

# Trends in Legal Assistant Management

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Firms and corporations can maximize the productivity of their legal assistant staff by implementing a legal assistant manager. At a panel of managers from Detroit, Chicago and Columbus five separate management systems were presented, including a legal administrator, a managing partner, two full time legal assistant managers, and one senior legal assistant. The legal assistant managers were full-time administrators who were promoted from senior legal assistant positions, whereas the senior legal assistant was given administrative responsibilities in addition to a full caseload. The trend however, is toward employing a legal assistant manager with full-time administrative responsibilities to oversee the entire legal assistant staff.

Senior legal assistants who have achieved requisite skills are an excellent choice for the position of legal assistant manager. They have developed the expertise and the resources necessary to identify and solve problems specific to the profession. In this regard, they take a special interest in furthering their own skills and developing training programs to promote the legal assistant specialization required for various practice areas. They are also responsible for coordinating and carrying out recruiting, performance evaluations and demonstrating profit as a result of those efforts.

## RECRUITING

Recruiting well-qualified legal assistants is one of the primary responsibilities of a legal assistant manager. This process is enhanced by their network of legal assistants and legal assistant program directors, which immediately widens the pool of available applicants. Screening is more thorough since the manager has the background and experience to match the prospective applicants with the job through a skills analysis. With their knowledge of legal assistant training programs and method of certification, legal assistant managers can also establish realistic academic requirements.

Managers also screen for longevity in previous employment, high work standards, adaptability, overall skills, confidence, initiative, energy, planning and organizational skills, stress tolerance, analytical skills, service orientation, the ability to monitor one's own activities and the ability to learn.

## TRAINING

Training is probably the most critical of all the responsibilities of the legal assistant manager. For the most part, firms have followed a sometimes inefficient "open door" policy, where legal assistants request specific information from their

attorneys on an as needed basis. As an alternative, many legal assistant managers have initiated employment of training specialists. The trend has been to coordinate in-house training with outside consultants, incorporating manuals, training tapes and seminars. Some managers have implemented a mentor system for orienting and training new legal assistants.

One insurance company with a large legal assistant staff developed a training program designed and administered by senior level and managing legal assistants. The curriculum consists of logic, communication and legal methods. This broadbased foundation approach is used to complement specific task-oriented legal assistant training and experience. This type of program provides additional opportunity for legal assistants who have mastered particular subject areas to develop and proctor training.

## **EVALUATIONS**

Legal assistant managers perform evaluations of legal assistants at consistent intervals. A Minneapolis based firm uses a self-assessment prepared by the legal assistants, in which they state their goals and achievements for the year. They are critiqued on the skills they have acquired and rewarded appropriately for having met their goals. As they master specific skills, their per hour fee increases, and likewise the firm profits as a result of the graduated expertise of the legal assistant.

Legal assistant managers incorporate evaluation procedures which track performance and focus on initiative, judgment, responsibility, stress tolerance, knowledge of work, organizational skills, quality of work, productivity, communication, attitude, overall performance goals, teamwork, ability to gather information, practical solution orientation, workload management, writing and analytical ability and billable versus non-billable hours.

They distribute monthly and quarterly reports to the legal assistants which reflect the number and cost of the hours billed. Billable hour expectations are also incorporated into the job descriptions, which are circulated to the attorneys as a method of minimizing the number of non-billable projects that are assigned.

## **CAREER DEVELOPMENT**

Firms who have appointed a legal assistant manager tend to offer their paralegals more possibilities for career development. Opportunities for promotion encourage longevity of employment, offsetting the cost of hiring replacements. Legal assistants are promoted through positions such as document clerks, junior legal assistants, senior legal assistants, legal assistant coordinators and legal assistant managers. Other opportunities include positions in higher level management, automation management, training, marketing and library positions. Some legal assistants have been promoted to human resource development departments

where skills in employee benefits, workers' compensation and labor relations are utilized.

One way firms and corporations facilitate career pathing is through cross training. This creates a new challenge for legal assistants who have achieved a level of seniority and do not want to leave the firm, but want to broaden their skills. It also provides continuity for the firm when they require back-up support.

## **CONCLUSION**

The entrée of the legal assistant manager has opened doors for the individuals promoted, and for the firms and the corporations employing them. Legal assistant staffs with formal management systems are centralized, consistent and fair, and the firms benefit from increased profits, longevity of their legal assistants, a higher degree of legal assistant challenge, and more satisfied clients as a result of a well managed, cost efficient system.

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