

The Value and Advantages of Paralegal Managers

Investing in a paralegal manager is a cost effective way to increase and improve efficiency in the legal environment.

BY THE INTERNATIONAL PARALEGAL MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION



As the paralegal profession has developed during the past 35 years, the need to supervise, train, and retain qualified and talented staff within growing legal organizations has led to a variety of reporting relationships. Firms have delegated this management role to attorneys, senior paralegals, office administrators, and human resource professionals, and these managers have become responsible for the productivity and profitability of the paralegal program.

Attorneys who have never worked with a paralegal manager may wonder whether they need a dedicated manager in this position and how to find the right person for the job. Ultimately, any office with five or more paralegals can realize financial and logistical benefits from designating a qualified manager to supervise them.

In the words of the International Paralegal Management Association (IPMA), a paralegal manager is not only a supervisor, but also a leader, mentor, advocate, trainer, financial watchdog, evaluator, problem-solver, and resource manager. Yet some firms have delegated these important responsibilities to a busy attorney or an already overburdened office administrator or human resources manager. Consequently, they are not getting the most effective use of their paralegal resources.

The least cost-effective management system for paralegal supervision is to delegate day-to-day oversight responsibility to attorneys. These Attorneys-Managing-Paralegals (AMPs) are most frequently senior associates or partners – attorneys whose time is much more valuable to their firms when they are billing time or developing new client relationships instead of performing administrative functions.

From a financial perspective, AMPs are an expensive proposition. If the AMP has a billing rate of \$300 per hour and spends an average of one hour per day staffing projects, preparing evaluations, conducting training, and interviewing and hiring staff for the paralegal group, the firm is investing \$75,000 of attorney time each year to an administrative function. As the paralegal staff grows, the AMP is forced to devote more time to this function, spiraling the cost to the firm.

Instead of using an AMP, firms can use a qualified paralegal to take on the majority of this administrative responsibility. Paralegals are employed to help lower costs to clients; they are equally useful in lowering administrative costs.

Pushing management responsibilities down from AMPs to someone with a lower billing rate creates more revenue for the firm – and a career advancement opportunity for paralegals.

FINDING YOUR PARALEGAL MANAGER

If your firm does not already have a dedicated paralegal manager, it is not essential to invent a management position into which you bring someone from outside your organization. The person with the right experience and qualities may already be on your staff and looking for a new challenge.

Veteran paralegals already possess many important attributes of a manager. They are experienced with organizing volumes of information and thoughtfully balancing the demands of clients, attorneys, staff, and outside vendors. They are good at gathering data and assembling reports – keeping track of the many administrative details inherent in supervising paralegals. And, unlike an office administrator or human resources professional, a paralegal as supervisor is intimately familiar with the daily responsibilities inherent in performing paralegal tasks.

The most appropriate person may not be your most senior paralegal. Many senior paralegals are satisfied with the jobs they have. They are looking for increased responsibilities on client projects without the additional stresses of administrative duties. It is important to select a person who is able to communicate the goals and objectives of your legal practice and who can inspire other paralegals to join in that effort. And, most important, select the person who has the right balance of technical expertise, interpersonal skills, and management potential to succeed as a supervisor. Create a job description that denotes the most important functions of the job to give the new manager a road map of the firm's expectations. The IPMA offers information on the core competencies required of paralegal managers.

EVOLVING RESPONSIBILITIES

The newly appointed paralegal manager can grow into a position that the firm establishes. Start by having the new paralegal manager coordinate assignments with attorneys and monitor billable and nonbillable hours. Later, responsibility for orientation, training, interviewing, and hiring can be added to the job.

Once the employee has a proven track record, the paralegal manager may help conduct evaluations and disciplinary sessions as well as assist in setting salary rates and recommending staffing levels. The last step in the evolving paralegal manager job could be assisting in preparing the department budget and policy directives that affect the paralegals. At any point in the growing paralegal manager role, the firm may decide to cap the responsibilities at a level at which it feels most comfortable. Though, to get the best financial results for the firm, the more tasks performed by the paralegal manager, the less billable time that is lost by the AMP.

In an evolving management position, the new paralegal manager may continue to perform a reduced amount of billable work. Some paralegal managers never completely give up their billable projects because it helps to keep their skills sharp, exposes them to the latest technologies, and keeps them in closer contact with the staff they supervise. Though balancing the billable and nonbillable roles of a “working manager” is challenging, it can be accomplished in both large and small firms. Ultimately, paralegal manager can provide core competencies in a variety of critical business areas.

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

A paralegal manager can help your firm better utilize its limited resources. A person with an overview of the firm, its current projects, and its future needs is a valuable asset in keeping operations running smoothly. Even an office or department with as few as five paralegals benefits from having a manager focused on work distribution. A paralegal manager functions as an intermediary and can help anticipate the needs of attorneys and make timely staffing recommendations.

Managing human resources in a law firm is never an easy task. Paralegals who do not work with managers often complain that their workloads are erratic. Once a large assignment is complete, there is no coordinated effort to find the next project. A paralegal manager should be able to smooth some of the peaks and valleys of individual workflow.

A manager who supervises paralegals in multiple practice areas will be able to better utilize limited resources by shifting individuals between groups as the need arises. This will require a commitment by the firm on the cross-training of skills. However, many basic paralegal skills are transferable between practice areas without additional training. Balancing paralegals' workloads can offer an organization tremendous savings by lessening the need to hire any additional staff or temporary employees.

RETENTION AND RECRUITMENT

The paralegal manager is in the best position to channel work to the most appropriate individual in the firm. The manager understands that it makes more sense to channel higher-level work to senior paralegals, with a higher billing rate, and more routine assignments to less experienced staff members. Appropriately assigning projects will increase the organization's efficiency and increase the utilization of the paralegals.

At many firms, paralegals fall into a gap between attorneys and staff. Although they work with and bill time like attorneys do, their pay, benefits, and status at some firms are more in line with what is accorded to nonattorney staff. The problem is that during the policy-making processes at some firms, the unique status of paralegals is not adequately addressed.

A strong leader and advocate within the paralegal group helps to address this gap, and it also can call attention to more complex problems that might otherwise not be noticed or addressed. Paralegals who feel that they have a voice heard by management are more likely to remain with their firms. Increasing job satisfaction through appropriate utilization and inclusion in policy decisions will help to increase the paralegal retention rate.

TRAINING AND FEEDBACK

A paralegal manager not only makes sure the paralegals are equipped to handle attorney requests and follow the firm's procedures, but also can train new associates in the proper utilization of paralegals. Experienced paralegals can be instrumental in training and mentoring all new arrivals to your organization. And a manager will put greater emphasis on soliciting and offering feedback to paralegals, which will help improve performance and morale.

OPENING MORE DOORS FOR PARALEGAL MANAGERS

If your office currently employs a paralegal manager, it may be possible to combine his or her primary management duties with other functions. Are there special projects that would benefit from this person's contributions? Someone with great computer skills could also be the supervisor of litigation databases or document scanning. A good public speaker could be useful in the orientation and training of new staff and associates. A talented writer may be able to help with marketing, personnel manuals, or drafting disaster-recovery plans. Take a look at the skills that the manager is already using in supervising paralegals and apply that experience to projects in other departments.

Undoubtedly, your paralegal manager has some specialized knowledge that would be useful in training junior attorneys, such as research resources, useful Internet sites, and court or agency filing requirements. And every firm could use someone to teach a refresher course on Bluebooking skills. These are only a few examples of proj-

ects that a paralegal manager can accomplish, instead of disrupting a partner's or senior associate's workday to plan and conduct training programs.

Encourage professional development and educational opportunities that offer your paralegal manager new skills. The IPMA offers a wide variety of programs for both new and experienced managers. Check into local graduate programs for management and budgeting courses. Give your paralegal manager the tools to become a more valuable resource to the firm.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES AND SAVING MONEY

Every legal organization struggles to do more with less. Creating or redefining the paralegal manager's position within your office may be an excellent way to reduce administrative time charged by attorneys, raise the morale and quality of your paralegal staff, create new opportunities for valued employees, and accomplish special projects that benefit the firm and its clients. ♦

ABOUT IPMA



The International Paralegal Management Association (IPMA) was founded in 1984 as the Legal Assistant Management Association. It promotes the development, professional standing, and visibility of paralegal management professionals.

IPMA's Primary Goals

- To be the primary provider of information and educational resources on paralegal management
- To promote the participation of paralegal managers in forums that deal with the legal profession
- To advocate the paralegal manager's viewpoint on issues affecting the legal profession
- To promote the value of the paralegal manager's role in the delivery of legal services
- To establish a strong communication network within the association and with the legal community
- To ensure IPMA's vitality as a professional association

The IPMA has more than 600 professional members who are directors or managers of paralegal services in law firms, corporate law departments, and governmental agencies throughout North America, with additional members in Europe, Asia, and the Caribbean. Additionally, about 75 companies are sustaining members in the legal staffing, court reporting, electronic discovery, translation services, and other service providers to the legal community.

IPMA's Member Benefits and Services

- IPMATalk Online Discussion Groups

- *Paralegal Management Magazine*
- *Annual Compensation Survey for Paralegals / Legal Assistants and Managers* – produced in partnership with Altman Weil Inc.
- *IPMA Paralegal Utilization Survey*
- Chapters in more than 20 locations throughout the United States and Canada
- Paralegal manager and paralegal job bank
- Annual Conference & Expo
- Skills for New Managers Workshop
- Paralegal Management Webinars
- IPMA Service Provider Directory
- Printed and Online Membership Directory
- Manager's Manuals Series
- Mentoring Program
- Speaker's Bureau

For More Information

The IPMA is a dynamic community of professionals committed to each other's success and to the advancement of the paralegal management profession.

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