

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.

Legal Administrators Can Benefit from Global Perspective

Globalization is not only changing how and where client companies operate, it is also affecting the composition of the legal workforce, expanding the practice of law across borders, and transforming the management and operation of law offices.

Moreover, a Robert Half Legal survey of 300 attorneys from the largest corporations and law firms in the U.S. and Canada suggests that globalization trends are just starting to have a significant effect on the profession. Asked which of several factors would have the biggest impact on the practice of law in the next five years, 23 percent of lawyers pointed to globalization, the second-highest response behind electronic discovery, cited by 25 percent.

Globe-spanning legal activity has given rise to a complex operational issue – how to successfully create and manage geographically dispersed legal teams that represent a spectrum of languages, nationalities, cultures and legal systems. Legal administrators must keep abreast of how globalization is reshaping their profession in order to help their firms adapt and respond with the appropriate resources.

Managing a Global Workforce, a report by Robert Half Legal, explores in depth the impact of globalization on law firms. Some highlights from the research follow:

Expanding International Reach

As corporate clients have adopted a no-borders approach to business, U.S.-based law firms have expanded their reach into international markets. Among law firms, globalization may mean that domestic firms have law offices in foreign countries or collaborate with foreign firms on specific cases or matters as necessary. This type of cross-border collaboration can give even the smallest practices a global component. In addition, globalization can entail providing legal counsel to American-based clients that do business in foreign locales, or offering legal services to foreign clients with business ties or investments in the United States.

Many of the largest law firms are adding offices in countries that are experiencing strong economic growth. Since 2000, the 250 largest U.S.-based law firms have more than doubled the number of their attorneys in Europe, and increased the number in Asia by 60 percent and in Latin America by 42 percent, according to a 2005 annual survey by *The National Law Journal*.

The most successful global law firms recognize the need to cultivate an international perspective regarding every aspect of their practice. This might require attorneys and

legal staff to increase their knowledge of other countries, cultures and languages or to take a more global approach to staffing.

Another significant challenge for the global law firm is managing the logistics of communication and facilitating knowledge-sharing among far-flung legal teams. To connect employees scattered across a network of domestic and foreign sites, some law offices rely heavily on advanced technological tools – including videoconferencing and converged voice, video and data applications – that help create a sense that colleagues, while far away, are nearly as accessible as if they were just down the hall.

Sophisticated technology also plays a crucial role in helping firms seamlessly deliver services across borders. Clients expect competency and consistency from their outside counsel from one substantive area to the next, as well as uniformity in the quality and timeliness of legal service from one country's office to another.

Global Talent Shortage

The legal talent pool is continuing to shrink, as a result of declining enrollments at U.S. law schools, skills shortages in certain high-demand practice areas and rising attrition rates among seasoned midlevel attorneys. Furthermore, within the next five years, many of the 76 million members of the baby boom generation will be eligible to retire, and the pool of skilled legal candidates will further contract.

Yet, caseloads continue to grow. Nearly half (45 percent) of law firms and corporate legal departments recently surveyed by Robert Half Legal said they expect to hire additional lawyers in the coming months.

These trends hold significant staffing implications. Legal organizations can no longer afford to have a narrow scope in their search for talent. To staff adequately, they must expand beyond their traditional recruitment efforts to attract and retain candidates. This may include online recruiting initiatives, building closer relationships with law schools and alumni networks, and greater investment in professional development.

Many law offices also recognize the need to cast a global net as they seek candidates with the optimum depth and breadth of professional and cultural experience. Some American law firms, for example, are stepping up recruitment initiatives at Canadian law schools. In addition, domestic firms are looking across the Pacific for candidates. Recruitment by U.S. law firms of attorneys in Australia has been increasing since the signing of a United States-Australia free trade agreement, which allows up to 10,500 Australian professionals to work in the U.S. each year on renewable two-year visas.

Legal administrators are ideally positioned to help their firms meet these and other challenges arising from the globalization of law. Although the extent to which the growing international focus will further change the legal profession is unknown, the most successful law offices will continue to develop and refine their global capabilities, strategies and practices to improve their positioning for whatever the future holds.

For more information about the effects of globalization on law firms and corporate legal departments, please visit www.futurelawoffice.com. To obtain a free copy of our white paper, *Managing a Global Workforce*, please call **1.800.870.8367**.