

THE LAWYERS WEEKLY

Increase value by staying on top of trends

Lawyers need well-versed paralegals

By Catherine D'Aversa

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The legal market is changing. As technological developments affect everything that legal professionals do, business models are becoming more competitive. According to Ottawa-based Edge International's Jordan Furlong, the Canadian legal market is moving rapidly from the closed market enjoyed prior to 2008 toward a fully-fledged, open and multidimensional market.

Technology is driving changes in relationships between in-house staff and outside firms, and the range of tools available means more tasks can be handled internally.

How has this affected the paralegal profession, and what are the risks and opportunities for the paralegal practice?



Lawyers continue to serve a critical function in society, and while there's a need for their services there will be a need for strong paralegals/law clerks. Here are some of the trends that currently affect paralegal practice.

Trend #1: Impact of technology

The impact of technology on the legal workplace has resulted in better efficiencies and productivity. This hasn't been an entirely good thing for paralegals/law clerks, because in some instances it has caused the reduction of paralegal jobs and resources.

Corporate clients are now able to buy technology and keep much of their basic legal work in-house. However, the same technology offers small firms, in-house legal departments and independent practitioners the tools they need to compete with larger firms. This also creates job opportunities for experienced paralegals.

Paralegals must keep up with the new trends in technology to bring increased efficiency to their work. Increase your value to your employer by staying abreast of technology, understanding how it impacts your paralegal practice and how it benefits the firm or company you work for. By doing so, you increase your importance as a valuable commodity.

Trend #2: The rise of boutique law firms

The current demand for specialized law services has caused a rise in boutique law firms. Lawyers are moving away from large firms, either to practice on their own or with one or two lawyers from the same practice area. This opens up a world of opportunity for paralegals with specialist knowledge to move with them and pursue expertise in a niche area.

Trend #3: Increased workload and responsibility

With the demand for lower legal costs and alternative fee arrangements, more work is being pushed down the food chain to the paralegal in an effort to maximize profits. With this comes increased responsibility for paralegals to take on tasks that would have previously been done by lawyers. As a result, top-performing paralegals now enjoy a bigger role in client work and greater responsibility for the outcome.

Michael Schrage, a research fellow at MIT Sloan School's Center for Digital Business, discusses trends in the industry with respect to the value/productivity of retaining and recruiting the top employees rather than investing time and money in mediocre employees. In a post on the Harvard Business School blog, he writes: "There's arguably never been a worse time to be a mediocre, average or typical employee. For most firms today, mediocrity is a cost to be managed and a burden to be borne..."

Don't be the mediocre employee. Ensure that you develop the expertise, professional and substantive skills to be one of the top paralegals in your firm or company and enjoy the new role evolving in the industry.

Trend #4: Specialization in niche areas

Paralegals are increasingly specializing in niche areas of law, such as medical malpractice, family law, not-for-profit law, commercial real estate or mergers and acquisitions. We've also seen the beginnings of specialization in functions such as e-discovery and litigation support. This combats the competition rampant across the general practice sphere, and helps paralegals build a reputation for themselves.

Technology provides the necessary tools and knowledge to enable paralegals with the appropriate background to target niche work.

Trend #5: Varied pricing structures

A decline in overall legal expenditure coupled with innovative delivery of services has increased the demand for alternative fee arrangements. The traditional pricing models used by most law firms to date are being replaced by RFPs, fixed fees and project fees that enable clients to budget more effectively. Under pressure to lower costs and improve efficiencies, law firms are adopting blended rates that support the delegation of more work to paralegals.

They are finding it increasingly vital to utilize the newest technology and paralegal expertise as tools to ensure that they remain profitable within the alternative fee structure demanded by their clients. Paralegals should take an active role in identifying routine repetitive work that can be billed in an alternative fee structure or fixed fees.

Trend #6: Professional development pressures

With all these opportunities available to paralegals, continuing professional development is essential to improve alignment with lawyers and their work. The more knowledgeable a paralegal is in a particular niche, the better his or her chances of being included as a member of the team handling a specialized legal project. Skills such as leadership, organization, negotiation, analysis, project management, time management and practice management complement the technology and specialty knowledge that paralegals bring to their employer.

Trend #7: Social networking

No review of current trends would be complete without a mention of social media and its impact on the legal industry. With most networking now taking place online, paralegals have an unprecedented opportunity to build up their professional connections through sites such as LinkedIn, Twitter, Google+ and YouTube. As the second-biggest search engine, YouTube enables paralegals to easily create and upload video clips showcasing information, comments and expertise to help establish their expert reputation. Join professional groups on networking sites to keep informed of the latest trends in your area of practice, stay abreast of the newest technological advances and assert your expertise.

Paralegals work in a changing industry. By incorporating the newest technology, knowing the trends in the legal market, establishing your niche or expertise and networking through social media, paralegals can enhance their value to employers and establish themselves as valuable commodities in the legal industry.

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