

# The law librarian's tool for fair compensation in the best—and worst—of times

By Femi Cadmus and Loretta Orndoff

None of us can deny that the last year has been one of economic uncertainty and of great concern as we face the challenges of operating with shrinking budgets. On the salary and compensation front, the *AALL Biennial Salary Survey* remains a vital tool in preserving fair and equitable compensation for law librarians.

The AALL salary survey reaches the broadest segment of law librarians and has the highest response rate of other comparable law library-related surveys. The data collected for the AALL survey is requested from head librarians, and an independent outsourced research company tabulates submitted data. The survey focuses only and specifically on law library personnel, while differentiating between law librarians in private law firms, academic law libraries, and court/government settings. It also covers more than 20 law library position descriptions and reports data for law libraries with more than 451 attorneys/judges or more than 650 students/45 faculty. The level of detail for each law library position includes level of education, years in that position, and geographic area, including nine census regions and large metropolitan areas.

The careful collection of data, in very specific categories that are meaningful for assessing compensation and bonuses in the varied settings (geographic; size of firm, school, or court), makes the biennial survey an essential tool for both the law library professional and potential employers. However, in conducting a survey targeted at private law librarians and a discussion forum directed towards AALL members, the AALL Economic Status of Law Librarians Committee found that members sometimes had difficulty getting their institutions to recognize the value of the AALL survey. The preference in private libraries appeared to be for other surveys that do not focus specifically on law libraries, but rather focus broadly on the legal profession. The AALL survey, however, remains the sole law library-oriented and in-depth assessment of salary and compensation in our profession.

So why is the AALL survey often not preferred by some librarians and compensation professionals? As a mature professional body of intelligent librarians and information managers, certainly we are not embarrassed to talk about money. More likely, law librarians do not have enough factual background to provide persuasive answers when asked why the

AALL survey is the best evaluation tool for compensation in law libraries. Armed with better information about the AALL survey, we will be better able to explain and promote it.

*The 2009 AALL Biennial Salary and Organizational Characteristics* is available for members online at [www.aallnet.org/members/pub\\_salary09.asp](http://www.aallnet.org/members/pub_salary09.asp).

Hard copies of the survey can be purchased for \$110 (members) and \$175 (non-members) at [www.aallnet.org/products/pub\\_salary\\_survey.asp](http://www.aallnet.org/products/pub_salary_survey.asp).

## History

The *2009 AALL Biennial Salary Survey* has just been published and is available at no charge to current AALL members in digitized format on AALL's website or for purchase in print. The survey premiered in 1993 and was the first comprehensive effort to conduct a salary survey of all members of the Association. Prior to this time, individuals and special interest sections had invested time and money in compiling local and regional data on law librarian compensation. Penny Hazelton, associate dean for library and computing services at the University of Washington School of Law, who had vigorously spearheaded efforts to publish a survey, describes what the thinking was at that time:

First, the AALL policy was to have a minimum salary requirement for posting job openings in the AALL Newsletter. That minimum was embarrassingly low at that time. Second, we had no facts, so if a law firm or court library wanted to hire their first professional librarian, the Association (and its members) could not help with some general salary guidelines. Third, it seemed in the early 1990s that many employers were trying to pay extremely low wages (just anecdotal) for professional staff. Fourth, for law and library trained librarians (and there were more and more of these people in our profession), salaries did not seem to be keeping pace with new associate salaries or new law clerk

salaries. Fifth, for the responsibilities and expertise law librarians provide to their institutions/firms, I felt that salaries needed to be in line with the skills required for all positions in law libraries. Sixth, basically, I didn't think we could pay librarians too much—so more is always better, and having factual salary information to use could help librarians improve their negotiation posture once they are in a position.

## AALL Economic Status of Law Librarians Committee

The biennial survey has always elicited varied responses from AALL membership with suggestions for improvements, which have been incorporated into the survey when feasible. To this end, and in preparation for the 2009 survey, the Economic Status of Law Librarians Committee initiated a discussion forum in fall 2008 seeking input from AALL membership. The invitation to join the discussion forum (Comp-Chat) was extended to various special interest sections, including academic, private, and state and county courts.

The main question centered on the ability (or inability) of library directors and managers to use the current salary survey in their efforts to obtain fair salaries and compensation for staff, retain staff, and plan for future library positions. A recurring concern cited by some respondents (especially those working in law firms) was the lack of credibility of AALL's salary survey in comparison to other commercially published surveys. Other perceived shortcomings of the survey included the lack of data on benefits (such as health care, retirement, and tuition assistance), which constitute a significant component of total compensation, and billable hours data for law firm librarians. The issue of currency also arose specifically because the survey is published biennially instead of annually. Some from the law school market also indicated that the timing of publication would hinder planning in the law school market where budgets are planned and decided in the spring.

In addressing some of these issues raised, the 2009 survey includes new survey questions regarding the number of people a position supervises, billing information, and benefits. The survey also includes the new metro areas of Phoenix, Pittsburgh, and Portland. Job descriptions in private and academic law libraries were also thoroughly revised, and new job descriptions—Instructional/

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Reference/Research Librarian and Competitive Intelligence Analyst/Librarian—were added.

Also in the fall of 2008, the AALL Executive Board requested that the committee explore the possibility of developing a salary and compensation survey with an entity widely recognized in the law firm environment. The committee decided to review select surveys used in the law firm environment, identifying how they are compiled and constructed in comparison with the AALL survey. To assist in this project, the committee did a targeted survey of private law librarians in December 2008. A total of 213 librarians responded to the main survey question (“Is the AALL Survey used by

administrators in your firm?”), with 51.6 percent responding yes and 48.5 percent responding no.

Some librarians reported that they experienced an initial resistance to the AALL survey, which they overcame with persistent promotion of the publication. Another group of librarians raised the credibility issue and lack of recognition of the AALL survey by firm administrators. Some respondents asserted that administrators who made salary and compensation decisions most likely had not even heard of the AALL survey, the perception being that the survey has not ascended to the reputation of other national publications like Altman Weil, Watson Wyatt, etc.

Other reasons advanced by non-users were: data is self reported, salaries reported are too low, firm sizes are not comparable, human resources relies on local market data, and library directors are not interested in improving salaries.

As a committee, we decided to analyze and compare the AALL survey with three other surveys, the *Association of Legal Administrators (ALA) Compensation Survey*, *Altman Weil Survey of Law Firm Economics*, and the *Special Libraries Association (SLA) Salary Survey and Workplace Study*.

### Methodology and the Facts

All three of these surveys are published annually while the AALL survey is on a biennial cycle. Comments from some of our membership suggest that an annual publication would be more beneficial in terms of currency and would track trends in a timely manner.

With the exception of Altman Weil’s *Survey of Law Firm Economics*, the surveys are outsourced to research companies. In fact, the AALL and SLA surveys are outsourced to the same company, Association Research Inc. (ARI).

One of the factors cited for non-use of the AALL survey is the claim that it is self-reported. This claim, however, is inaccurate since the methodology for soliciting and gathering information and the tools used by all four surveys are similar. The ALA and SLA surveys, like the AALL survey, invite members to participate in the survey through a secure website. For purposes of gathering, tabulating, and analyzing data, AALL and SLA both utilize the services of Associated Research Inc. (ARI), while ALA uses Readex. Altman Weil invites and surveys about 260 law firms from prior contacts, law firms who purchased the last Altman Weil survey, including ALA members. Therefore, Altman Weil’s survey is not a comprehensive solicitation of law librarians but of select companies. Questionnaires are mailed to

designated contacts, and responses are mailed or completed online.

In terms of response rate, AALL posts the highest response and reaches a broader segment of law librarians. The overall response rate for the 2008 ALA survey was approximately 32 percent; the 2008 SLA survey had a response rate of 43 percent; and Altman Weil did not provide this information. The overall response rate of 60.2 percent for the 2009 AALL survey was significantly higher compared to the other surveys, with 54.3 percent for private libraries, 70.6 percent for academic libraries, and 55.7 percent for state, court, and county libraries.

Altman Weil’s main focus is law firm management and the finances of the billing individuals of a law firm; as such, it contains very little on the libraries within those private firms. Three positions are surveyed—library manager, manager of a one-person library, and library clerk—and brief titles and position descriptions are included. Meanwhile, the ALA survey covers *only one* position for the library, which is the director/manager of library services. The SLA survey does not contain job titles for law libraries but lists legal research as one of the options that could be selected by primary responsibility under nine general job titles. The AALL survey provides detailed and defined information on 23 library positions written and updated by special interest sections.

The salary surveys are also disparate in terms of firm size, and only about 4.5 percent of firms reported in Altman Weil are larger than 150, while the ALA Survey only goes up to 200-plus attorneys. Compare this to the 451-plus private firm/corporation size reported in the AALL survey. Anyone working in a large law firm or law school knows that size very definitely makes a difference in what is required of a position with the same title.

In the final analysis, the AALL survey is more detailed and helpful to the administrator seeking compelling data on law libraries; however, the core issue continues to be perception and lack of recognition. The issue of branding rises to the forefront as the other commercial surveys tend to be well received not because they are better but because they are published under well-recognized brands. The AALL survey needs an infusion of public awareness, a role that should be played by librarians and the Association as a whole. An advisory and collaborative role would also be more effective than simply switching publishers to a commercial entity to produce some “legitimacy.” In the past AALL has worked with Altman

## Surveying the Surveys

### Some important facts for information managers to know about salary surveys:

- AALL’s survey has 23 surveyed positions, SLA has seven positions (all top management, such as chief information officer/vice president, owner, director, or webmaster), ALA has one (director), and Altman Weil has three (manager, manager of one-person library, and library clerk).
- Years of experience are reported by AALL and SLA.
- Area of focus in AALL’s survey is law libraries; SLA has law as one of 16 subject areas.
- AALL reports academic, private/corporate, and government, whereas SLA reports many types of special libraries, and ALA and Altman Weil focus on law firms.
- AALL reports up to 451-plus attorneys/judges and 650-plus students/45-plus law faculty; SLA reports by total number of employees up to 10,000-plus, ALA reports up to 200 plus attorneys/judges, and Altman Weil reports to 150-plus attorneys.

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Weil to furnish detailed descriptions of library positions for their surveys. For most of the other publishers, the law library market is simply not their area of focus and expertise, and the surveys produced are not as detailed or exhaustive as the AALL survey.

The 2002 report of the past Law Librarian Compensation Special Committee stated: “The president of AALL must make a concerted effort to work with the leadership of the Association of Legal Administrators (ALA). It is crucial that this group, at both the national and local levels, understand who we are and what we do. At a minimum, the ALA’s salary surveys, on which many law firms rely in setting salaries, should accurately reflect the complexity and value of the law librarian profession.”

## Conclusion

The problem lies not with the usefulness

of the AALL survey but its perceived lack of credibility by some administrators. The stamp and imprimatur of a commercial survey will not cure the underlying problems relating to compensation of law librarians. Luis Acosta, chair of the past Law Librarian Compensation Special Committee, aptly stated in an August 6, 2003, online discussion list, “we should not confuse promoting the use of the AALL salary survey with the goal of improving the level of compensation for law librarians overall. The latter goal involves efforts like increasing demand through marketing and public relations, improving our negotiation skills, advocating pay equity.”

The *2009 Biennial Salary Survey* is an excellent and evolving tool in setting and negotiating salaries and compensation of law librarians. When compared to other salary surveys, the AALL survey best describes more law

library positions, and the reported data is more in-depth and relevant to law librarianship than other salary surveys. The AALL survey should be the most-used tool for evaluating law librarian compensation and benefits. Its usefulness and relevance, however, hinge on the willingness of members to contribute data, actually utilize the survey, and promote it with other efforts in marketing, branding, and public relations. ■

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