

By Charles A. Volkert, Executive Director of Robert Half Legal®, a legal staffing service specializing in the placement of attorneys, paralegals, legal administrators and other legal professionals with law firms and corporate legal departments.

A Look at 2009 Legal Hiring Trends

Demographic patterns and trends specific to the legal field, such as decreased law school enrollment, higher attrition rates and intense competition for professionals with expertise in certain areas of law are having an impact on hiring for positions ranging from attorney to legal secretary.

According to the *Robert Half Legal 2009 Salary Guide*, despite a more cautious hiring environment, firms continue to need attorneys and support staff to bolster their capabilities in high-demand practice areas. These include transactional law, litigation, intellectual property (IP), bankruptcy and corporate securities. Although salaries in the legal field have stabilized, employers have demonstrated a willingness to boost compensation for professionals with the most sought-after expertise.

The following are other key hiring trends noted in the *2009 Salary Guide*:

Attracting Attorneys

Law offices have enhanced their use of technology to recruit Generation Y professionals (those born since 1980). Law firm websites, once staid and static, have become more dynamic. In addition, firms are using YouTube-style recruiting videos and accessing professional and social online networks such as LinkedIn and Legal OnRamp to reach a broader, more diverse pool of candidates. Toward this end, some law offices are mandating top-down diversity training, emphasizing diverse lateral hires, and offering bonuses for referrals of talented minority and women attorneys.

In addition, a growing number of law firms and corporate legal departments are taking steps to address the concerns of today's professionals, particularly Gen Y workers, who are intent on attaining a healthy work-life balance. Law offices are offering individually tailored schedules that allow for telecommuting, flexible hours and variable workloads. Also, a growing number of firms are eliminating mandatory retirement policies and offering part-time work and consulting opportunities to older attorneys to ensure a gradual transition.

Although firms are eager to attract young professionals and achieve greater diversity in their workforces, they are taking care to avoid costly hiring mistakes by being more thorough in their evaluation of promising candidates. With the demand for legal professionals with top-tier educations and relevant expertise outpacing the supply in certain practice areas, however, organizations have to be careful not to take too long to make hiring decisions and risk losing strong candidates to other firms or corporations.

Once new hires are on board, firms are working harder to ensure associates receive meaningful career guidance and the tools they need to successfully integrate into the legal practice.

The Paralegal's Expanding Role

The hiring of paralegals is expected to remain steady as law firms focus on growing revenue and corporate legal departments bring more work in-house to control costs. The roles and responsibilities of legal assistants continue to evolve as they are increasingly assigned work traditionally performed by junior-level associates for which an attorney's license is not required.

Not only are paralegals supporting higher-level projects but, in some cases, they are performing additional administrative work as well. As associates become increasingly self-sufficient, some firms are hiring fewer legal secretaries and instead are assigning administrative duties to paralegals who can bill their time for the work performed. Paralegals in greatest demand have litigation support, IP, corporate law and insurance defense experience. Those with backgrounds in probate and estate law as well as foreclosure and bankruptcy law are highly sought by law firms while many legal departments seek paralegals with contract administration and corporate transactional expertise.

Most law offices expect paralegals to possess at least a two-year college degree, but an increasing number now prefer a bachelor's degree in addition to a certificate from a paralegal education program. While some firms have stringent education and certification requirements, others place greater value on candidates who can boast more years of practice area experience and a history of direct supervision by a senior attorney.

Specialization Key for Legal Secretaries

Hiring of legal secretaries remains steady at midsize and small law firms. Candidates with five or more years of experience in litigation, IP, corporate law or estate planning are in strongest demand. At many firms, legal secretaries are taking on broader responsibilities and supporting multiple attorneys. Additionally, some of the work legal secretaries have traditionally performed is being handled by executive or legal assistants, records clerks and data entry specialists.

Employers seek legal secretaries with specific practice area expertise, a stable job history, strong editing skills, a high level of initiative and experience working for large law firms. At some firms, a legal administrative assistant degree or other legal education certification is highly valued.

Meeting Changing Demands

Like businesses in other fields, law firms and corporate legal departments are trying to maximize the talents and productivity of every staff member. In some cases, this means adding attorneys with specific expertise, but organizations also are raising the knowledge bar for legal support professionals. In addition, many law offices are turning to project professionals to help them address fluctuating workloads and supplement in-house skills.

By staying abreast of these and other hiring trends, legal administrators can help their employers continue to find innovative ways to meet workload challenges while holding the line on human resources costs – a mandate that is especially important during periods of uncertainty.