

# Are Online Services Really Less Expensive Than Books?

*By Jacob Koff, Library Manager, Mills Law Library, San Francisco*

You're thinking of canceling all your book subscriptions and replacing them with electronic databases. You think you're going to save big bucks, right? After all, that's what the publisher's representative promised. Better think again.

In his article "*Volumes are Giving Way to Velocity\**," Douglas McCollam looks at data from a library survey conducted by AmLaw Tech. The survey results are based on responses from 88 of the American Lawyer's top 200 firms. The survey found that law firm libraries are changing, just as the tools lawyers use to practice law are changing. So it's no surprise to learn that law firm libraries are switching from books to online services. What is surprising is that despite publishers' oft-repeated mantra that online means lower costs for lawyers, this is not always the case. In fact, sometimes just the opposite is true.

Not only have law firms discovered that online services can cost just as much or more than equivalent print products, but firms have also found that they have to pay more for professional researchers and IT specialists to make all that technology work. Despite an extensive switch from print to online products, almost 80% of survey respondents reported the same or higher law library costs in 2003 as compared to 2002. As McCollam states, "It turns out that deploying all that labor-saving technology is a labor-intensive enterprise. While firms have substantially cut clerical and support staff ... they've had to beef up their professional ranks of researchers and information technology specialists." James Shelar, head of library services in the Washington office of Arnold & Porter, whose experiences are not atypical, reports that a publication in electronic form costs even more than its print version. In other words, cost-savings come at a high price.

The choice between print sources and online sources is often not as straight-forward as it seems. Among the factors to consider when thinking of switching from print to online services are: How often will the service actually be used? What special hardware and telecommunications will be needed to make the process work? What kind of help will the vendor provide? What has the annual price increase on the product been? Can I get the same information for less from another source?

So before you switch from print to online, get all the facts and weigh and balance your decision against your actual needs, keeping in mind that online's biggest selling point—lower costs—may just turn out to be pie-in-the-sky.

\* National Law Journal, v.25, no.46, July 14,2003, p.SI.