# Qualified Staff Is Essential To Automated Litigation Support

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When automating a law firm, consideration must be given to hiring a technically competent staff. This usually starts with hiring an information systems manager to design and implement plans for purchasing and installing hardware and software, and to train operating personnel.

## Blending Skills

Most new managers enter the legal field from other systems-related occupations. The trend in automation has been to hire managers with technical, legal and administrative backgrounds. The position requires the ability to balance law firm politics with esoteric proficiency.

Automated litigation support is usually housed within the information systems department. Melvin J. Goldenberg defines automated litigation support in his article, *The Maturing of Computerized Litigation Support,* as "a skillful blending of information, science and project management with specifically applied software products and hardware. [It] organizes critical documents into a system which allows attorneys and legal assistants to search and retrieve information at a moment's notice."

## Litigation Support Is A Separate Arm

In most cases, litigation support is a separate arm with its own manager. Like the manager of information systems, the litigation support manager should have a substantial degree of technical as well as law firm experience. Many have worked for litigation support consulting companies or have been promoted through legal assisting after demonstrating technical proficiency in large case and document management.

In his article, *Effective ALS (Automated Litigation Support) Staffing,* Norman Strizek stated that "an ALS manager must have legal experience, possess managerial talent, administrative skills and technical familiarity." His article points out the value of a legal assistant's background because of the experience and knowledge needed to carry out this responsibility.

Starting an ALS department is an enormous task, combining the coordination of large case management with technical expertise. Some firms rely on their legal assistants to the point where the legal assistants work very closely with the litigation support manager. Some are actually working as project managers. In this capacity, they can learn the skills necessary for total management.

**Understanding Legal And Technical Needs**

In firms where litigation support is not handled by a separate manager, the information services technical staff is primarily responsible for modeling databases, and work very closely with the legal assistants. Frustration can develop when the legal assistant does not understand the issues of a case well enough to translate the technical needs. The legal assistants most valuable to litigation support are meticulous, and can actually prepare their own databases.

One legal assistant in a Fortune 500 company has been responsible for the entire process of automation, from the request for proposal to training users. She is the central person in their product liability case management department and acts as a database administrator and advisor, and she works closely with the programmer. She is essentially a litigation support manager with a legal assistant title.

Allowing unskilled professionals to take a stab at automation management can be disastrous. In many cases, highly technical people are driving litigation support, but they really don't understand the law. The skilled professional possesses both characteristics. Believe it or not, there are still firms where legal assistants are building databases on word processors. This is inefficient and in the long run will not compete with firms gaining credibility through more sophisticated resources

**Complete Team Works Best**

The litigation support department seems to function best when a litigation team includes an attorney, a litigation support manager, a project support manager, a technical analyst, document coders and a legal assistant. It is suggested that the expectations of the database be determined at the outset. The details required to design the database usually come from the attorney. The legal assistant should play an integral role since he or she inevitably manages the case by incorporating the attorney's needs.

The litigation support department depends heavily on document clerks or coders to enter the data. They may be college students, people returning to the work force, retirees or entry level legal assistants. While some firms prefer individuals with legal backgrounds, firms with training programs often hire non-legal data entry clerks.

Automation creates an ongoing need for technically competent staff. Locating individuals with combined law office experience requires a unique set of resources and information. Selecting the right staff enhances efficiency and provides a reliable foundation and competitive edge.