

askbill

Bill, my law firm has never had an office administrator. But we've grown so much over the past few years that we're now considering hiring someone. How should we go about it?



experienced administrator who works at Hall & Evans in Denver, and she emphasizes this: the need for the lawyers to be willing to integrate the new administrator into the management ranks and to give that person the authority

A I recently attended the annual conference of the Association of Legal Administrators, where I sought the opinions of some people who have a lot of experience in running law firms. They raised some very important issues for you to consider.

Among the people I spoke with, the consensus of opinion was that your firm's lawyers need to do some serious soul-searching before hiring that first administrator. Otherwise, the person you hire will not have much chance of success. As one experienced administrator put it, rather bluntly, "They probably won't get it right the first time because they won't know what they want." He went on to say that, "After the first one quits, they can start to think about what they really want from someone in the job."

How can you increase the odds of success? I spoke to Sandra Daly, an

required to do the job. Sandra points out that the lawyers must decide *how much* authority they are willing to give up to the new administrator. Todd Rains, administrator of Abel, Band in Sarasota, echoes Sandra's comments, adding that your firm needs to hire someone you can and will treat as a "peer," regardless of whether that person is a lawyer.

Similarly, administrator Robert Harris, of Smith, Anderson in Raleigh, North Carolina, says that the lawyers need to be willing to delegate authority to the person they hire for the job. However, he further advises that letting go of authority is difficult enough for any group of lawyers—but where they have never done it before, it will be especially difficult.

Your Firm's Culture Plays a Pivotal Role

Delegation of authority is one of the most important cultural issues in law firms. But there are other cultural factors to consider, too. Nancy Constantine, executive director of the San Francisco firm Sedgwick, Detert, Moran & Arnold, advises that you do a careful analysis of your firm's culture before deciding whom to hire. She points out that a new administrator

Send a Question to Bill

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could come into your firm with all the skills that you advertised for, but if that person does not fit with your firm's culture, then he or she probably won't stand a good chance of succeeding.

The reality is that every firm has a culture, regardless of whether its lawyers and staff can put into words exactly what that culture is. One administrator described his firm as being made up of "a bunch of ex-military guys doing insurance defense." Another described her firm as "a group of young, liberal intellectual property lawyers." With just those bare descriptions, you can begin to imagine the differences between the cultures of those two firms. In other words, an administrator might succeed in one firm but fail in the other simply because of cultural issues.

Everyone I spoke with pointed out

that developing a job description is the easy part. On paper, the administrator's duties will probably be fairly easy to identify. They will range from daily human resources and administrative issues to marketing and long-term financial and strategic planning. In reality, though, those duties will involve dealing with a group of lawyers who, up until now, have probably operated as feudal lords and have made decisions independently. Even though they now believe that they need an administrator, they may still be reluctant to give the new person their wholehearted backing. For example, most lawyers may be willing to give the administrator authority to handle personnel matters "except when they involve my secretary."

Another veteran administrator encourages your firm to decide up-front

whether you want an "office manager," someone with limited authority and in a clearly deferential position, or a true "legal administrator," someone who is viewed as an equal by the lawyers.

If your firm hasn't yet decided what you want the new administrator to do, now would be a good time to engage in some serious soul-searching. This is an important enough decision that you might consider bringing in a consultant to meet with the firm's lawyers and hash out the issue. You need to make sure that you all want the same thing in an administrator—and that each of you is willing to give up some authority so the new person can have a chance of succeeding. **LP**

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LAW PRACTICE MANAGEMENT SECTION

EVENTS

August 4-10, 2005

ABA Annual Meeting

Hyatt Regency Chicago
(CLE Centre, ABA Expo and
LPM Section Headquarters)
Chicago, IL



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Part of Chicago's newly renovated Museum Campus, the Field Museum educates and entertains visitors with exhibits such as Sue, the world's largest and most complete T-rex dinosaur skeleton.

Be sure to make your reservations early for the best hotel deals and locations. The deadline for advance housing, registration and ticket sales is

July 7. To register for the meeting and CLE passports, see www.abanet.org/annual/2005.

October 20-22, 2005

LPM Fall Meeting

Philadelphia, PA



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Philadelphia's City Hall, located in the city's center, is the largest occupied masonry structure in the world.



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Buckingham Fountain, centerpiece of Chicago's lakefront parks.

SUMMER IN THE WINDY CITY

Make plans now to attend the ABA Annual Meeting in Chicago. The Section meets August 4-6 at the Hyatt Regency ABA headquarters hotel. That means easy access to CLE and all of the city's attractions. August in Chicago is a great time to enjoy a baseball game, visit the new Millennium Park, and enjoy the world-class shopping and dining.

Visit www.lawpractice.org for details.

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