

Legal Administrators as Strategic Assets

Law firm managers' professional roles continue to evolve as they strive to take on new responsibilities and their colleagues acknowledge the importance of sound business management practices.

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Those who have been legal administrators for some time can attest to the myriad of changes to the profession over the years. When I started as a legal administrator, the novel concept of running a law firm like a business had just started to become a reality. Lawyers learned at local bar conventions and the like that if they ran their firms differently, all of their good legal work could be transformed into more cash in their bank accounts. Imagine!

In those days, the administrator's role was a much narrower one, with limited management discretion and decision-making authority. In an article from PLI's 1978 *Course Handbook Lawyer's Assistant*, Brad Hildebrandt said that an administrator of a larger firm (considered at the time to be more than 12 attorneys) needed "skills in financial management, systems and procedures, word processing, data processing and, most of all, the ability to act as father confessor and resident psychologist."

In the 1980s, however, administrators were no longer limited to these duties. New responsibilities emerged, including the develop-

ment of firm policies and planning of a firm's information systems. We began to be part of financial analysis/forecasting and strategic decisions, as well as marketing and attorney recruiting.

HOW IT HAPPENED

How did the role of the legal administrator evolve? Which came first ... the chicken or the egg?

I am not sure whether this heightened growth and importance of the administrator was due to the enlightened perspective of law firm leaders, or whether it was due to the legal administrators of the time "stepping up" to advise the law firm leaders what needed to be done – and then demonstrating that they had the capability to do it. While I choose to believe that the latter is true, one thing is certain: Law firms recognized the need for, and valued the talents of, their administrators. As firms grew, so did the administrative staff. Over time, the concept caught on, and firms looked for "generalist managers" along with, as firm size warranted, the need for

specialists in areas such as human resources and technology. The role had evolved from administrative, to managerial, to leadership in nature.

Our profession continues to evolve, and we are now at a critical stage where dramatic changes are taking place. Law firm mergers, partner/practice group defections, competition for young talent, spiraling associate salaries, and concerns about the accompanying rise in billing rates, to name a few, present interesting challenges for legal administrators. It stands to reason that the evolution and growth of law firms would bring about an evolution and growth in legal administration, and with that a growing professionalism, pride in the position, and greater intellectual capacity.

What does all of this mean to us? It means that we must always be on the cutting edge intellectually, must have all of the right answers and respond quickly, and must keep our “ships” sailing more smoothly than ever before.

accept decisions by professional managers (us) that directly impact either them or the strategic direction of the firm, and a true dilemma exists. Without a significant leadership role, will it be more difficult for legal administrators to move forward as time goes on?

Ultimately, we must create more value by asserting ourselves into our firms’ futures. We cannot wait for our management teams to expand our present roles; instead, we must exert the initiative to make it happen. We already find ourselves more involved in practice development, strategic planning, lawyer evaluation, mergers/acquisitions, and general law firm quality thanks to our efforts to take the initiative in these areas. And as our successes grow, we will add more value, which will, in turn, give us more rewarding roles in our firms.

GAINING CREDIBILITY

How do we accomplish this? We gain credibility by moving toward higher levels of educational achievement. We cannot afford to stagnate; rather, we must constantly be at the top of our game, anticipate



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HEIGHTENED EXPECTATIONS

What is expected of today’s legal administrator? While differences exist between administrators of different-sized firms, administrators everywhere need to be highly organized, have outstanding interpersonal and communication skills so that they have the ability to work well with people at all levels in the firm, and have overall general knowledge of all aspects of running a law firm (technology, etc.). Beyond all of these, administrators must have integrity and be good leaders with adaptable management styles. They must command respect of everyone in their firms and be responsive, creative, and open to new and challenging ideas. They need to reinvent themselves regularly, and to be proactive (not reactive) in their approach to what they should be doing to enhance their firms.

What can we expect down the road? Carl Leonard of The Hildebrandt Institute predicts that while managing partners will gravitate to a role akin to that of a corporate chief executive officer, he argues that the personality traits and the training that lawyers have will make it difficult for them to be successful in this capacity. Compound this with Leonard’s belief that managing partners are often reluctant to

what our firms will need, and put initiatives in place to keep ahead of the pack. But increased education is just the beginning of building credibility: We must also enhance our leadership and management skills to a successful level.

Without the ability to change, we will fail or, at the very least, we will not prosper. We must create the competence, demonstrate the capability and, most importantly, seize the opportunity.

Like all good leaders, we must be comfortable dealing with the uncomfortable. Successful administrators of the future will be enmeshed in their firms and will do great things to leave them far better places than they were when they arrived. ♦

about the author

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