

## **Establishing Internal Mentoring Programs for New Support Staff**

By Sherry Hurst

Low unemployment levels which prevail throughout the country have made employee retention more important than ever, especially in the competitive legal field. One of the most effective methods of retaining legal support staff is keeping them motivated by providing ongoing learning. Developing a mentoring program is an ideal method of accomplishing this.

In a recent study we commissioned, 96 percent of executives said they supported formal or informal mentoring in the workplace. Most businesses view it as a highly successful strategy for transferring internal wisdom and nurturing talent.

In a legal environment, mentors are able to impart to new personnel the subtleties of office protocol, such as navigating delicate or challenging situations, building a spirit of camaraderie at work, communicating with senior management and developing effective interpersonal skills.

This form of mentoring, which a growing number of law firms and corporate legal departments are incorporating into their overall hiring and orientation procedures, differs from the more traditional advisory approach. Mentors assume an active, "hands-on" role in assisting and guiding new personnel, teaching them the policies and procedures unique to their offices and enabling them to make immediate contributions.

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### **Creating a Mentoring Program Suited to Your Office**

There are a variety of approaches to mentoring incoming support personnel, from informal to highly advanced. Many larger firms, for example, might hire an experienced legal secretary or office manager to develop and oversee a mentoring program, while others might assign these duties to their human resources departments. Much of your decision will depend on the size of your practice or department and the number of new staff you wish to participate at one time.

### **Getting Started**

Creating an internal mentoring program can be accomplished with little disruption to your normal business activities. Here are some tips:

#### **Recruiting internal staff**

Your own legal secretaries and senior support staff are the best choices to serve as mentors. Interview those professionals in your office who possess the leadership, communication and technical skills necessary to take new administrative staff "under their wings." They should have a healthy attitude toward their work and be able to engender enthusiasm in employees. Select mentors based on their individual areas of expertise, such as computer systems, litigation, contracts, employment, etc. Try creating a team of mentors with complementary skills and experience.

#### **Matching up mentors and new staff**

New personnel should be assigned to work with individual mentors on a rotating basis, absorbing the special expertise of each. For example, a candidate could first be assigned to your legal administrator, who would provide an introduction to office policies and procedures. The next assignment could be with a litigation secretary who has excellent organizational skills, followed by a database administrator who is well-versed on the firm's computer systems. The mentoring schedule also might include rotations with one or more mentors skilled in specific legal specialties.

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## Program length

You can determine how long new candidates should be mentored based on their skill levels and experience. Programs can run as little as one to two weeks for highly experienced legal support staff, to a month or longer for entry-level personnel.

Once they complete the mentoring program, your new employees can begin functioning independently as legal secretaries or in other administrative roles supporting attorneys, legal teams or departments.

## "A Win-Win Situation"

Internal mentoring programs can prove to be a valuable asset both for your incoming candidates and for mentors themselves. New staff members receive one-on-one attention as they work to understand the intricacies of your firm or department. Legal secretaries or other personnel who serve as mentors gain, in effect, an assistant who can work with them on fundamental tasks - typing, filing and mailing - as well as more advanced assignments such as drafting correspondence and research.

Those individuals who serve as mentors are acknowledged publicly as having special expertise, which will provide them with a high level of job satisfaction. In addition, some law firms and legal departments offer mentors compensatory rewards such as increased salaries, bonuses or special consideration during salary and promotional reviews.

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## A Sound Business Strategy

Mentoring provides numerous benefits to management as well, including:

### Skills building

By assuming responsibility for mentoring new personnel, you enable them to become acclimated to your office operations quickly and efficiently. As a result, you build a legal support team with the precise skills your firm or department requires.

Tasks undertaken and completed "your" way.

Even when bringing in highly experienced legal support staff, there is still a learning curve to undergo in comprehending how your office wants certain projects and documents handled. By mentoring new candidates from the moment they begin work, you can instruct them on the procedures preferred by your firm or department.

### Loyalty

A mentoring program builds dedication in both new personnel, who appreciate the time and energy devoted to them, as well as the mentors, who gain a sense of pride and ownership in contributing to the firm's future.

### Compensating New Personnel

Of course, you cannot rely on loyalty alone to retain candidates with whom you have substantial time and money invested. One added advantage of a mentoring program is that, at least at the onset, you may be able to hire a less-experienced employee at a

lower salary, with the promise of an increase when their formal training comes to an end.

However, remember that other offices in need of legal support personnel may attempt to recruit candidates from your newly trained staff. In today's candidate-driven market, it is critical that salaries at your firm keep pace with those of your competitors.

With a solid mentoring program in place, finding qualified legal support candidates may not be as great a challenge as once thought. Every office has the resources to create an effective internal program for fostering new talent. With proper planning, you will develop a strong group of candidates who can learn your procedures first -hand and become highly productive - and greatly valued - members of your team.

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Sherry Hurst is an account executive with The Affiliates<sup>®</sup> St. Louis, a leading staffing service that specializes in the placement of temporary and full-time legal support personnel in law firms and corporate legal departments. Based in Menlo Park, Calif., The Affiliates<sup>®</sup> has offices in major cities throughout the United States. For additional information contact her at 314.621.2223 or email to [sherry.hurst@affiliates.com](mailto:sherry.hurst@affiliates.com).