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Creating a New Vision for Attorney Support at Law Firms

Ever since lawyers have roamed the earth, there have been well-organized and highly attentive legal secretaries sitting directly outside their office doors. Each secretary was specifically assigned to support the lawyer in serving clients and performing administrative tasks. That is, until now. Both the law firm and this support model have changed.

Today's lawyers may not even be present in the firm's office for extended periods of time — or ever — due to travel or the ability to work remotely. And from a practical perspective, the luxury and convenience of having a fully dedicated secretary is certainly not a given. Most lawyers must share legal secretaries (now called legal assistants or other titles — check out Jennifer Hill's white paper "The Changing Role of the Legal Secretary" at alanet.org/whitepapers) with several fellow attorneys, or do without them completely.

The role of the legal secretary continues to evolve as the job market shifts and law firms re-engineer how clients' work gets done. Operationally minded firms are embracing new technologies and resourcing models to realize crucial efficiencies and cost savings. The 1:1 lawyer-to-secretary/assistant ratio has been replaced at many firms by a leaner ratio of 6–7 lawyers per secretary. In the foreseeable future, this model is poised to double to 13 lawyers (or more) to 1 secretary, assistant or admin.

Legal assistants have become more like air traffic controllers, ensuring work is expediently funneled to the right departments and resources. Accomplishing this feat for multiple attorneys and their clients often involves a mixture of people, process and technology that requires specialized skills and training.

Some attorneys are bridging the gaps in legal support themselves, becoming more versatile, tech-savvy, and self-sufficient. However, firms need their lawyers to spend time on more high-value client-facing work, not generating documents. The legal work for corporate clients needs to get done and done well — but by whom if outside counsel lawyers and legal support professionals are pulled in too many directions?

If upping internal staffing is not a viable option, there are two primary alternatives to consider: leveraging technology and outsourcing parts of the legal work.

CLIENT EXPECTATIONS ARE GROWING

Clients have raised the proverbial bar for suppliers, including their law firms. Large corporations continue to hire legal operations professionals skilled at combining resources to produce streamlined results. Like their clients, outside counsel law firms are also investing in people and technology to realize the efficiencies and cost savings needed to ensure a well-run, profitable business. If law firms want to retain corporate business and stay in business, too, they must be willing to reinvent themselves by creating an updated vision for attorney support.

First, the law firm must be realistic about its capabilities and limitations. If the client's expectations increase but their bills don't (or perhaps even shrink), the law firm has no choice but to adjust its service delivery model. Although the client wants a vast network of resources capable of providing accurate responses around the clock, the firm cannot expect lawyers and legal support staff to regularly perform at that level with no room for breaks. If the law firm cannot adapt to meet the client's needs, the firm can expect to lose that client soon, or risk operating at a loss.

One option is for the law firm to hire more lawyers and legal support personnel to meet clients' 24/7 needs. However, this usually comes at a very high price that may not be covered by the firm's fees. If upping internal staffing is not a viable option, there are two primary alternatives to consider: leveraging technology and outsourcing parts of the legal work.

INCREASE AUTOMATION FOR BETTER RESULTS

Technology can greatly assist with automating processes. Software and cloud-based practice management and document tools can streamline document production and facilitate collaboration. Law firm IT departments have become incredibly important as business enablers and even profit centers.

In addition, law firms are increasingly turning to outsourcing resources from global alternative legal service providers (ALSPs) to help support their lawyers and to offload some of the more repetitive, routine legal work. ALSPs are skilled at process engineering, and larger providers can staff trained legal support professionals in shifts to cover the full 24/7 schedule.

Though ALSPs are typically associated with litigation-related projects such as document review, their scope of work has

broadened in recent years. Some outsourcing firms have specialty skill sets such as legal research, patent illustration, transcription and dictation.

For law firms seeking to re-engineer their lawyer support approach, here are some key areas to consider:

- Objectively evaluate your current lawyer-to-secretary ratio. Is your current model providing adequate support to meet your lawyers' needs? Is it properly meeting your clients' needs?
- Is technology used effectively at the firm to speed operations and ensure quality? Do your lawyers and legal staff require more training to extract value from current software, or is new hardware or software required?
- Do your clients require after-hours support that your current staff and facility cannot accommodate? If so, can clients' expectations be managed to alleviate this, or do you need to supplement your legal staff with new hires, repurposing existing personnel or external resources?
- Are your legal secretaries doing tedious, repeatable tasks that could easily be completed by technology tools or outsourced teams? Would this free the secretaries up to do more project management, and would it boost morale by removing "busy work" from their days?
- Can you track realization of return on investment (ROI) for employees, technology tools and outside services? Having metrics can make decisions clearer and easier.
- Drawing upon your current stable of lawyers, legal support staff and installed tech, are you confident that you have all the resources you need to meet clients' needs? If not, what is missing and how can you obtain those resources at a cost-effective price?



Now is the time for law firm leadership to create a new internal vision for enhanced lawyer support that includes internal, external and technology resources.

Fortunately, this is not an impossible problem to solve. By leveraging knowledge of legal operations, suitable technology and the help of outsourced ALSP partners, both lawyers and legal assistants can be sufficiently supported so they can complete their legal work to the client's satisfaction. Law firm administrators are instrumental to prioritizing enhanced attorney support at the firm. Their leadership and willingness to invest in complementary resources can build a strong foundation to benefit the firm's own lawyers and legal staff, as well as its clients.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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