

## How to Hire Your Next Administrator

### Do It By Design, Strategies for Tailoring the Role to Your Firm's Needs

After serving in the role for the past 15 years, your firm's administrator has announced her retirement. You knew it was coming, but you hadn't put much thought into what you would do when the day actually arrived.

Frankly, you're not even sure what the incumbent does from day to day. She has pretty much built her own role during her tenure. All the partnership really knows is that the trains seem to run on time in the firm.

She has given four months' notice, so you have some time to find a suitable replacement. But exactly what is "suitable" for your firm today? In an increasingly complex and competitive legal market, perhaps it's time to break the mold of the current role and seize this moment as an opportunity to find a candidate who would be ideal to help lead your firm forward into the future.



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President

But where do you begin? There is an impressive group of next-generation administrators taking the reins in law firms today. What role should your new administrator play in your firm? What competencies are important for success? What sort of educational background and professional qualifications does your firm need? Do you want someone with prior law firm experience, or are you inclined toward the fresh ideas that a professional from another sector might bring?

To help you identify the ideal administrator, here are practical solutions and ideas to guide you through the process of designing the role to best serve your firm.

### The Business Case for Tailoring: Management versus Leadership

Legal administrators can contribute to many areas of a firm's success: strategy, marketing and business development, client relations, financial management, people management, merger initiatives, and technology purchases and implementations. Of course, the impact of any senior business professional will depend very much on the individual's background, experience and interests, and the scope of responsibilities you afford.

The key is to be proactive and precise about what you need before you make the new hire. Many law firms share characteristics that are both strengths and weaknesses in this regard. First, law firms tend to be somewhat patriarchal in culture. They care for their people and, consequently, a firm often feels like a family. In tandem with that, law firms are usually loyal to their people—and sometimes too loyal. Particularly when considering the wheels of administrative staffing, firms will often let roles and their parameters evolve as their people grow professionally. This is a good thing. The weakness, however, arises

when firms let roles form around given employees rather than continually assessing the firm's business needs and identifying the best person to fill a role from a wide pool of candidates.

Since the administrator is typically the most senior non-lawyer employee in a law firm, building the business case for designing a role that will help you lead your firm into the future should be clear. Three considerations that will give you a starting point are:

- The firm's strategic goals over the next three to five years
- The depth and strengths of the firm's existing administrative team
- The leaders and future leaders within the partnership

In terms of the latter, the managing partner's position is particularly critical. Consider that in all but the largest law firms, being managing partner is a voluntary role, with different shareholders elected to serve a certain term and managing partners changing over time. The firm administrator—who over the years acquires a great wealth of institutional knowledge—can have a steady influence and be an invaluable resource through those changes.

So the question becomes, in addition to what it needs in terms of administration and management, does your firm need leadership from the new administrator? To be clear, it is the managing partner's role to lead the firm. However, the administrator's management and leadership skills and competencies will be key to the success of the managing partners that come and go from that role over the administrator's tenure.

To help clarify the difference between the distinctive but complementary concepts of leadership (the role of the managing partner) and management (the role of the firm administrator), see below, which is inspired by a John Kotter article that appeared in the December 2001 Harvard Business Review (one of Kotter's HBR series on the topic of "What Leaders Really Do").

The Difference Between Leadership and Management		
	Leadership Is About ... Coping With Change	Management Is About ... Coping With Complexity
What are we setting out to do?	<p>► <b>Establishing Direction</b> Developing a vision and strategies to achieve that vision; setting high but reasonable standards</p>	<p>► <b>Planning and Budgeting</b> Establishing detailed steps and timetables and allocating resources</p>
How do we deliver results?	<p>► <b>Aligning People</b> Communicating direction to influence creation of teams and coalitions that understand vision and strategy</p>	<p>► <b>Organizing and Staffing</b> Establishing a structure to achieve the plan; delegating authority and providing policies and processes</p>
How do we make it happen?	<p>► <b>Motivating, Mentoring, Inspiring</b> Energizing people to develop and overcome barriers to change</p>	<p>► <b>Controlling and Problem Solving</b> Monitoring and organizing</p>
What are the outcomes?	<p>► <b>Producing Change</b> Often to a dramatic degree, such as cultivating new services and new approaches</p>	<p>► <b>Producing Predictability and Order</b> Consistently achieving budgets and targets</p>

Source: Based on materials in John Kotter's "What Leaders Really Do," *Harvard Business Review*, December 2001.

## What's in a Title: Many Hats and Multiple Roles

There are as many titles for "administrator" as there are firms and people in these roles. From the firm's perspective, though, the title reflects the scope of responsibility and authority the partners assign to the role. Common titles in midsize firms include executive director or director of administration and finance. As firms get larger, there is a trend toward "C-Suite" roles and titles such as chief financial officer, chief marketing officer and chief administrative officer, all of whom might separately report to the managing partner. But in firms that favor one senior administrative role so that the managing partner has a single point of contact, the more appropriate title is chief operating officer and all functional areas report to the COO.

In their book *Riding Shotgun: The Role of the COO* (Stanford Business Books, 2006), Nathan Bennett and Stephen A. Miles identify seven kinds of COOs as defined by their relationship with the CEO in corporate environments. Some of these roles may apply in your law firm while perhaps others will not, but as you continue to define the administrator role that will best serve your firm in the near and long term, you might consider the roles that Nathan and Stephen identified in their research.

## Executor

When administrators play the role of executor, they pursue the strategic objectives and deal with the complexities of getting things done, establishing timelines and working with leadership and practice groups with an execution mind-set. The executor understands and monitors the metrics that measure success and can translate strategic goals into

actions, and then nurture members of the firm at the practice group and office level to help them achieve both group and firm goals.

### **Change Agent**

Given that all firms go through life cycles, you might need a change agent in your administrator. This is someone who can work the firm through turnaround situations, make tough decisions, and help leaders create and communicate the burning platform necessary to inspire change. A change agent can help the firm through rapid expansion and mergers without getting overwhelmed.

### **Mentor**

Where the partnership and the managing partner are relatively young, you might consider a mentor role for your next administrator. This is someone who adds experience and wisdom to the entrepreneurial exuberance of a young partnership and a youthful leader.

### **The Other Half**

An additional role from Bennett and Miles's research is the other half. If, as a managing partner, you are self-aware and know your personality and your strengths, you might look for someone in the top administrative role with the personality, competencies and style that will balance your strengths and style.

How the senior business role fits in your firm will depend on the firm's culture and the senior partners' views of the value an administrative professional brings to the firm. But in all firms, one factor is an undeniable constant: Buy-in among all the partners is key; otherwise, some will invariably set the new administrator up for failure. (See the Law Practice Case Study beginning on page 39 for detailed advice in this critical area.)

### **Fine-Tuning Further: Core Competencies**

Competence comprises a combination of knowledge, skills and behaviors that qualify a person to perform a given role. All firms, large and small, have similar business functions that make up the firm's operations and will determine the type of competencies you seek in an administrator. The Association of Legal Administrators (ALA) sets out a summary of firm business functions in its **Sample Job Description for a Legal Administrator**. The functions for which the administrator may be responsible include financial, human resources, systems and facilities management, as well as aspects of marketing and practice management.

And in addition to the business-specific responsibilities, the most successful legal administrators often wear other hats. For example, they may serve as the firm's official reader, gathering and generating ideas; as the firm's diplomat, in building and nurturing networks and resources; and even as the firm's conscience, by making sure that you do the right thing in challenging situations.

Yet another area to think about—and one in which many firms make missteps when they select an administrator—is the ability to manage change.

There are myriad reasons for this, involving the sophistication and pace of change that touches every functional area of a law firm. Technology changes rapidly; human resources, professional development and associate affairs require keeping ahead of the changing needs and values of new generations; finance and marketing, too, are increasingly strategic and complex.

The knowledge and experience to handle these kinds of multiple functions can come from many different educational and work experiences. However, as you define the role that will best serve your firm, you will do well to consider the following competencies and evaluate them in your candidates:

- Analysis and problem-solving skills
- Business acumen
- Business writing abilities
- Communication and presentation skills
- Creativity
- Judgment and decision-making abilities
- Capacity to develop others
- Emotional maturity
- Sense of humor
- Ability to influence and persuade
- An inquiry mind-set
- Listening skills
- Teamwork approach
- Trustworthiness and integrity
- Time management skills

Lastly, many of the most successful legal administrators exhibit the rare combination of having lots of confidence while removing personal ego from the equation. As one highly successful administrator confided to me, he astutely shares ideas with partners, nurtures both the idea and the partner, and succeeds through a combination of leadership and support that is highly effective.

### **Finding Candidates: Search versus Recruitment Options**

So you've carefully thought through your firm's needs and designed a role that's built to suit. Now you need to find a pool of qualified candidates. Based on your market and budget, there are several resources you can access. However, it's important to know the risks and benefits of each before you begin.

You can work with an executive search firm that specializes in senior executive search. These search firms attract a retainer in the range of 30 percent of the first year's compensation for the role. Executive searchers are the true "head hunters" who do fresh research of the market for each engagement after they have a clear understanding of the opportunity and the ideal candidate. Targeted search is about finding square pegs for square holes. It is also about finding excellent candidates who may be happy in their

current positions and firms but who also might be intrigued by a very interesting opportunity at your firm. Executive search firms should provide you with a short list of candidates designed to save you time. Your search consultant sifts through the long list and does the heavy lifting and interviewing.

Another option is the many legal recruitment firms that also do management recruiting. These firms typically charge fees of 20 to 25 percent contingent upon finding a successful candidate. Some use a combination of retainer and contingent fees. Some legal recruiters will interview candidates and provide you with a short list. Others will interview candidates and send them all to you for you to filter into your own short list. Note that legal recruiters who've taken the time to get to know your firm might pitch a candidate who may appear to be a round peg for a square hole—but it might just be the right person for your firm.

You can also do the recruiting yourself by advertising in local and national newspapers, in legal publications, and on the ALA job site and other recruiting sites and job boards. Be warned, though, that this is a very time-consuming process. And you must be extremely careful about due diligence, whatever recruitment method you use: Firms can mistake provenance (the firm names that appear on a resume) with competence and capability. (This happens in lawyer recruiting with alarming regularity.) For the most senior business position in your firm, you might consider the balance of time, money and recruiting expertise that a professional brings to the task.

### **Integration: Set Up for Success**

When a firm hires an administrator after a long-tenured incumbent departs, it can be a bit choppy. Often firms try to hire a replacement that is either very similar or very different from the incumbent. After a few stops and starts, the executive committee then takes the time to define the firm's needs, redesign the role, and identify competencies and the elusive characteristics that would enable success in the particular firm.

If, on the other hand, you take the time to define your needs at the outset, you have a much better chance of finding the right business leader for your firm.



The experience, competence and skill level of the individuals in legal administration varies from the folks who do a spectacular job of dealing with operational complexity to those who are really partner-level strategic professionals that can help your firm build leadership capability and client relationships and impact both top and bottom lines. The key to success is knowing what you want and need from the get-go.

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