

Leveraging the value of paralegals

LawBiz Coach's Corner

By Ed Poll

It is well demonstrated that paralegals improve a firm's bottom line. These paralegals may be employed within the firm itself, or they may provide outsourced services in a virtual relationship.

Either way, paralegals epitomize the highly effective concept of leverage as a

such as a desirable combination of skill and attitude. When all factors are present and positive, the paralegal relationship is most successful.

A paralegal's fundamental task is to allow a firm's lawyers to do more client or marketing work without running up against the danger of not properly addressing client needs. The extra business that paralegals allow a firm to do under the principle of leverage more than pays for added salary, in

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way that law firms enhance their profitability by doing billable work as members of client service teams. In this way, their lower rates, when blended with other team members, boost partner profitability.

What should firms expect from their paralegals to justify using them? The fundamental question in this regard is obvious: is there enough work?

In analyzing a paralegal's worth to the firm, there is no formulaic expression that specifically depends on origination, billing or collection.

To say that a paralegal is worth the amount of profit due to billing or the amount of profit due to business brought in does not take into account the subjective factors that should be considered,

addition to reducing lawyers' stress level. Paralegals enable the lawyers who hire them to focus on the tasks for which the lawyers themselves are best suited.

Once they are part of the firm, paralegals can be leveraged not just through their technical abilities, but also for their client service strengths. For example, having a paralegal answer phone or written client inquiries (ones that do not require a lawyer's response), or at least assuring the client that their inquiry will be answered as soon as possible, can prevent many client relations problems.

Similarly, paralegals can often handle the kind of communication that clients appreciate, by sending copies of documents, by writing, or making calls for updates.

Clients kept informed at every step of their matter are happier clients. All this, of course, means that client service education training is a must for paralegals.

Of course, lawyers must continue to exercise direct supervision of paralegals. Firms have faced disciplinary problems for including paralegals along with lawyers on their website under the category of "attorneys."

The solution is not to remove paralegals from the website; it's to create a separate category for them. Including paralegals on a website gives clients additional contacts to help them. It also is formal recognition that enhances the morale of the entire firm.

This discussion of economics should not imply that paralegals are only an economic adjunct of the firm. The successful legal practice requires a team approach between lawyers, paralegals, other staff and clients. The team dynamic is a powerful tool to serve clients and market the practice to potential new clients.

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