

Winter 2004

Effective Use of Legal Assistants Can Boost Productivity, Profitability

Attorneys looking for ways to improve efficiency and productivity often overlook a resource located right down the hall — their legal assistants, or paralegals. The effective use of paralegals can significantly boost a firm's profitability and, for smaller firms, reduce the need for associate attorneys.

Legal Assistant's Role

The first issue to consider is the type of assistance the firm actually needs. Will the assistant perform substantive work as a fully integrated member of the legal staff, drafting pleadings or assembling documents for real estate closings? Or will he or she do lower-level work, such as filing or copying?

Paralegals shouldn't be confused with secretaries; to the contrary, paralegals should perform tasks a secretary could not, whether because of insufficient training or other reasons. Generally, formally trained paralegals shouldn't be assigned administrative or clerical work.

Hurdles to Effective Use

Many firms have difficulty using their paralegals effectively. The attorneys might use paralegals inconsistently and be confused about the paralegals' role. They don't know which or how much work to give paralegals, and may lack confidence in their abilities. At the same time, paralegals frequently complain that they aren't treated professionally and lack a clear career path; in turn, their morale suffers.

The effective use of paralegals also can be impeded when a firm has too many attorneys on its staff and not enough work for them. Although it is usually more cost-efficient to use paralegals than associates, these attorneys frequently end up handling matters more appropriate for paralegals.

Associates' time, however, is better spent conducting research or generating business than completing paperwork.

Improving Paralegal Utilization

The root cause of poor paralegal utilization typically is a lack of structure — paralegals find they have no career paths, mentors, training or voice in their firms. This dilemma often can be alleviated by designating a paralegal coordinator, responsible for the hiring, development, training and optimization of the paralegals. Ideally, the coordinator should be a respected attorney who believes in the value of paralegals.

While the coordinator shouldn't be involved in actually assigning paralegal work, he or she should affirmatively advocate the appropriate use of paralegals and facilitate relations between them and the attorneys.

Paralegals need to feel as if they are part of the legal team. To accomplish this, firms should ensure that paralegals:

- Participate with attorneys in meetings,
- Contribute to practice group decisions,
- Pursue opportunities for professional development, including membership in appropriate organizations or associations,
- Are treated as professionals within and outside of the firm, and
- Receive performance evaluations similar to those given attorneys.



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