability of legal databases, which are critical tools for legal professionals and researchers.



*Figure 2. Opinion of respondents: Online legal databases lack the needed information*

This analysis holds importance for assessing the perceived completeness and reliability of legal databases, which serve as critical tools for legal professionals and researchers. Analysing the frequency of encountering missing information by users based on their gender, can help identify satisfaction or dissatisfaction patterns which may reveal the underlying issues related to content availability, search functionalities, or user expectations.

A majority of males (80%) report rarely experiencing a lack of information in legal databases, indicating the satisfaction of most male users with database content and coverage. Few males (5%) report experiencing missing information sometimes or often; while 1% feel that information is always lacking. Overall, the majority of users from both genders (74% of the total respondents) report that they rarely find information missing in legal databases, which suggests that despite the possible existence of occasional gaps, they are not a major concern for most users. 12% of respondents (mostly females) opined never encountered missing information, while 9% opined that it is occasional occurrence.

The data suggests that issues with missing information in legal databases are rarely encountered by most users, though females are more likely than males to report gaps in coverage. Severe issues of information scarcity while being minimal, it is seen that there is reporting of occasional gaps by a significant proportion of females, indicating a need for enhanced database content or improved search functionalities leading to better user experiences. Overall, a majority of users perceive legal databases as comprehensive.

**4. Perceived Benefits of Traditional Law Libraries**

The ambiance and structured environment of a physical law library continues to be appreciated by many legal professionals, where the quiet, focused atmosphere allows for concentrated legal research and writing. This can sometimes be challenging in a digital workspace. Moreover, law libraries help to foster a sense of community among legal professionals while also providing a suitable environment for informal networking and knowledge-sharing.

**4.1 A physical library enhances productivity compared to a digital library**

The given table provides data on gender-based opinions regarding whether a physical library enhances

productivity. Conducting this analysis is important to understand how users perceive the role of physical libraries in contributing to their work efficiency and academic or professional success. As libraries continue to evolve with digital resources, it is essential to assess whether physical spaces are still valued by different user groups, particularly males and females.

*Table 3 Opinion of respondents: A physical law library's quiet and focused environment enhances your productivity compared to working in a digital workspace.*

Gender	Opinion that a Physical Library enhances productivity					Total
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
Male	185	253	18	15	15	486
	38%	52%	4%	3%	3%	100%
Female	12	65	6	1	0	84
	14%	77%	7%	1%	0%	100%
Total	197	318	24	16	15	570
	35%	56%	4%	3%	3%	100%

A significant proportion of respondents strongly agree that a physical library enhances productivity: 35% of the total sample (38% of males and 14% of females). Males show a notably higher rate of strong agreement compared to females. 52% of males and 77% of females agree that a physical library enhances productivity. This indicates that the majority of both genders support the idea that a physical library contributes positively to their productivity. Males show a stronger overall conviction (with 38% strongly agreeing) compared to females, who are more likely to agree (77%) but less likely to strongly agree (14%). This indicates that while both genders recognize the value of a physical library, males express stronger confidence in its role in enhancing productivity.

The data points out that most respondents believe physical libraries enhance productivity, with males expressing a firmer conviction through higher rates of strong agreement. Females are more likely to agree moderately, suggesting that despite both genders finding value in physical libraries, it is males who show slightly more confidence in their productivity benefits. Disagreement showing to be minimal, is a reflection of a generally positive consensus on physical libraries as being important for enhancing productivity.

### 5. Challenges Facing Traditional Law Libraries in the Digital Age

Traditional law libraries, despite their importance, face significant challenges in adapting to the digital terrain. Challenges like budget constraints, the continual need for physical space, and rising subscription costs for legal databases present challenges to the maintenance of robust collections. Furthermore, there remains the likelihood that younger, more digitally literate legal professionals may bypass physical libraries, in favour of online tools, leading to reduced footfalls in these spaces.

#### 5.1. Law libraries should focus on digital resources

The given table provides data on gender-based opinions regarding whether a physical library enhances productivity. Conducting this analysis is important to understand how users perceive the role of physical libraries in contributing to their work efficiency and academic or professional success. As libraries continue to evolve with digital resources, it is essential to assess whether physical spaces are still valued by different user groups, particularly males and females. By identifying trends in user preferences, institutions can make informed decisions on allocating resources for physical and digital library services.

Table 4 Opinion of respondents: Law libraries should focus more on digital resources rather than maintaining physical collections

Gender	Opinion that libraries should focus on digital resources					Total
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
Male	156	277	12	18	23	486
	32%	57%	2%	4%	5%	100%
Female	13	68	3	0	0	84
	15%	81%	4%	0%	0%	100%
Total	169	345	15	18	23	570
	30%	61%	3%	3%	4%	100%

A significant proportion of respondents strongly agree that a physical library enhances productivity: 35% of the total sample (38% of males and 14% of females). Males show a notably higher rate of strong agreement compared to females. This suggests that males have a stronger belief in the productivity benefits of a physical library compared to females. 52% of males and 77% of females agree that a physical library enhances productivity. This indicates that the majority of both genders support the idea that a physical library contributes positively to their productivity. Males show a stronger overall conviction (with 38% strongly agreeing) compared to females, who are more likely to agree (77%) but less likely to strongly agree (14%). This indicates that while both genders recognize the value of a physical library, males express stronger confidence in its role in enhancing productivity. Females tend to agree but are less definitive in their opinion than males, as reflected in the lower percentage of strong agreement and higher neutral responses.

The data indicates that most respondents believe that physical libraries enhance productivity, with males expressing a stronger conviction through higher rates of strong agreement. Females are more likely to agree, albeit moderately, suggesting that while both genders find value in physical libraries, males are slightly more confident in their productivity benefits. Disagreement is minimal, which reflects a generally positive consensus on the importance of physical libraries for enhancing productivity.

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### 5.2. Law Libraries as Hybrid Spaces

Many law libraries are progressing into hybrid spaces where traditional physical resources and digital tools blend seamlessly. The benefits of this blended approach where physical books and journals complement electronic legal databases, are gaining awareness amongst legal professionals. Law libraries have also effectively adapted in becoming centers for legal technology, by offering access to legal software, e-discovery tools, and collaborative spaces for legal professionals. Thus, they have altered into hybrid spaces acting as repositories of both traditional and digital resources.

### Conclusion

“The most dynamic and challenging job is legal librarianship because of the constant flow of new material and the constant changing of judicial and legislative decisions” (Singh & Maharana, 2024). It cannot be denied that digital technologies have transformed the way research is conducted by legal professionals. Yet the relevance of traditional law libraries continues to endure, even if it is in a changing form. Legal professionals have viewed law libraries not as mere repositories of physical books; rather they look on them as essential institutions providing

access to both physical and digital resources, expert research assistance, and a conducive environment for professional development. The future of law libraries rests on their ability to bring about an integration of both digital and traditional resources, thereby catering to the evolving needs of the legal profession.

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