

Explore Ways to Effectively and Efficiently Utilize the Skills and Talents of Legal Support Staff

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Effective Legal Support

Presented by:

Bev Boyden

Walsh LLP

Calgary, Alberta

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**EXPLORE WAYS TO EFFECTIVELY AND EFFICIENTLY
UTILIZE THE SKILLS AND TALENTS OF LEGAL SUPPORT STAFF**

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of legal support staff is akin to the historical evolution of the nursing profession.¹ If it wasn't for visionary leaders of the past, those working in the nursing profession would not have the amazing career choices they have today within the health care sector. Although it is now many years later, the evolution of legal support staff has reached a point where it is time for everyone within the legal profession to recognize and act upon these inevitable and similar changes occurring within the legal industry.

Before getting into ideas I have to share on that topic, let me first briefly share my story of the evolution of legal support staff as I have witnessed it since graduating from Red Deer College in 1979.

HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF LEGAL SUPPORT STAFF

For many years, law firms have been and were the sole provider of legal services. Initially, not much more than administrative duties were expected from legal support staff. No formal training was required and it was relatively easy to be hired on. Lawyers dictated and secretaries transcribed. There was none of the technology we have today and turnaround time was expected to be slow. When I started working in the legal industry, there was no such thing as a photocopier, fax filing, scanning, or email exchanges ... computers weren't even in the picture yet. Instead of making photocopies, carbon copies were made by using carbon paper inserted between layers of paper manually inserted and lined up in a manual typewriter. Wow! That sounds so archaic!! I still remember the thrill of have my first electric memory typewriter that permitted me to type 3 lines out on a screen and edit prior to pressing the print key. Technology has evolved immensely since then and so has the role of legal support staff.

Known and titled as “legal secretaries” back then, not much significance was ever given for having graduated from any Law Clerk Program. In 1980, I was living and working in Red Deer and made the arrangement to drive to Calgary for 3 separate job interviews in one day. I was young, ambitious and ready to pursue a career ultimately as a Law Clerk in the big booming City. All three law firms offered me a legal secretary position and I made the decision which job to accept.

¹ A Historical Overview of the Development of Advanced Practice Nursing Roles in Canada, <http://www.longwoods.com/content/22268>

I chose to start off in a Real Estate pool within a small/medium sized law firm in Calgary and at the time thought that was the area of law to be working in. It was a busy time for the real estate market. A couple of years later, adventurous me was planning a one-year trip “traveling on a shoe string” through SE Asia. Timing was right as the recession had hit and real estate was in a huge slump.

A year later I was back and my former employer was calling me to come back to work for them again. This time I worked in the area of foreclosures and repossessions.

Years have passed by and the “Law Clerk Program” has been renamed as the “Legal Assistant Program”, including many changes to the course material studied. Only a handful of graduates from the early days have been successful in their pursuit of a paraprofessional career. For most legal support staff, including myself, for many years it was a “just a job” with little room for any kind of career advancement. There were departments by area of law, but very little work related meshing among legal support staff. That was the *status quo* for many years and the atmosphere was more often than not a “dog-eat-dog world”.

For many years, there has been a lack of understanding of the variances in workload taken on by legal support staff under the corresponding supervising lawyer within the various departments. I know I am not alone in having felt frustration and disappointment as a result of this traditional view to the effect that all legal support staff are to be categorized and utilized the same way.

Within Alberta, the terminology of these evolved roles of legal support staff is still being sorted out:

- Initially, the terminology was “Secretary” or “Legal Secretary”
- In the late 70’s, the terminology had evolved to “Legal Secretary” and “Law Clerk”
- In the mid to late 80’s, the terminology evolved to “Legal Secretary” and “Legal Assistant”
- Again, over the years, terminology has now evolved to “Legal Assistant” and “Paralegal”
- These roles have evolved without any clear or commonly known terminology and often without acknowledgment within the legal profession of any distinction of work performed
- There are variances, not only in personal ambitions, but also in level of ability and of work actually being performed and a standard needs to be set for each of these evolved roles (including education) and to give each of those roles a name