

# The paralegal manager

By Linda S. Jevahirian

A reliable management policy will help lawyers maximize the productivity and longevity of their paralegals. The system can be non-structured and casual, or formal and strict.

The style of management chosen will be influenced by the size, structure, and the nature of the organization. Whatever the method, consistency seems to be the key to good results.

Good management starts by determining the need for a paralegal. Once the need is established, a job description is used to recruit, interview and hire the individual.

After the person is on board the emphasis switches to continuing education and training, mentoring, delegating, evaluating, profiting, compensating, and career pathing.

## Paralegal manager

Some firms and corporate legal departments designate a paralegal manager who is responsible for the entire management and administration of the legal assistant program. This is an ideal solution, but seems to exist more often in larger organizations.

In smaller and midsize companies, management is usually delegated to a senior paralegal, a lawyer, an administrator, or all three.

## Hiring

Hiring a paralegal means knowing why you need the person, and what the person is going to do once on board.

The job description will help clarify the requirements and expectations for both the attorney and paralegal. The lawyer, the outgoing paralegal,

or other paralegals on staff can assist with the description.

The job description will become important again during the paralegal's performance review, and will be invaluable should the position be re-organized.

Finding, interviewing and hiring a paralegal is a craft. Because the process of hiring is time consuming, it is often delegated to the human resources department. While the administration is gathering candidates, assessing skills and checking references, the supervising attorney does the interviewing and makes the final decision.

## Training

Even after an experienced paralegal has been hired, additional training may be needed. This can be as simple as an orientation, or as complex as continuing education.

Lawyers who are too busy to train one-on-one often rely on other resources, such as a continuing education forum in-house, paralegal seminars, or classes in a paralegal program.

Continuing education should be well directed, consistent and required at regular intervals.

## Mentoring

One way management can provide training is by developing a mentor program. A mentor might be an attorney (who has time!) or a more experienced paralegal.

A reliable mentor can be effective in tutelage, in helping the paralegal locate resources, or in steering the paralegal through the management labyrinth.

Whatever the method, it should al-

## THE LAWYER'S PARALEGAL

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leviate the log jamb of the "open door" training policy that often fails because of busy time schedules.

## Work

Paralegals are only as productive as their work allows. A good management system provides that work be generated regularly, and that it be distributed according to ability and profitability.

In a smaller organization this is usually handled through close proximity and the fact that there are usually fewer paralegals. In a larger atmosphere it makes sense for someone to be in charge of collecting the work and distributing it accordingly.

Having a broader understanding of what work is accumulating where can add to efficiency and productivity.

## Performance

Evaluating performance may be one of the most important roles of management. One of the biggest drawbacks is the failure to render reviews timely and consistently. The review encourages the paralegal to establish goals which can then be rewarded.

A formal process need not be confined to larger firms. Even in a small or medium size firm there should be a regular system for determining worth and giving paralegals an opportunity to gain additional knowledge, and reap the benefit of doing so.

Likewise, it is necessary to determine when paralegals are not profitable and arrest the problem in its early stages.

### Profitability

Mastery, knowledge and motivation can work to the benefit of the firm as paralegals become more valuable, increase their hourly rate, and move into higher level work. Without proper management these elements may not be appreciated, and the paralegals are bound to become stagnant and desirous of greener pastures.

Paralegals should understand how their efforts profit the firm. A good management system will provide members of the profit team with reports that summarize their billable hours, and collected and uncollected fees. Time that has been written off should be explained so the paralegal understands where he or she has been the most and least profitable.

### Conflict management

Good management means being able to sustain good morale, resolve conflict and keep turnover as low as possible. This means that paralegals should be adequately represented by management.

The supervising attorney, the paralegal manager, or the paralegal mentor

should ensure that problems are addressed promptly and resolved fairly.

### Compensation

Like any organization, compensation should be administered by a manager who has the skills to process payroll, overtime, vacation, bonus, and benefits.

Equally important is determining a budget for the paralegals and the paralegal program, and tracking invoices and billable hours.

Creating a system that ties compensation to profitability demonstrates value, creates worth, and provides an impetus for improvement.

### Career pathing

One of the most crucial components of a good paralegal program includes career development.

More experienced paralegals who have an interest in “moving on” or “moving up” can be presented with opportunities in management, technology, training, marketing and other positions that utilize their skills and broaden their horizons.

The supply of experience paralegals can be easily replenished by having the promoted paralegals train the new paralegals well in advance of their promotion.

In some organizations, there are no opportunities to move up. In this case, cross training can be an effective way to reinvigorate a paralegal who has lost interest or is “burned out.”

Retooling by learning a new specialty and a new set of skills can be stimulating for the paralegal, prof-

itable for the organization, and can reduce employee turnover.

### Conclusion

Paralegal management is continuously evolving. The role of management is to set policy and create a system whereby employees are aware of what they should be doing and what the consequences are for appropriate and inappropriate actions.

Whether someone is hired or promoted to the paralegal manager position, the firm or company should be aware of the many aspects of paralegal management and tend to them in a way that is reliable, efficient and fair.



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