

Legal administrators worth their weight in billable hours

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Expert Opinion

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The job of administering a law firm may seem at times to resemble the herding of cats, but that's just one of the many skills needed in a professional legal administrator.

That administrator can manage your firm, practice or law department in a role similar to that of a CEO in other businesses. Some small firms and most mid-size and large firms employ a professional administrator who works with the partners to manage a multitude of details in managing and expanding the firm. This administrator enables partners to practice their profession, provide excellent client service and develop their law practices. After all, wasn't that the plan in law school?

Without an administrator, smaller firms struggle with day-to-day issues of running a business and may find it difficult to justify the additional overhead of hiring someone to administer the firm. Consider that a professional legal administrator will, among other duties, provide financial analysis and market statistics; manage marketing materials; manage information technology projects and negotiate with vendors; recruit lawyers and staff; manage human resources, benefits and policies; and assist in implementing the firm's development plans and goals. How many potential billable hours would it take for an attorney to do the same? Are attorneys as effective in administrative processes as a professional businessperson? Attorneys are trained to practice law, not manage a business.

Legal administrators are also likely to belong to the Association of Legal Administrators, an international organization that provides its members with valuable on-the-job tools, along with opportunities for peer networking and education on local and national levels. Membership in the ALA offers knowledge sharing, leadership support, educational skills, best practices and management resources, all targeted to law firms.

The Boston chapter of the ALA, with 200 members, holds frequent networking and educational meetings; the international association, with more than 10,000 members, holds annual educational conferences, webinars and teleseminars — all designed to educate its members in the latest trends in law management.

A successful administrator in any size law firm should also be a leader and be proactive rather than merely reactive. Regardless of your firm's size, your administrator should participate in regular management meetings. He or she brings professional management advice, resources and experience to the table. It's a mistake to allow administrators to spend time on clerical duties. They should be given the time and authority to manage so that they have the opportunity to participate in and contribute to the success of the firm.

The most successful administrators are skilled professionals who know how to lead, delegate and work side by side with the partners to develop and implement the firm's goals. Some of the most talented administrators avoid working for large firms because they enjoy the diverse responsibilities and culture of smaller firms.

Legal administrators seek out other administrators because they generally lack peers in their own firms. Through professional associations such as the ALA, administrators from all size firms and backgrounds

meet and compare what management techniques work for them and what techniques do not.

When faced with a new challenge, administrators usually find another administrator who has already worked through the problem and is eager to share his or her experiences. Moving or renovating your office? Need some advice on staffing ratios? Struggling with the annual professional liability policy? Looking for a recommendation for a new equipment vendor? Usually a fellow administrator can be found to help work through the issue.

Regardless of the size of the law firm, if a professional administrator is missing, consider hiring one to share the burden of leadership and management to keep the firm competitive in today's dynamic and unpredictable economy and business environment. Make room for the administrator at the table, communicate the firm's direction and goals, and be sure your administrator participates in management. The job description could include the following:

"Seeking an individual who is a superb juggler with a creative and open mind. Must have proven skills at herding cats. Experience working with strong personalities and egos preferred. Individuals with high blood pressure need not apply."

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