

The Defence of Secretaries

Why short-term secretarial cutbacks can lead to long-term regrets.

By Jordan Furlong

I was struck by a recent report that a large global firm had cut its support staff to achieve a 4-to-1 attorney-secretary ratio. The usual reasons were cited: technology had taken over many administrative and clerical tasks traditionally performed by secretaries, which made possible layoffs to improve the firm's efficiency and bottom line.

I'm not enamored of this short-sighted view of secretaries (the preferred term, in my view, to the anemic "administrative assistant"). Firms that cut back on secretaries overlook or ignore perhaps the most vital service these professionals perform: the day-to-day management of their lawyers.

Secretaries, unlike almost any other creature on Earth, can actually get lawyers to do what they're supposed to do. They chase them down to fill in their time sheets. They push truly important priorities up the to-do list. They remind them about the colleague who's come to their closed office door three times for a consult. They act as the lawyer's ambassador, apologist and oracle for colleagues and clients alike.

Secretaries with four different "bosses" can't perform many of these functions and will rarely feel inspired to do so anyway. Ask any 1970s-era lawyer if he would have shared his secretary with three other lawyers and he'd laugh: how could she serve his needs if she's busy serving others' needs too? Who gets first call on her time and attention?

Lawyer-secretary relationships are among the most important in a law firm, yet many firms seem to treat secretaries as fungible and interchangeable. That leads to the deterioration of these relationships through three types of misalignment:

- personality (some lawyer-secretary matches are or become disastrous in personal terms);
- skill sets (the lawyer's needs vs. the secretary's skills vs. the secretary's job description); and
- priorities (the lawyer and the secretary are normally assessed and judged on different criteria).

A few lawyers might actually welcome less secretarial presence because they're secretly happy not to be managed anymore. It's easy to dismiss an Outlook reminder or overlook a

scheduled meeting when there's billable work to be done; it's harder to do that when a live person is at your door telling you to get moving.

Law firms don't appreciate secretaries' lawyer management functions half as well as they should; those that keep cutting back on secretaries will learn how costly that lack of appreciation really is. (Inspired by [a recent post at Ron Friedmann's Strategic Legal Technology blog](#).)

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