

Retooling the Senior Secretary

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The Legal Secretary profession has evolved over the years. In years past, attorneys relied on their secretary for a variety of functions. In most recent years, attorneys are becoming more self-sufficient and they have many resources. Where does this leave the legal secretary?

The offices today are very multi-generational. There are the Veterans, the Boomers, the Gen X'ers and the Nexters. What we find out is that the Gen X'ers refuse to be "just a secretary". So, many of them go to school to be paralegals. After receiving this education, most of them end up being "just a secretary" because the pay is about the same. Understanding how each generation learns helps when retooling the legal secretary.

In the office today, the average age of the workforce is rising, the average level of education is rising and people past retirement age are making up a larger and larger share of the labor pool.

The speakers conducted a survey of legal secretaries throughout the country and asked them 4 questions. Here are some of their answers:

1. What defines a senior level support professional in your office?
 - Generation, experience, tenure, skill set
2. What motivates you to keep current in our ever-changing work environment?
 - Consider it a career and not just a job
 - Challenge myself
 - Not wanting to fall behind
 - Staying competitive
 - Self esteem
 - Opportunity for promotion
3. As a supervisor, how do you continually motivate both senior and junior level legal support staff regarding skills, ethics, attitude and professionalism?
 - Consistent praise when due
 - Hold regularly scheduled staff meetings
 - Include senior support staff on committees with attorneys
 - Offer brownbag luncheons
 - Hold weekly "do you have any problems/issues" meetings
 - Firm-wide recognition of achievements
 - Spot bonuses (don't have to be monetary)
4. In the next five years, what will you do to increase your technical competence, interpersonal and problem-solving skills?
 - Learn new software applications to become more efficient
 - Attend seminars
 - On-line education
 - Become certified

The survey also showed that respect, feeling part of a team, recognition, appreciation, challenging projects and money are what motivates senior legal secretaries. In addition, lack of respect, lack of communication from attorneys, lack of guidance and lack of appreciation for knowledge and tenure frustrates them. *Also frustrating is when law firms hire legal secretaries with less legal experience at the same or greater salary than the senior legal secretary.*

Some of the concerns senior legal secretaries had were attorneys doing their own work and attorneys not knowing how to work with secretaries.

Addressing the concerns of senior legal secretaries is key to making them feel valuable. So, how do you address attorneys doing their own work? You can train your new hires and laterals. Let them know it is ok to hand stuff over to their secretary. Encourage them to include secretaries in team meetings and e-mails. Have open communication among the attorneys and secretaries.

Let your senior secretaries be involved in training your new hires — even your new associates. Provide them with education opportunities (both in-house and outside). Keep their technical training current.

Let your senior secretaries be involved in creating your new associate and staff orientation manuals. If you have manuals in place, let them review and revise it.

Consider changing your senior secretary title to Executive Legal Secretary. These individuals must show leadership in your Firm. They also must be excellent at multi-tasking, problem-solving, communication and project management.

Conduct annual surveys on job satisfaction with your staff/paralegals. Everyone gives exit interviews. Why not give interviews to the people who stay and are loyal to the Firm?

Consider the following roles for your current legal secretary:

- Trainers
- Mentors
- Administrative managers
- Virtual assistants
- Professional development managers

Why do they leave your Firm? Lack of recognition, training, tools and resources, teamwork, pay, career growth (advancement).

Are you doing everything to make sure your senior legal secretaries are thriving and enjoying coming to work every day? If not, perhaps it is time to retool your senior legal secretary.