

Administrators: Worth Their Weight in Billable Hours

Successful administrators are skilled professionals who know how to lead, delegate, and work side by side with the partners to develop and implement a law firm's strategic goals.

BY KAREN GLOWACKI
ASSOCIATION OF LEGAL ADMINISTRATORS

The job of administering a law firm may seem at times like "herding cats," but that's just one of the many skills a professional legal administrator needs. That administrator can manage your firm, practice, or law department in a role similar to that of a chief executive officer in another business. Some small firms and most mid-size and large firms employ professional administrators who work with the partners to manage a multitude of details in managing and expanding their firms. Professional administrators enable 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

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 firm's success. 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 strategic goals.

Successful legal administrators are also likely to belong to the Association of Legal Administrators (ALA), an international organization that provides its 10,000-plus members with valuable on-the-job tools, along with opportunities for peer networking and education on local, regional, national, and international levels. Membership in ALA offers knowledge sharing, leadership support, educational skills, best practices, valuable publications, and a variety of vital management

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duties, provide financial analysis and market statistics; manage marketing materials; manage information technology projects; 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.

A successful administrator in any size law firm should be a leader who is proactive rather than merely reactive. Regardless of your firm's size, your administrator should participate in regular management meetings. He or she brings valuable professional management advice,

resources targeted to private law firms and corporate and government legal departments. The Association also boasts 100 chapters that hold regular meetings and educational events.

Legal administrators often seek help or guidance from other administrators because they generally lack peers in their own firms. Through professional associations such as ALA, administrators from all size firms and backgrounds meet and compare what management techniques work for them and which do not.

When faced with a new challenge, an administrator can 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 an annual professional liability policy? Looking for a recommendation for a new equipment vendor? Finding a fellow administrator to help you work through the issue is made very easy thanks to the emphasis on networking within ALA.

Regardless of the size of your law firm or legal department, if it lacks a professional administrator, consider hiring one to keep your organization competitive in today's challenging economic environment. Have a seat for the administrator at the executive table, communicate the firm's direction and goals, and watch as the approach enhances your organization's strategic success. ♦

about the author



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ABOUT THE ASSOCIATION OF LEGAL ADMINISTRATORS



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

Headquartered in the Chicago suburb of Lincolnshire, Illinois, the Association of Legal Administrators (ALA) is the world's largest and most influential organization representing legal management professionals.

Formed in 1971, ALA supports professionals involved in the management of law firms, corporate legal departments, and government legal agencies. ALA provides abundant educational opportunities and services to more than 10,000 members representing more than 6,000 employers in 34 countries.

ALA's mission is to:

- Promote and enhance the competence and professionalism of all members of the legal management team;
- Improve the quality of management in law firms and other legal service organizations; and
- Represent professional legal management and managers to the legal community and to the community at large.

ALA's Membership

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. 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's Demographics

95% of ALA members are from the United States.

93% are employed in private law firms.

76% are female; 24% percent male.

67% have principal administrator job responsibilities.

30% work in firms with 1-14 attorneys.

22% work in firms with 15-29 attorneys.

23% work in firms with 30-74 attorneys.

ALA's Educational Offerings

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. Other annual events include regional and specialty conferences, including the new Extraordinary Law Firm Conference.

Legal administrators can add to their credentials by becoming a Certified Legal Manager (CLM)SM. The 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. Examinations are administered each autumn and then each spring during the Annual Educational Conference and Exposition.

The latest developments in law office management are covered in ALA's official journal, *Legal Management*, which will increase its frequency in 2009 to 10 issues per year. Other useful ALA publications include the Association's official bimonthly magazine, *ALA News*, and the twice-monthly e-newsletter *ALA Currents*.

For More Information

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