

## **Personnel in a Law Office**

### **Resource 24**

Resource 24 introduces the new lawyer to a variety of office personnel frequently found in a law office.

- Discuss the attached listing provided by Lawyer.com.

## Who Works at a Law Office

By Brian Farkas, Attorney

A law office usually has many employees in addition to the lawyers. Knowing who these people are and what they do may help you to be a more informed client and make your lawyer's representation more efficient. Typically, the law office hierarchy can include any of the following people:

- Partners: People commonly refer to the owners of a law firm as being the "partners." Partners are usually the most experienced lawyers in a firm and, consequently, they charge the highest fees and receive a share of the overall profits. Depending on the legal structure of the firm, they might be called "Members" or "Shareholders." While law firms often have a "Managing Partner" who runs the operations of the firm, most firms do not typically use the more corporate-style language of "CEO" or "President."
- Associates: Lawyers who are employed by a firm, but who aren't owners, are usually called "associates." Associates can be excellent lawyers, but typically have less experience than the partners of the firm. Much of their work will be reviewed by partners, and they may have very little personal contact with clients for their first few years at the firm. Although practices vary from firm to firm, associates may have to work for perhaps three to ten years before they are considered for partnership. Given their experience, associates tend to bill clients at lower rates than partners. Therefore, as a client, you might prefer that certain work is handled by a smart associate for a lower hourly rate.
- Contract lawyers: A firm will sometimes hire outside lawyers as independent contractors to do part-time work. The firm will usually pay a contract lawyer on an hourly basis and then bill out his or her time at a higher rate in order to cover overhead costs and hopefully make a profit. It is common for a firm to do this when they are particularly busy, or when the Contract Lawyer has a specific expertise on a matter (e.g., a specific type of real estate transaction or a certain type of appeal).
- "Of counsel" lawyers: Many firms will also develop an affiliation with one or more lawyers under an "of counsel" arrangement. The types of arrangements that can be called "of counsel" are sometimes hard to neatly define, but it usually is something more than a part-time contracting relationship. For example, a lawyer who is quasi-retired may continue a relationship with his or her firm on an "of counsel" basis rather than remaining a partner.
- Law clerks: Law clerks are ordinarily current law students working at a firm for academic credit, or for a small amount of money. Clerks will do legal research and otherwise assist lawyers in preparing cases and working on other law-related matters. Like associates, firms will bill out clerks at a much lower rate than partners. Thus, clients will see benefits to law clerks doing certain types of time-intensive work, where significant expertise is not required. Hiring a law clerk is also a good way for a firm to recruit new associates; clerks are often given job offers following their law school graduation.
- Paralegals: A paralegal is someone who performs quasi-legal functions and assists attorneys, but is not an attorney. Paralegals can serve a very important role in a law firm by providing critical support to lawyers when they are working on cases. In many

instances, paralegals have a practical working knowledge of the law and of court or administrative procedures that makes them valuable to a law firm. They are able to work under the supervision of a lawyer on the detail work that has to be done on every case but that cannot justify the high billing rates of a lawyer.

- Legal assistants: This is a catchall term that is sometimes used by law firms to describe anyone in a law office who assists attorneys in working on legal matters. It may include paralegals, legal secretaries, and other support staff.
- Legal secretaries: Every lawyer is burdened with an endless barrage of administrative details and procedural requirements that are a part of practicing law. These duties and requirements can be a huge distraction for a lawyer who doesn't have a competent legal secretary to organize and assist with the day-to-day affairs of his or her practice. Depending on the law firm, "legal assistant" and "legal secretary" are sometimes interchangeable titles.
- Receptionists: Almost all law firms employ a legal receptionist. He or she is the firm's initial contact with the outside world, and generally answers phones and greets clients at the door. Some receptionists double as paralegals or legal assistants, depending on the nature of the law firm.
- Investigators: Depending on the type of law they practice, some law firms will hire their own investigators who investigate background facts on a case. This is particularly common in criminal or personal injury practices.
- Administrative personnel: Larger law firms will have their own administrative personnel to run internal operations. While administrative staff generally don't charge clients directly for their services, they do constitute an overhead cost that is ultimately reflected in billing rates. Administrative staff may include accountants, bookkeepers, librarians, billing and accounts receivable personnel, and human resources personnel.
- Marketing directors: Responsible for creating a positive image for their law firms, marketing directors are charged with attracting new clients and retaining existing ones. Marketing staffs are most common at larger law firms.
- Other personnel: Many law firms will have runners, part-time clerical help, technology experts, and other staff members to perform certain functions of the law office. The larger the law office, the more likely you will find such personnel on staff. Clients are unlikely to interact with many of these behind-the-scenes employees.