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*In 1987, Char helped form Cairncross & Hempelmann, P.S., now a 40-attorney law firm, and has served as its principal administrator ever since. Working in the legal industry for 31 years, Char came up through the ranks as receptionist and then legal secretary. She eventually became interested in legal administration and discovered a natural talent in that area. A member of ALA since 1987, Char has been active at the chapter, regional, and national levels.*

**Q. What are the major issues you face as a legal administrator in your country?**

**A.** There are numerous issues facing the legal industry and, hence, legal administrators, in the United States. They start with the maturation of the legal industry and the resulting fallout: price compression, client consolidation, increased competition for interesting and profitable legal work, etc. They continue with competition for attorneys from non-legal sources, managing disparate generations within law firms, “younger generation” challenges such as decreasing loyalty and a demand for constant meaning and stimulation, skyrocketing associate salaries, dramatically escalating overhead, increasing malpractice suits, the list could go on.

Other issues being faced by legal administrators in the United States include (1) 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; (2) the fact that few partners understand or appreciate what their administrators do, which translates into an unspoken directive to take care of as much of the administrative burden as possible without extra support, promote their value to their firms (not an easy task for administrators who are primarily introverts and enjoy working behind the scenes), and do it all without much public acclaim; (3) resistance by some managing partners to their administrators’ professional development (especially ALA conferences); and (4) to some extent, a continued struggle for decent wages in comparison to attorney salaries. In addition, because many law firms rotate managing partners on a two- or three-year basis, it is often difficult for a legal administrator who may get to work with the good, the bad, and the ugly and spend a lot of time training new managing partners.

**Q. Where do you see legal administration headed in your country?**

**A.** It is definitely here to stay, although I continue to see the occasional law firm eliminate their position of principal administrator after a departure or firing. Whether the managing partner takes over those duties, or they are tasked to functional specialists in mid-sized or larger firms, it usually isn’t long before the position of principal administrator is reinstated and a hiring search begins. That ties back to the transparent nature of many of the administrator’s duties, leading partners to wonder what he or she

really does for the firm. Once that person departs, it is quickly clear what he or she did and it becomes apparent that someone needs to take over the role of holding together and staying on top of a large number of disparate needs within the firm.

In the past few years, I have seen salaries and bonuses increase to a new, more acceptable level throughout the Northwest. I believe this is directly a function of managing partners coming to understand the importance of legal administrators in their organizations and how unfortunate it would be to lose the people who provide much of the “glue” that holds everything together. 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. I believe this is also directly a function of managing partners and, to some extent, partners as a group coming to understand and respect the role of administrators.

**Finish this sentence: By participating in PLMW, I hope to promote the visibility and greater understanding of the role of legal managers beyond just managing partners.**

**Q. What initiatives have you taken or do you plan to take to promote the awareness of legal administration (one of the goals of PLMW)?**

**A.** For many years, I have supported membership in ALA and attendance at ALA conferences for the functional specialists in my firm. From time to time, the ALA members in my firm and my managing partner (who also attends ALA’s Annual Conference) have prepared reports and/or presentations for the partners in my firm about current trends, threats, and opportunities in the legal industry. This has gone a long way toward increasing the awareness of legal administration within my own firm. That awareness has spread to other parts of the legal community from time to time as my managing partner and other partners in my firm have spoken with other attorneys in town.

**Q. Why is legal administration important to people in your country?**

**A.** The legal profession is incredibly important to people in the United States as it seeks justice and civil dispute resolution throughout the country. Legal administration enables lawyers to achieve their highest and best calling by focusing on legal services, not the day-to-day operations involved in running a law firm.

**Finish this sentence: A career in legal administration has given me a good living for me and my family, many good friends throughout ALA, and numerous opportunities for personal and professional development.**

**Q. How do lawyers in your country view the legal management profession?**

**A.** To varying degrees, I believe lawyers in the United States view the legal management profession as a necessity for the smooth operation of their law firms and legal

departments. Generally, the longer they practice, the more they come to value its importance as they experience the end result.

**Q. What types of programs would you like to see implemented in your country to advance this profession?**

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

**Q. How has legal administration evolved since you entered the field?**

**A.** The titles say it all, with legal administrators starting out as Office Managers, moving into Business Managers, then becoming Executive Directors, with a sprinkling of Chief Operating Officers. As greater responsibility and authority has been assumed by administrators and granted by partners, the titles of principal administrators have kept pace. Functional specialists, once found only in large law firms, have gained ground in smaller firms as their principal administrators have taken on broader roles in law firm management.

**Q. What does PLMW mean to you?**

**A.** It means working toward the improvement or eradication of many of the issues discussed earlier through enhanced visibility and recognition. I look forward to seeing it evolve over the coming years.

**Q. How would you like to celebrate PLMW 2007?**

**A.** The chapters' visibility initiatives are a good place to start, and I plan to participate in anything the Puget Sound Chapter launches. Aside from that, I continue to give thought to how I and the other administrators in my firm might celebrate PLMW this year.

**Q. What advice would you give to someone who wants to increase awareness in legal administration?**

**A.** Stop being so transparent in your job and start tooting your own horn. You can do this in a way that is not self-aggrandizing, while drawing attention not only to your own value but also to the value of the profession as a whole. Administrators occasionally mention that they have to fight for ALA membership and attendance at conferences, not to mention time away from the office. By sharing with the managing partner and partnership group the value that is brought to the firm by the legal administrator(s), this problem should eventually go away and the partners should insist that their administrators learn, grow, and bring back the intelligence they need to maintain their firm's competitive advantage.

**Q. In what ways can legal administrators increase the awareness of the legal profession among students?**

**A.** Participate in job fairs, say yes when asked by a school to allow a student to "job shadow" for a day or provide a semester internship, and look for tasks that can be done by summer interns (high school and college students, not just law school students).

**Finish this sentence: When it comes to legal administration, 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.

**Q. What advice would you give to someone in your country interested in entering the legal administration profession?**

**A.** Network like crazy with anybody you know who knows somebody in a law firm. Cold call legal administrators and ask for a courtesy meeting. Check ALA's job bank and local chapter job banks. Talk to local recruiters who specialize in the legal field and ask for their advice. Read articles, research law firm web sites, and become familiar with what legal administrators do so you'll be ready when an opportunity arises.