VENDOR VOICE

Putting Learning into Perspective with the Practising Law Institute

Since 1933, PLI has provided instruction and publications to help attorneys hone their craft.

Eighty-seven years ago, shortly after graduating from law school, New York attorney Harold P. Seligson realized that, like many young lawyers, his academic training hadn't fully prepared him to actually practice—so he created a handful of courses to help his fellow industry members learn functional legal techniques.

Those courses, initially offered during the Great Depression, marked the start of the Practising Law Institute (PLI), a nonprofit learning organization, which today still supports Seligson's initial goal—providing legal professionals with the necessary tools and training throughout their careers to successfully represent their clients.

Over the years, PLI's course offerings have swelled from 15 classes in 1933 to more than 400 programs today, with 10,000 available on-demand hours of educational instruction, delivered by more than 4,000 industry professionals, including prominent lawyers, judges, investment bankers, accountants, corporate counsel, and U.S. and international government regulators.

PLI Press, the organization's printing arm, has published more than 4,000 titles, including treatises, course handbooks, answer books, and journals relating to 25 practice areas. Featuring skills knowledge from expert legal practitioners, the content has been available electronically since 2012 through the organization's PLI PLUS platform, which was named the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) New Product of the Year in 2013.

We spoke with Alexa Robertson, PLI's director of legal information services and electronic publishing, about how PLI's online research utility has evolved over time, the role law librarians played in its

PLI PLUS users can search for information by entering a term, article or book title, author name, or other criteria.

formation, and why the ability to successfully utilize data could someday be worth its weight in gold.

Which industry members use the PLI PLUS platform?

PLI PLUS's customer base includes law firms, law schools, corporations, nonprofits, and government agencies. Librarians are our primary users. Of course, associates, partners, professors, students, and other legal professionals also use PLI PLUS. We have an easy-to-use interface, so you don't have to be a research expert to find an answer to your question quickly and easily.

What was the inspiration for creating PLI PLUS?

There is a new generation of attorneys and librarians who are more accustomed to using electronic resources than print resources; on top of that, law librarians have been migrating from print to electronic for years now. Each medium has its strong points—but one example of the power of electronic resources is that a subscription to PLI PLUS provides more than 4,000 PLI Press titles without taking up any shelf space. It also eliminates the need to file supplements for treatises, as updates occur automatically.

How has the platform changed since its launch?

PLI PLUS has kept its easy-to-use functionality, while adding content and customer-requested enhancements. The entire organization underwent a major rebranding in 2017, and we updated the visual look and feel of PLI PLUS.

Every new title published is now automatically available on PLUS, so the collection includes staples such as *Sack on Defamation* and *Friedman on Leases,* alongside newer titles such as the *Legal Guide to the Business of Marijuana* and *Technology Transactions.* Also, we have been working to build out the archive at the request of customers. Librarians asked us to add our back files to help them to support their organizations. As libraries weed their collections, we are committed to being a resource for all PLI publications, old and new. We have added more than 2,000 older titles and now feature content dating back as far as 1980.

Have law librarians contributed in any way to the product?

Law librarians have shaped PLI PLUS since its inception. Not only do we have law librarians on the product team and a librarian as the product owner, but we also worked with law librarians throughout the entire development process. We included librarians in demos and asked for their feedback; we included librarians in beta testing; and we continue to solicit their feedback.

Most of our enhancements, however big or small, were due to customer requests. A good example is that we provide MARC records as part of the subscription to PLI PLUS; as we were introducing PLI PLUS to the legal community, librarians asked us to provide them. That had not been on our original road map and we added it in. It took us time, and we developed a catalog of records that we are really proud of. We sent samples to customers, including members of AALL's Technical Services Special Interest Section (SIS). We continue to create MARC records for our titles and distribute them quarterly as part of the subscription, and we continue to listen to customer feedback—just last year, we added OCNs (OCLC numbers) to our records due to customer requests.

How do you find authors for your publications?

We actively solicit authors in areas of the law where we feel reference materials would help our audience. Many times, we will notice the popularity of a program or an uptick in use of the corresponding course handbook on PLI PLUS, and we will reach out to the speaker to explore an opportunity. Because PLI provides a multitude of programs on topics across the spectrum of legal practices, and our programs are led by expert speakers who are renowned in their practice area, we can gage demand and feasibility of a topic.

Likewise, authors will contact us with an idea they believe lends itself to the written word, rather than a lecture. Either way, it's a conversation that leads to a product that serves the profession.

Simply put, we always have our eyes and ears open—and welcome any new and great ideas from across the profession.

What are some of your most popular published titles?

The 31-volume *Corporate Tax Practice Series* is our most popular title on PLI PLUS—but popular titles can vary by discipline. For example, *Working with Contracts* and *An Associate's First Year* are top titles for law school students and recent graduates. Other top titles include *Public Company Deskbook, Kane on Trademark Law,* and *Art Law.*

How do librarians use the published content on a day-to-day basis?

They find PLI PLUS is a place to start their research. Our authors provide in-depth coverage and analysis of legal topics, and PLI PLUS provides a platform to quickly search and find answers.

PLI FACTS

Founded: 1933

Chartered by: The Regents of the University of the State of New York

Educational Programs: In addition to SECI compliance and accounting education workshops and a Patent Office Exam Course, more than 400 new legal programs are presented annually by 4,000-plus volunteer faculty members, including lawyers, judges, accountants, government regulators, and other professionals.

Published Products: More than 4,000 answer books, course handbooks, journals, and treatises, are available via the digital PLI PLUS library.

Website: www.pli.edu

Have you added anything new to the platform lately?

The addition of case law links through a partnership with Fastcase. We have numerous case law citations in PLI Press titles; by providing direct links to these cases, at no additional cost to our customers, we are able to save legal researchers time.

Do law librarians take the educational courses the organization offers?

Yes, they do, and we have partnered with the Law Library Association of Greater New York (LLAGNY) around educational programming that's of interest to librarians.

Although obviously created primarily for lawyers, the breadth of our programming is developed with the entire profession in mind—from librarians to practice development professionals, paralegals, and others. We want entire law firms, corporations, government agencies, educational institutions, and similar organizations engaged.

Typically, most librarians are part of an organization or firm that has signed on as one of our Privileged Members—organizations that have unlimited access to our full catalog of programming, including more than 10,000 hours of on-demand instruction and more than 400 new programs produced annually. Access extends to any employee. Our PLI PLUS resource is available through an annual subscription. Subscription prices vary by practice area segment.

What are some of the challenges the industry faces today, in regard to the dissemination of legal information?

It's simple: technology—which is not only rapidly changing the legal profession, it is changing the way information is used and consumed. It's difficult to predict what support the profession will need in the near future, how its practitioners will want that support delivered, what tools librarians will need, and how we can best invest in products that will meet that demand.

For example, today, most associates performing legal analysis know how to cite-check their work, but few, if any, have ever picked up a *Shepard's Citations*

book. They do not realize that researchers in the past had to check out scores of books, read indexes, and cross-reference to adequately cite-check a brief. For some, that's a simple, and relatively welcome, development. But what happens when the entire body of law—the entire universe of documents—can be scanned in fractions of seconds with artificial intelligence? What is the lawyer's role? What is the librarian's role? What information do they need, and how can PLI deliver it? We are not the only profession asking these questions, but the answers are closer to becoming a reality than we may realize.

What do you think the legal information industry landscape will look like in the future?

The awesome power of technology has made everyone re-evaluate how they can best harness the information they once took for granted or did not even know was valuable. That's why many have seen knowledge management or advisory knowledge take form as a defined role in larger organizations. It's why some have called data the new oil, and why technology companies have such high valuations.

Information can be used to gain competitive advantages like never before. Luckily, we are all in the information industry—even if it is purely for legal needs. In the next few years, we will see greater integration of library sciences with information technology. For example, developing and integrating application program interfaces (API) will become routine necessities in the legal space. Federated search platforms will become de rigueur. Some of these things may sound scary or foreign today, but what matters most is what has always mattered—even 80 years ago: Can I find the right information that is useful and accurate?

That's what we all do today, and what we will do in the future. It's a future librarians will play a critical role in shaping. ∎

IM Information Management