

Law Office Management & Technology

Is It Time to Grow Your Staff?

By Paul Sullivan

If you can't seem to catch up to your workload, it may be time to bring in help. Here are some of your options.

In a previous column, we addressed how to expand your practice and increase your personal income. Incorporating a business-development mentality into your daily activities and making sure clients recognize you as an expert in your field are two ways to do this.

In this article we take a different tack. Suppose you have all the work you can handle but are working endless hours, never catching up, and have no time to yourself. There are essentially three ways to approach this problem; delegate some tasks, manage your time more efficiently, or hire help. This column focuses on the third option (see the sidebars for options one and two). In it, we discuss how to assess your need for more staffing and what to do when you decide it's time to bring someone on board.

FYI . . .

Side Bar

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To hire or not to hire

Have you become a victim of your own success and need more help in the revenue producing area, or are you spending a disproportionate amount of time on non-revenue-generating work? Let's look first at what to do when you are spending time on the latter.

Even if you don't want to manage a staff, you might want to consider hiring an employee to handle administrative functions. It's simple economics; if you're spending time on nonbillable functions, it's costing you plenty whether you realize it or not. The cost is not only in dollars, but also the energy required to keep everything going. This could have a negative effect on day-to-day contacts with clients.

If your timekeeping is seldom up to date, if your invoices aren't going out on time, if your bills aren't getting paid, if your correspondence to clients is way behind, or the whole idea of office operations simply turns you off, those are red flags that you need administrative help.

If you can find a good employee who is skilled and dependable, hiring this person could be the best thing that ever happened to your productivity and operating efficiency. Be aware, though, that hiring employees for the first time brings on a whole new set of challenges. Managers will confirm that employee problems consume the largest percentage of their management skills.

And that's just part of it. Employees open up a whole new area of accounting and reporting requirements. You'll be required to withhold federal and state payroll and income taxes. You'll need to file regular governmental reports and pay the employer portion of Social Security and Medicare taxes. You'll be required to report and pay for federal and state unemployment compensation and to purchase workers' compensation insurance.

Temps and teams

If the thought of managing employees is just too much to deal with, another option is to contact a temporary agency that specializes in law office workers. Unfortunately, temps are largely unavailable except in the larger metropolitan areas, but if this resource is available it offers the opportunity to "try and buy" an employee before hiring. Most agencies will allow you to hire the employee full time after a six-month period.

Another option is to team up with another lawyer and share an administrative person. While this saves money, it can raise conflict-of-interest problems and confusion over to whom the employee ultimately answers.

If it's secretarial help you need, some attorneys have found that using secretarial services to handle correspondence works well. With current technology, you can dictate over the telephone from your office, your car, your home, or your client's office. Another option is to use a digital dictation unit and then send it via email to the transcription service. They prepare the documents and email them back to you where you print them on your printer. You are charged on a per-document or per-page basis.

Paralegal or associate?

If you need legally trained help, then your choices are to hire an associate attorney or a paralegal. If this is the first time you've needed additional help in your practice area, then the paralegal might be a better choice. Paralegals don't command the salary that associates do and are better suited to routine work. Being able to bill these functions at a paralegal rate provides better value to your clients and frees you to do higher level work, for which you should be able to charge a commensurately high rate. In fact, you might actually be able to increase revenue while saving time.

Statistics have also shown that turnover for new associates is high compared with paralegals. Nothing is more frustrating than to hire and develop a lawyer and then have him or her go elsewhere; perhaps with some of your clients in tow. On the other hand, if the work in question can only be performed by a lawyer, then your only choice is an associate. A frank discussion of expectations, future opportunities, and long-term goals for the firm is important when hiring an associate.

Adding a paralegal or associate should increase your level of client service and, more importantly, make the workload more balanced and productive. A paralegal might be able to

perform administrative tasks as well, thereby filling a need in both areas of your operations.

Don't ignore the problem

If you are overworked, stressed out, disorganized, or just can't seem to get control of things in your practice, ignoring the problem won't make it go away. A critical mistake could cost you a client or, even worse, become a professional liability claim. Analyze your situation to seek out the problem areas and then do something about it. You'll have more time for your practice and you'll have more time for yourself.

Gain time by delegating

The delegation paradox. Delegating work is often difficult because initially it takes even more of your time. Sometimes it seems easier just to do it yourself. But that is really counter-productive, especially if your goal is to make yourself more efficient. You only have so much capacity, and you're limiting your potential by not delegating things others can do.

Learn to let go. Good people under perform when they are bored, and challenging them with new opportunities may bring out the best in them. Even if you lose some control over how a job is done through delegation, you can still control the final product.

Gain time through better time management

Are you as efficient as you should be? Countless books have been written about time management, and it's impossible to cover the topic adequately in this space. But here are some key time-management principles.

1. Make lists and prioritize. Put due dates on everything and stick to them.
 2. Tackle the tough projects first when you're fresh. Do routine things later.
 3. Avoid interruptions. Set aside time you can't be disturbed and stick to it except in emergencies.
 4. Use technology to maximize your effectiveness. E-mail and voice mail can replace phone calls and other time-consuming alternatives.
 5. Organize your workspace. Get rid of piles and know where everything is located. Just looking for things can waste precious time.
 6. Treat each item you receive in one of three ways; act on it, file it, or toss it; leave yourself no other options.
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