

Who Made Me the “Go To” Person for Copyright Law Issues, the Copyright Officer or De Facto Copyright Expert?

Many times I hear librarians, educators, editors and other non-lawyers say they have become the "go to" person for copyright issues. If you feel that you have fallen into this position (or if you have chosen it), follow this five-point plan to get up and running.

1. Get Authority

If your title is acquisitions librarian or reference librarian or any other title that does not have the word "copyright" in it, get that changed. You want fellow employees to be able to find you in the company directory; you need people to follow your advice when you tell them they cannot copy a newsletter or other item; and you need confirmation in your own mind that you are, in fact, the "go to" copyright person.

If you are going to be guiding people on copyright compliance, senior management should be aware of your role and why certain things are or are not permitted, and your fellow employees need to recognize your role in this complex and often frustrating area. You need authority to provide advice and guidance and ensure copyright compliance where necessary.

Some common titles for the copyright “go to” person are Copyright Officer, Copyright Librarian, Copyright Manager, Permissions Editor and Licensing Officer.

Undertake Internal Research

Take time to find out what's happening on the copyright and licensing front in your library and organization. What sorts of copyright-protected content are being used? Are print books an issue, or just electronic books? Are there questions regarding the public performance of videos and movies, or concerns relating to copying images or sound recordings? Do you have licensing agreements that no one can understand? How are copyright and licensing issues resolved? Do you answer questions about copyright and licensing issues, or are they dealt with in different ways by different people? Perhaps your new title as “Copyright Officer” can help you organize and streamline copyright issues in your organization.

Budget

As the copyright go to person, you will find there are many things on which to spend money. Books and newsletters about copyright should be read and placed on a reference shelf or intranet page for you and your colleagues to consult. You will want some training in copyright law, and you may also want to train others with whom you work so that they know the basics and know when to approach you with questions and concerns.

You may need money to hire a copyright consultant to develop a copyright policy for you. You may also need a budget to consult with a copyright lawyer on questions that you cannot answer.

Get Educated

Did you take an information law policy course in library school? If so, dig out your notes and look at the bigger picture. Locate books that are written for librarians on copyright and licensing (there are several available). Read Web sites and blogs.

Self-study can take you far on copyright issues. There are many excellent websites and blogs on various aspects of copyright and licensing. Professional associations often offer year round courses as well as sessions at annual conferences. Consider taking online and in-person courses to learn basic principles, upgrade your knowledge, and stay on top of changes in the law. If there are others in your organization also upgrading their copyright knowledge, arrange for a private webinar or course geared towards your needs.

Obtain Help

Do you have a network of people you can contact for assistance, such as colleagues in similar positions? Does your organization have an attorney, either on staff or on retainer, who can advise you on copyright matters that are outside your comfort zone?

It is important that you establish contacts in the library and legal communities to assist you in such situations. Build a support system by attending conferences and meeting others who work in copyright, networking with fellow students in copyright courses, and joining online copyright communities.

Now, Get Going!

Although you may never have intended to be the copyright “go to” person in your organization, you may find that the job offers much satisfaction. You will be a key player in helping people gain access to information, moving work forward, and eliminating the frustration and uncertainty that others confront when using content. While you may often say no to requests, your colleagues will soon appreciate your value in guiding them through the copyright maze.

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