Where Have All The Legal Secretaries Gone?

By Aebra Coe

Law360 (June 21, 2019, 3:45 PM EDT) -- Law firm staffing has experienced a radical transformation in the past decade, and among the biggest changes has been a dramatic decrease in the ratio of legal secretaries to attorneys. Yet while their numbers may have dwindled, secretaries are now doing a wider array of work than ever before.

In the last decade, law firms have upended the way they deliver services through the use of technology and processes aimed at increasing efficiency. One major outcome has been a shift in the ratio of legal secretaries to attorneys, according to staffing specialists.

For a long time, one legal secretary would lend a hand to one or two attorneys, but today the average ratio is closer to one legal secretary to four attorneys, and in some cases as low as one to eight, according to Ron Friedmann, chief knowledge and information officer at LAC Group.

“There’s been a dramatic cut in the number of secretaries in large law firms with the advent of technology and with associates doing more work on their own,” Friedmann said.

As law firms felt the squeeze of the recession in 2008, they looked for ways to cut costs. Scaling back on staff was one way they were able to do that, Friedmann explained.

But that doesn’t mean an impossible amount of work was dumped on any given secretary. Instead, advances in technology that had been occurring for some time were coming to fruition, allowing lawyers to make use of new tech-based legal tools rather than rely solely on human labor.

And firms restructured their support staff teams so that a given legal secretary or paralegal supported a team of attorneys in such a way that allowed them to handle more work in a less burdensome manner.

In addition to providing help to more attorneys, legal secretaries and other support staff in law firms, such as paralegals, are doing a greater variety of work today than they once did, according to Jamy Sullivan, executive director of Robert Half Legal.

“Firms are looking for legal support staff that have a broader skill set that are able to handle multiple roles and functions,” Sullivan said.

Some of the work that was once performed by junior associates, such as trial preparation, e-filing and litigation support, has been shifted to paralegals or other support staff who are aided by technology and overseen by an attorney, she said.

Support staff are even taking on more of a client service role, according to Sullivan, doing things like following up and providing clients with case updates.

And firms are now searching for paralegals with advanced technological proficiency who are able to quickly make use of the newest innovations in the field.

“We see a huge demand for paralegals with contract software experience,” said Julia Shapiro, founder and CEO of Hire an Esquire. “Attorneys set up the system, and then they can review mass amounts of contracts with the help of a paralegal.”
In addition to new responsibilities for roles that have existed for a long time, there have also been a number of new support staff roles that have popped up in order to help lawyers deliver services in a more efficient and businesslike manner.

This has been prompted in part by an increase in legal operations roles within corporate clients that has changed how they obtain outside legal work, with an uptick in matter-by-matter requests for proposals and an increase in desire for alternative fee arrangements.

Some of these new job titles include pricing professionals, legal project managers, chief operating officers and innovation directors. Many legal staffing professionals say law firm marketing and business development departments have grown in the past decade as well, in part due to the influx of those new positions and roles.

“Those new roles are becoming integral to business development,” Shapiro said. “It used to be you had a partner golfing with their buddy to get work. Now more often, you have a client’s legal procurement professional talking to a pricing director or someone else like that.”

While the slimming down of law firms’ legal secretaries is an important development, the trend is just one part of a larger transformation that is altering how legal services are delivered, Friedmann said.

“Not only have there been sizable shifts in staffing with the drop in secretaries and rise in marketing professionals, but it’s become a more diverse ecosystem as there are more functions,” he said.

--Editing by Philip Shea and Rebecca Flanagan.