

A World of Change

ALA members on six continents address critical legal management issues and envision the future of their rapidly evolving profession.

BY AMY DVORAK

Association of Legal Administrators



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One goal of International Professional Legal Management WeekSM (PLMW) is to increase knowledge of the diverse roles within the profession. To achieve this, the Association of Legal Administrators (ALA) gathered the thoughts of a dozen legal management professionals on six continents. The result: We were awed not only by their differences, but by their similarities, as well.

As Charles Stinnett states in the recently published ALA book, *The Extraordinary Law Firm*: “The connection between employee attitudes and financial success is not a function of laws, national boundaries, or location; it is a matter of relationships.” Like you, administrators in countries such as Brazil, China, and Nigeria remain passionate about their careers, persistent on increasing its awareness, and motivated to evolve the future of the profession – even with little or no educational opportunities and the disdain of still being identified as (sigh) “office managers.”

So, read on and find out how their careers are changing, how they would like them to change, and how PLMW is helping them evolve their worlds as they know them.

Legal management professionals worldwide share similar job descriptions and titles, yet no two jobs are the same. What major issues do you face that are unique to your countries?

Harrison-Abiola: In my country, legal administrators are saddled with a variety of job responsibilities vital to the success of any law firm, from financial to HR to secretarial,

and yet they struggle to be recognized as professionals. In my country there is inadequate training and development for the profession. There is very little continuous education or professional development opportunities.

Crowley: Our struggle is establishing the role and status of the administrator in a professional service firm. To be really effective, especially in a larger firm, the senior

non-partner has to have partner status and an equal say with partners. This level of status and influence must be earned, however. Therein lies the challenge!

Capano: We are rather few in Brasil. The legal industry is still being professionalised here.

Butler: In South Africa, we face issues with black empowerment and a skills shortage.

Tivy: As is true for nearly every industry in America, the shrinking labor pool is of particular concern. With baby boomers leaving the work force and fewer and fewer next-generation members entering the legal secretarial field and other support service positions, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find the caliber of employees we need in a professional services environment.

Coulbert: Another issue being faced by legal administrators in the United States includes work-life balance. It is common knowledge that part-time administrators work a full 40-hour work week, while full-time administrators put in even more time, which is even more of a problem for women raising families.

How has legal administration evolved in your countries since you entered the field?

Crowley: It has become much more professional and specialized, and the level of knowledge has risen considerably over the last 15 years.

Capano: Seven years ago, when I was first in touch with the issue of running a firm in a professional way, the career of a legal administrator was not even recognized. Today, we already have here in Brasil a center of studies that is dedicated to analyze and talk about the professional administration of the law firms, like ALA does.

Harrison-Abiola: There has definitely been some progress. At least legal administration is not strange anymore. A few years ago, we did not know those words existed. You were either an accountant, personnel manager, or admin manager in a law firm.



Felmingham: When I joined a law firm 20 years ago as an office manager, I was limited in what I could do and change without approval from the partners. Everything had to be agreed at committee level. All these years later, I am involved in strategy, lawyer recruitment and training, facilities, and finance to name but a few areas of responsibility. I now believe I have a voice in the running of the firm.

While the legal management profession is, indeed, evolving, there is still room for growth. What programs should your countries implement in order to advance the profession?

Felmingham: Training programmes set up by The Law Society that governs our lawyers for Legal Managers. Also, training within firms for all support staff, not just legal managers, to show people at every level of support just how much they are valued and needed in the firm.

Martínez: I would like to see in a standard law degree a short course devoted to explaining the role of legal administration in modern law firms.

Harrison-Abiola: Also, developing the legal management curriculum with some reputable institutions. Many legal administrators would like to join the professional associations, but subscriptions and material may not be within

their budgets. These professional associations can take a leaf from some organizations where subscriptions, resources, and conference fees for other member countries are reduced to accommodate them.

Guo: I would also like to see certification of professional legal management and seminars and training programs of legal management professionals in law schools or business schools.

Coulbert: I believe there are still significant barriers between bar associations and legal management. I would like to see programs that would improve those relations.

Where do you see legal administration headed in your countries?

Martínez: In Spain, at present, only the very largest firms have legal administrators. Perhaps in the future medium-sized firms will also create this position. In the future, partners from old-fashioned firms will take less active roles in management.

Felmingham: The signs are good that more responsibility is being given to legal managers and that partners are now listening to people who know how to manage “the machine.” The amazing thing now is to be involved in strategy and planning for law firms, as the market is extremely competitive. Legal managers have a lot to offer in this regard.

Guo: Legal administration in my country will move more and more toward the management model of business companies. More and more MBA and professional managers will join this career, which I believe will significantly improve the management level of the law firms in China.

Harrison-Abiola: The growth of law practices in my country (many law firms are handling multi-million dollar transactions) and globalization in general are forcing law firms to take the business aspect of law more seriously, and I guess by extension that will mean taking legal administrators or legal managers more seriously if they are rightly positioned. More and more legal managers are

getting more exposed and demanding better treatment and more recognition. I guess we will not have to fight too hard if we let our good works speak for us.

Tivy: Of course, not every firm is on board with the concept of the professional manager, but by and large, over the past 15 years in particular, the profession has grown considerably.

Capano: Brasil is a country of continental size. Thus, there are some places where the market is sufficiently complex and the search for qualified professionals is sufficiently great. São Paulo, Rio De Janeiro, Rio Grande do Sul, and Brasilia, the capital of the country, are the Brazilian states that certainly possess the most complex markets and the most promising places to be a legal administrator.

Coulbert: While shocking as it is that it has taken so long to come about, I have also heard of more principal administrators attending and participating in principals meetings, management/executive committee meetings, and attorneys’ retreats. Many of us have done this for years, of course, but some – especially some in small and mid-sized firms – have been excluded until recently.

How do lawyers in your countries view your role in the legal profession?

Butler: Generally highly regarded, but in some instances, considered to be like an insurance policy – a necessary evil.

Capano: Most of them are unaware of the function.

Harrison-Abiola: I am afraid 90 percent of them, due to no fault of theirs, probably do not have a clue.

Tivy: This has evolved over my career, but I believe lawyers truly understand and value the practicality of the legal management profession. Are they all ready to give up the power and control? Certainly not. But the wiser lawyers do, and their success in this regard is a lesson for others.

Felmingham: They would do without it if they could, but they know it allows them to do what they really want to do: practice law.

Guo: Generally speaking, the legal management profession in my country is still new to most of the lawyers. It is more an office manager rather than overall management role.

One goal of PLMW is to provide awareness, understanding, and education about the legal management profession. In what ways have you supported this goal?

Tivy: I actively promote the concept of non-attorney legal managers/leaders to my large network of attorneys outside my firm. I counsel law students and young attorneys on the roles non-attorney managers fill and how those managers and their business perspectives can add to the success of maturing attorneys. Also, every year our firm works with a local high school and sponsors a half-day seminar on the business of law for Legal Studies students.

Harrison-Abiola: I have approached the leading business school in Lagos (LBS) and told them about the profession, and there are ongoing discussions to put together a legal management curriculum with ALA. I have been discussing with some managing partners about meeting with the Business Section of the Nigerian Bar Association to expatiate on the profession.

Martínez: I have always felt that the best way to promote legal administration is to create the best managed law firm in Spain, thereby leading by example.

Why do you think legal administration is important to your country?

Guo: The influence of foreign firms landed in China, success of some legal firms that changed their management models to more professional management models, and competition.

Felmingham: I believe it is important that clients know that we are adhering to the guidelines of practice laid down by our Law Society. Having a Legal Manager in place gives clients confidence that this is being done.

Harrison-Abiola: Nigeria has a population of well over 125 million people, over 50,000 practicing lawyers. We have over 30 law faculties in the various Nigerian universities, and the Nigerian Law School produces over 3,500 lawyers every year with little or no business knowledge. We have over 4,000 law firms in Nigeria, and

in my view less than 2 percent are properly run as per international standard. Many law firms are struggling to remain in business, and others are folding up because they lack basic business knowledge.

By participating in PLMW, what do you hope to accomplish?

Butler: I hope that managers will be encouraged to engage with and learn from colleagues around the world.

Felmingham: By participating in PLMW, I hope to raise awareness of the multitude of duties carried out by legal managers so that both legal and non-legal staffs understand the complexity of the job. Legal recruiters could also be targeted as this, too, would help raise the level of recognition.

Harrison-Abiola: I hope to personally take the time to focus on myself as a legal administrator – try to define, redefine, or reinvent myself. I hope to bring some focus to my country. Leverage with other managers, try to focus on what others are doing. Get more insight into PLMW programs that I can adopt.

Capano: I want to develop myself, so I will be able to grow in my abilities as a legal administrator.

The ideal world of legal administration varies greatly among legal management professionals. In your country, what changes in the profession would you like to see?

Butler: Lawyers being taught the basics of business management as an integral part of their professional qualifications.

Martínez: The people in charge of non-legal areas be given the same status as partners.

Crowley: I would be happy if it became more universally recognised as a profession in its own right.

Harrison-Abiola: I would like to not have to struggle too hard to create awareness or gain recognition – if there is some kind of a pathway to partnership.

Coulbert: I would be happy if I can look back at the end of my career and feel like I have made a difference – to

my firm, to employees in my office, to ALA friends, and perhaps even to the advancement of the legal profession.

For more exclusive interviews, please visit the official PLMW Web site at www.plmw.org. ♦

about the author

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ABOUT ALA



ASSOCIATION OF LEGAL ADMINISTRATORS®
The Source of Legal Management Information and Knowledge

Headquartered in Lincolnshire, Illinois, northwest of Chicago, the Association of Legal Administrators (ALA) is the world's largest association representing legal management professionals. Formed in 1971, ALA provides support to professionals involved in the management of law firms, corporate legal departments, and government legal agencies. ALA provides high-quality educational opportunities and services to more than 10,000 members representing more than 6,000 employers in 30 countries.

ALA's mission is to "promote and enhance the competence and professionalism of legal administrators and all members of the management team." Members of the Association are law office administrators who are leaders and industry experts on legal management issues such as finance, human resources, systems and technology, facilities, marketing, and practice development.

ALA's Membership

Regular membership in ALA is open to any full-time administrator or support manager who is employed in a private law firm, corporate, government or university legal department, or charitable legal agency. Associate membership is available to certain individuals. Membership is not open to vendors or consultants.

ALA is structured into six regions with 100 chapters in the United States, Puerto Rico, Canada, and New Zealand.

ALA Demographics

- 95% of ALA members are from the United States
- 92% are employed in private law firms
- 76% are female; 24% percent are male
- 67% have principal administrator job responsibilities
- 31% work in firms with 1-14 attorneys
- 22% work in firms with 15-29 attorneys
- 20% work in firms with 30-74 attorneys

ALA's Web site

The Association's information-based Web site (www.alanet.org) provides law office managers and the legal community with news

and information about ALA's exceptional educational programs and member services, print and online management resources, and jobs available in legal management. The site also provides links to more than 250 law-related management resources and organizations and vendors to the legal industry.

The Legal Management Resource Center (LMRC), created and hosted by ALA, is designed to immediately provide the information you need or to quickly direct you to other resources, mostly on the Internet, where the knowledge you seek can be found. Located at <http://thesource.alanet.org>, the LMRC is an Internet complement to ALA's existing Web site at www.alanet.org.

ALA Education

ALA offers many outstanding educational opportunities for legal administrators of all experience levels. ALA's Annual Educational Conference and Exposition features more than 100 expert speakers, including law office managers, attorneys, and professors from leading management schools. In addition, more than 250 vendors display the latest products and services available to the legal industry.

Legal administrators can add to their credentials by becoming a Certified Legal Manager (CLM)SM. The CLMSM certification program allows a qualified legal administrator to demonstrate, through an examination process, a mastery of core areas of knowledge identified as essential to the effective performance of a principal administrator.

Each fall, ALA also sponsors the Corporate/Government Fall Forum, the Law Firm Financial Management Conference, the Large Firm Principal Administrators Retreat, and the Intellectual Property Retreat. These events address the unique needs of managers from these types of law practices.

The latest developments in law office management are also covered in ALA's official journal, *Legal Management*.

For More Information

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