

A Post-Pandemic Ode to the Printed Word

By the time it became safe to return to the office following the COVID-19 pandemic, I had already changed my habits, and all the things I used to do with printed words I now do online. And my practice has benefited. But recently, I have made a conscious effort to reincorporate books into my everyday practice.

BY RYAN M. BILLINGS

COVID changed the practice of law; in some ways temporarily and in others permanently (or at least into the foreseeable future). One way the pandemic affected me was by changing my relationship to printed words. I have always loved books – I feel happy just being around them, and libraries bring me joy. But the pandemic changed the way I work with books and hard-copy information. Before COVID, I would always print important cases and read them at my desk. I also had a ritual of printing the final draft of a brief before filing it and reading the hard copy slowly with my door closed, almost as a form of meditation. Most importantly, when I really needed to know something, or a case pulled me out of my normal practice areas and I was not completely familiar with the field of law involved, I always resorted to books. My favorites were what many of us call the “brown books,” the PINNACLE® guides to specific subject matters. If I had read about the issue in a brown book, I felt comfortable that I had at least a working understanding of the area in question.

Remote work severed my everyday link to law books. Like everyone, I adapted – physical resources became online resources – but I missed going to our library, pulling a book from the shelf, taking it back to my office, laying it flat on my desk and digging in. And my slow home printer spurred me to stop printing every case and to do my final brief reviews electronically (my trick is to jack the zoom up to 220%). By the time it became safe to return to the office, I had already changed my habits, and all the things I used do with printed words I now did online. Moreover, our firm got rid of our library during

the pandemic (I understand but am still not over it), so now it is not even possible to go back to how things used to be. Such is life.

But recently, I have made a conscious effort to reincorporate books into my everyday practice. There is something about the thoughtfulness and care that go into writing a treatise that is meant to be printed in hard copy and kept for many years. I think about the way people used to write to each other in long-hand letters in the 19th century compared to today's text messages. It is not that people were inherently smarter or fundamentally different in the past; writing a letter that would not receive a response for weeks just required the development of skills and a mindset distinct from instant messaging. So too with books. Even if a treatise is available online, it makes a difference to me if it was primarily intended for print, because books are just built differently from wholly electronic works.

Lest I be thought a luddite, let me stress that I fully embrace the digital practice of law and the amazing advantages it offers. I spend nearly all my day on my dual computer screens and cannot imagine life without them. It is a simple fact that I do things better, faster, and with more access to information now than I did 20 years ago when I began practicing law. But I remind myself from time to time that there is a unique space for legal analysis that only exists in the hard-copy world of books. I hope there always will be. **WL**



Ryan M. Billings, Harvard 2004, is a litigator at Kohner, Mann & Kailas S.C., Milwaukee, and chairs the firm's business litigation department. Access the digital article at www.wisbar.org/wl. rbillings@kmksc.com