

Changing Role of Legal Secretaries – Are you ready for where we are going?

By Kelly Coholich

Lawyers: How has your use of secretaries and other non-legal staff changed since you started practicing? Even if you have not been practicing very long? More important, are you prepared for where those roles are heading?

At a recent Chapter meeting of the Association of Legal Administrators, a panel discussed this topic with legal administrators from a wide variety of Columbus law offices. While continued change may be the only certainty, we should all actively engage in the discussion of these changing roles so firms can better serve clients. Firms that adapt best to the shifting staffing environment will earn a competitive advantage over those who resist it.

Barnes & Thornburg's Kathie Skamfer has been a legal secretary since 1975. As a panelist, she shared how much her role has changed over the years. When she began, she worked for a single attorney and spent most of her time on typing and shorthand. Today's technology helps Kathie to do significantly more work and take full advantage of her strengths. In recent years, Kathie has gone to court to ensure proper handling of multi-step filings and walked client paperwork through administrative agencies. She plans events. She does background research on parties related to litigation matters. In years past, some of these tasks would go to paralegals and marketers, but Kathie efficiently executes all of them with the same title she had nearly 40 years ago. We all know "secretaries" like Kathie who do so much more than what the job description has typically included. Perhaps the industry needs to come up with a more suitable title for the work now accomplished by such stars in our firms.

Of course technology is a huge driver in the changes to the legal secretary role. Newer lawyers grew up with technology and can effectively handle more themselves without asking a legal secretary for assistance. (Does anybody really think it more efficient for a secretary to type time entries handwritten by a lawyer than for the lawyer to type them directly into the accounting system?) Not only has technology made traditional typing tasks more efficient, but the volume of work requested by lawyers has declined.

More and more courts allow, or even require electronic filing. Rather than rushing to file something in person by 4:59 pm, lawyers and secretaries now rush to file something by 11:59 pm, though possibly from a laptop at home or Starbucks rather than physically in the office. Larger firms may have offices in different time zones handling needs after hours for multiple locations. Clearly people do secretarial work other outside of the typical 9 to 5 sitting in an office.

Many lawyers conduct significant business by email rather than by letters and memoranda. It's now even unusual for lawyers to engage secretaries to prepare longer emails in the same manner they historically had them prepare letters. Less business is conducted in person. To the extent a secretary served as concierge for a lawyer's clients, that role has greatly diminished.

At the same time technology continues to advance,

lawyers receive greater pressure than ever to deliver services efficiently. Twenty years ago, an assigning lawyer might have sent an associate to the courthouse to walk through one of those filings that Kathie mentioned at our meeting, and even charged the client for the associate's time to do so. Few clients will now pay for a lawyer's time on such tasks other than in unusual circumstances. Nor should they.

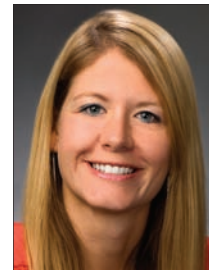
Another panelist, Bill Nolan (office managing partner of Barnes & Thornburg), pointed out that it is not just legal secretaries' roles that are changing. When he started practicing 25 years ago, law offices consisted largely of partners, associates, paralegals, and legal secretaries, along with a small handful of administrators. Few other categories existed, and they were usually very small if they did. Now those categories often include several subcategories, and roles overlap more than ever.

In addition, outsourcing has become a practical alternative for a number of tasks legal secretaries previously performed. Doyle Rausch with Ricoh told the group that outsourcing began in the 1960s with the printing of securities-related documents. Copy centers, mailing, and faxes soon followed. By the 1980s, it was common to outsource these functions. Now, even lawyer tasks may be outsourced as firms enlist third parties to do work such as large scale document reviews. Firms save by more effectively managing the peaks and valleys associated with big litigation; and they pass those cost savings onto clients, who already receive reduced rates from higher priced lawyers not doing the work.

The market of available legal secretaries reflects these changes and the relative decline of the traditional role. While the trend towards greater flexibility will continue, firms find it harder to fill more traditional roles when needed. Input from legal administrators at the program suggests that the median age of legal secretary candidates continues to increase as seemingly fewer people entering the profession.

As technology continually changes and the pressure on law firms to more efficiently deliver services increases, legal secretaries' job titles and responsibilities will undoubtedly evolve. In our office, I try to focus less on specific titles and more on who is best suited to tackle a project based on availability, interest, experience, and skill set. I see little benefit to clients, firms, or employees insisting on maintaining inflexible categories. Firms that embrace the changes as an opportunity will stand out.

Kelly Coholich is the Office Administrator of Barnes & Thornburg's Columbus office and Vice President of the Columbus Chapter of the Association of Legal Administrators.



*Kelly Coholich,
Barnes & Thornburg
kelly.coholich@btlaw.com*