

# LEGAL MANAGEMENT

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HR HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

## Modern (Staffing) Makeover

The evolution and reinvention of non-attorney roles in the law firm landscape

Technological advances and the push for cost savings are propelling firms to break with tradition – traditional staffing roles, that is. Firms are scrutinizing non-attorney roles to determine which are vital and which need to change to meet the realities of today's workplace. "If a firm is stuck in a staffing model that doesn't fit their needs anymore, then they're not optimizing their profitability, and at the end of the day, that's what's driving the firm," said Jessa Baker, Senior Consultant, LawVision Group LLC. From downsizing to redefining positions to increasing responsibilities, firms are implementing significant staffing changes – a measure that may be necessary to keep up with modern demands. Learn about some trends affecting traditional law firm staffing, as well as advice for seamlessly adopting modified staffing roles.



**MARY KATE SHERIDAN**  
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**ERIC SEEGER**  
Principal, Altman Weil, Inc.



### LAW FIRM STAFFING TRENDS

The traditional face of law firm staffing is changing, as firms reshape positions like assistants, law librarians, paralegals and more.

#### Assistants

Personal assistants dedicated to individuals or small groups of attorneys are quickly becoming things of the past. While senior partners and rainmakers may retain their own assistants, these support staffers are more often being shared by a large number of attorneys, rather than supporting just a few.

"I think there will be a trend away from traditional legal secretaries who sit outside lawyers' offices and do whatever two or three lawyers want them to do that day," said Eric Seeger, Principal, Altman Weil, Inc.

In Altman Weil's 2013 [Law Firms in Transition Survey](#), 89.7 percent of respondents believe that having fewer support staff within firms will become a permanent practice. And more than one third of respondents think that there will be fewer support staff at their firms in five years.

As the workforce becomes increasingly adept at technology, and therefore more self-sufficient, the need for assistants to take dictation, schedule meetings and generally support individual attorneys is dwindling. Armed with digital aptitude and modern tools, attorneys are more likely to type their own documents, keep time, correspond directly with contacts via email and perform other tasks that have been tackled by assistants in the past.

"Generation Y is anticipated to be 75 percent of the labor force by 2025," said Baker. This generation is going to be more technologically savvy, so secretarial ratios are going to diminish or change, she said.

Firms are assessing assistants' duties as they reshape the role: According to Traveling Coaches' 2012 [Survey of Legal Administrators on the Evolving Role of Legal Secretaries](#), 40 percent of respondents have defined or are defining new core competencies for the role, and 35 percent of respondents have completed — or will complete — a skills assessment. Today's assistants must be digitally inclined and prepared to help with analytical tasks, Baker said.

It's not just the assistant position that is seeing a major shift; some firms are eliminating the assistant supervisor role. While assistants in many firms previously reported to an administrative manager, more firms are placing the supervisory duties directly on the attorneys, said Judith Clark, Owner and President, HR Answers, Inc. In fact, in the [Traveling Coaches' survey](#), 49 percent of respondents indicated that attorneys manage the assistants, around 30 percent of respondents indicated that a Human Resources professional manages the assistants, and only around 19 percent of respondents indicated that a secretarial manager manages the assistants.



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**JESSA BAKER**  
Senior Consultant,  
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#### Law Librarians

Given the digital nature of today's legal research, the law library is an obvious target as law firms scale back on costs and seek greater efficiency. Nevertheless, law librarians can be invaluable to firms as they adapt to meet current needs.

The "role of librarians is changing to be more involved, more partner-driven, and more lawyer-focused," Baker said. Among the alternative routes for law librarians are:

#### *Librarian Without the Library*

A physical library may no longer be essential, but librarians may continue to offer the same types of services — such as managing resources and assisting with research — in the digital sphere.

#### *Non-Legal Researcher*

Some firms have created non-legal research departments focused on business development and opportunity assessment, said Seeger, who notes that a law librarian's skills may be well-suited for this area if he or she has good business sense. Research topics include people, companies, industry trends, lateral recruiting opportunities, and pros and cons of engaging in particular types of work.

#### *Embedded Librarian*

Some librarians are heading out of the library to work directly with a specific group or department, as described in Holly M. Riccio's article, "[Embedded Librarianship: The Library as a Service, Not a Space.](#)" from the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) and International Legal Technology Association (ILTA) Digital White Paper: "The New Librarian." The embedded librarian becomes an integral part of the team. [A recent survey presented at an Ark Group seminar](#) on embedded librarians found that 46.7 percent of respondents either have embedded researchers or specialists in their department or are considering introducing them.

#### *Knowledge Management Professional*

Fifty-nine percent of respondents to the 2011 ALM Law Librarian Survey indicated that the head law librarian was responsible for the knowledge management department in their firms, according to Steve Lastres' article, "[Knowledge Management: A Strategic Role Change for Legal Information Professionals.](#)" from the AALL and ILTA Digital White Paper: "The New Librarian." The article further notes that as knowledge management professionals, law librarians may develop databases, research firm- and competition-related information, manage social media research, work in project management, and more.

#### **Paralegals**

The push for greater efficiency and cost savings is prompting firms to place more responsibility on their paralegals. "Paralegals can now do more of the work that used to fall to entry level associates," said Baker, who explains that paralegals are assisting more with document review and commoditized work.



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#### **Marketing Professionals**

As firms adjust their priorities, their marketing needs likewise have changed. While modern technology and client demands have not obviated the need for marketing professionals, their focus may be shifting. In some firms, the marketing department's priority has switched from promoting the firm as a whole to focusing on individual attorneys and practice groups. "In terms of broad trends, I expect to see a shift from marketing the firm or branding to marketing practices and individuals – including through social media – such that the work of the marketing department is more localized and individual," Seeger said.

Firm marketing departments are also concentrating more on strategy, including brainstorming ways to differentiate the firm from their competitors, working internally with data to help drive client and industry teams, and assessing external data to help leadership identify new opportunities, Baker said.

#### **IT Professionals**

**ERIC SEEGER**  
Principal, Altman  
Weil, Inc.



With today's ever-expanding digital landscape and attorneys' reliance on technology to complete their work, law firm information technology (IT) departments are constantly busy. One current trend with IT is to optimize technology to drive down costs and improve efficiencies, Seeger said. These goals, he said, may increase the need for more IT professionals like project managers, process engineers, security architects, document automation engineers and e-discovery project managers. Further, lawyers with IT expertise will be in high demand, according to Seeger.

### General Trends

In addition to changes to specific staffing roles, law firms are also experiencing some general staffing trends as a result of modern demands.

#### *Nothing Special*

When it comes to support staff, firms are placing a higher premium on versatility – both skill- and schedule-wise. Firms “are moving more from very specialized to more generalized kinds of support roles,” Clark said. The most highly valued employees, according to Clark, are those who can fill multiple roles and function in a wider variety of arenas.

#### *Flexible Staffing*

Some firms are transitioning from full-time staff to highly flexible staff, who are available based on the firm's needs, rather than a set schedule, said Clark, who labels this model, “accordion staffing.” Accordion staff includes individuals willing to work when the firm needs them and not work when the firm doesn't. This practice is useful for smaller firms that don't require constant support from full-time staff and is particularly helpful with trial management tasks like document and witness preparation, said Clark, who notes that accordion staffing also promotes savings by minimizing staff payroll costs.

#### *Enhanced Focus for Administrators*

In the current economy, firms are increasingly expecting administrators to go beyond their typical scope. One area in which administrators are expanding their expertise is client satisfaction. “I think the administrators who are most successful in dealing with changes are those who understand the needs of the client,” Baker said. “The more they can understand who the client base is and what the industry trends are, the more they'll be able to add value.”

Administrators are also taking on more responsibility in the pricing sphere. While larger firms may hire pricing directors or chief financial officers, smaller firms may not have the resources or need for a distinct position. Instead, administrators may be expected to get involved with pricing issues, including efficiencies and profitability, Baker said. For example, administrators are becoming more involved in the cost of legal services, overhead and value added by particular partners.

#### *Moving Out*

It is no surprise that outsourcing law firm staffing is on the rise. Around 38 percent of respondents surveyed in Altman Weil's 2013 [Law Firms in Transition Survey](#) indicated that some of their non-lawyer tasks are outsourced.

“I think many of the administrative roles can be outsourced,” said Seeger, who lists everything from libraries to marketing to accounting to back-office operations to litigation support as among the staffing areas being outsourced. Interestingly, eliminating certain jobs in house may actually yield a new internal position: manager of outsourced operations.



*When approaching major staffing changes, it is also important to assess the firm's change readiness. In today's environment, it's critical that organizations understand that change is constant. We are not making a change and then it will be done.*

### TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION

As with any major change, firms need to provide a smooth transition for staffing adjustments, garnering buy-in from management, attorneys and staff, as well as establishing a clear direction on modifications.

Firms may begin at the individual level. "It all starts with the charter or charge for that person or that job function," Seeger said. "What are the goals? What are the parameters? What is their authority, and do they have the strong support of firm leadership?"

The process must also expand firm-wide to ensure that there is awareness and support. "You need to start building consensus from the bottom up," said Baker, who recommends getting people involved through focus groups and individual interviews. Baker also emphasizes the importance of top-down support and ensuring that management understands the significance of any staffing changes and are communicating the initiative appropriately.

When approaching major staffing changes, it is also important to assess the firm's change readiness. "In today's environment, it's critical that organizations understand that change is constant. We are not making a change and then it will be done," said Clark, who urges firms to set up an environment that is change-receptive and promotes awareness that after one change, another will follow. Creating an open-minded environment will prevent fear and resistance as staffing continues to evolve and morph in today's modern law firm.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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