

What Does Della Think About Perry Today?

Legal Secretaries Satisfaction Survey Offers Insight and Tips for Attorneys

Five years ago, *The Legal Intelligencer* published an article I wrote titled “Where Would Perry Be Without Della?” For those of you too young to remember, Della Street was the ultra-efficient legal secretary to black-and-white television’s legendary attorney, Perry Mason. That article was drafted to be somewhat prescriptive in response to the discontent I noticed coming from the legal secretaries’ community. I concluded in the article that attorneys would be well served by simply treating their secretaries with more respect and making them feel more a part of the attorney’s team. In addition, I had a hunch that this treatment would translate into increased productivity and improved retention of support staff.

I based my premise on anecdotal observations and discussions with legal secretaries I interviewed and those with whom I had come in contact in my own employment law practice. As a lawyer’s lawyer, I have many law firms as clients, and many of these firms have wonderfully articulate legal secretaries. One of these women (the percentage of legal secretaries who are women has stubbornly remained high) commented to me: “Legal secretaries are people and want to be treated with respect... [and if attorneys do that] they will have a secretary who feels her work is as important as the attorney’s work, who feels needed and appreciated. I’ve given 110 percent to those attorneys who treated me like a respected member of their team.”

CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH

Fortunately I recently had the opportunity to conduct quantitative and objective research on the feelings, motivation and overall work satisfaction of legal support staff. In conjunction with the legal secretary and administrative staff organization NALS—The Association of Legal Professionals, my firm conducted the 2005

Legal Secretaries Satisfaction Survey. Through the use of an online questionnaire to NALS’s more than 5,000 members, in April of this year we probed the attitudes and opinions of a sample of more than 1,000 legal support staff who responded. Their responses, in addition to being frank and enlightening, affirmed my original anecdotally inspired hypotheses.

Attorneys who have been practicing for a while recognize that the practice of law has changed dramatically. Although I believe that attorneys should not abandon the “profession of law” in favor of the “business of law,” it is evident that technology, regulation and pure economics have profoundly affected how we go about our daily duties. I often ponder how my father, who graduated from Duke University Law School in 1940, would react to the modern practice of law.

These changes have had an enormous impact on the work lives of attorneys. The most demonstrable effects, however, have been on legal support staff. Whereas my father may have had a bevy of assistants helping him serve his clients, often today a team of attorneys rely upon a single support staff member. In addition to juggling multiple bosses, many of the basic functions that secretaries served just a decade ago are now performed by technology. As a result, today’s legal support staff needs to be better trained and more productive than ever before—all in a business environment that has never been more competitive.

SURVEY FINDINGS

According to the findings of our survey, legal support staff are feeling the strain. Almost one-fifth of all respondents (19.3 percent) felt that they were overwhelmed by work: “Too many tasks and not enough time to do them all.” Another 44.3 percent believed that they were challenged by their workload: “Keeping up, but it is a struggle to complete the tasks in time.” Attorneys are

not the only people in the legal workforce who feel they are often like the proverbial hamster running on the wheel. An obviously exasperated secretary confessed in the survey, “I’m exhausted and completely stressed out from having to work so much overtime to get the work accomplished.”

A major perceived source of the pressure and stress on the support staff’s workload is the attorneys themselves. When asked if attorneys they work for consider the secretary’s time constraints when making work requests, more than half of the respondents (53.4 percent) reported that their attorneys seldom or never gave their time constraints consideration. More than ten percent of the secretaries agreed that, “[the attorneys] frequently drop work off at 5:30 p.m. when I am getting ready to leave.” Less than one-fifth of all surveyed (18.6 percent) said that, “[the attorneys] keep up with my tasks and are aware of my personal schedule.” As one secretary described it, “We are constantly expected to do more in less time.”

SUGGESTIONS FOR ATTORNEYS

Often, the attorney’s attitude toward the staff has a big impact on the perception of the staff by others. One secretary commented that if she could change one thing about her job, “I would like to see the staff being treated in a more professional manner and the attorneys not think they are ‘gods’ who sometimes lord it over the staff.” The staff members who responded did not appear to be shirking their responsibilities. To the contrary, they simply wanted to be treated like legal professionals. Another respondent commented, “I would like to be kept in the loop of what they are working on so I can answer client and opposing attorney questions without making an excuse.”

This desire to be more involved in their attorneys’ teams was also demonstrated by the apparent loyalty to their firms—even though the majority expressed significant work fatigue and dissatisfaction. More than ninety percent of the respondents said it was likely or probable that they would stay in their same job. Almost half (forty-seven percent) agreed that they “love this place.” A seemingly satisfied secretary offered, “The challenge, the contact with clients. The feeling that I am making a difference in someone’s life. The acknowledgement that I am important to his practice.”

Obviously—in my experience and as shown in the responses to the questions in our survey—secretaries really are desperate-

ly seeking respect, appreciation and inclusion in their attorneys' practices. There are some easy, simple steps that attorneys can follow to help them realize that goal and energize their support staff:

- Do not treat your secretary like she is invisible. Make her part of your team.
- Use common courtesy and appropriate language, and act like a professional with and around your secretary.
- Nobody's perfect. Cut your secretary a break, especially when it's your bungle.
- Your secretary has a life. Understand that she has other commitments and responsibilities.
- Plan now to give her a great gift for Administrative Professionals Day on April 26, 2006.

Our survey asked secretaries what they wanted for Administrative Professionals Day. Money or a day off was the top request, with a gift certificate coming in second. More than ten percent of secretaries simply wanted acknowledgement or appreciation. What about flowers? Only 2.1 percent of those responding were looking for flowers on Administrative Professionals Day.

And if you think your secretary views going out to lunch with the boss as a treat, you may want to reconsider. Only nine percent of secretaries who responded expressed a preference for lunch with the boss on Administrative Professionals Day.

APPRECIATING DELLA

What about my hunch about giving support staff the respect and appreciation they crave? As I had suspected, the research found that disrespectful behavior is frequently costly in terms of lost productivity and turnover, whereas a little respect goes a long way.

See for yourself. Administrative Professionals Day is in April, but why wait? Start now to make your own Della feel appreciated. ■

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