

Report to Legal Management

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Government Legal Offices Could Yours Benefit from a Little Creative Management?



Barbara Drake

By Barbara Drake

Lawyers who work in local, state and federal government practice law in a unique environment. They function in a high-volume, fast-paced atmosphere, operate with limited resources and encounter a tremendous amount of public scrutiny. They provide legal counsel to a diverse spectrum of clients and interests: governing bodies, chief executive officers, department heads and staff at all levels, as well as boards, agencies and commissions of the government.

One of the greatest challenges of working in this context is attaining and maintaining a high degree of effectiveness and efficiency while keeping the commitment to clients as the top service priority. A government legal office must create and implement highly effective practice management structures, policies and systems to achieve a superior level of client service and satisfaction while at the same time attaining exceptional quality and quantity of work product.

In pursuing these goals, government legal offices often need to find creative yet practical and workable solutions to office management issues in several key areas.

Client Service and Relations

Problems with client relations are not uncommon in government legal practice. There is a wide spectrum of issues that can be identified and addressed by an effective client relations process.

- **Timeliness and responsiveness** – Being keenly aware of the clients' needs and interests enables the legal staff to be more attentive to its clients.
- **Creative solutions** – A client service program encourages lawyers to be more resourceful in addressing the clients' needs, so that the fallback response of "no" is not the norm.
- **Mutual respect and understanding** – An increased level of interaction between the legal office and its clients adds to the legal staff's familiarity with the operational and legal issues of the client. This enables the legal office to be more supportive of the clients' needs and leads to consistency of advice agency-wide.

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Who benefits from the establishment of a formal, systematic client service process? Everyone. Improved client relations results in better service to the client, as well as a more positive working environment for the legal staff. A better atmosphere will bring about greater dedication and professionalism for the legal office. Lawyers become more effective advocates. Clients are better served, and their relationship with the lawyers is greatly improved. The public perception of the working relationship between the legal office and the government entity is enhanced by the positive interaction between the clients and lawyers.

Practice Management

Government legal offices address issues varying greatly in complexity and subject matter. Workloads change and shift constantly due to changes in the focus of the government entity as well as developments in legislation, regulations and case law. It is essential that the office effectively and efficiently manage this ever-changing, dynamic practice.

The legal office's ability to manage its practice can be greatly enhanced if it develops a practice management strategy that addresses the following issues:

- **Organizational structure** – A government legal office's organizational structure must include minimal but effective management, with clear lines of reporting and accountability.
- **Appropriate mix of inside/outside counsel** – Clear policies and objective criteria for selecting and evaluating outside counsel, as well as a system for continual reassessment of the appropriateness of the mix are critical.
- **Maximum productivity** – Efficient distribution of the substantive workload among lawyers, with

systematic re-evaluation to ensure that ongoing appropriate workload distribution will maximize total productivity.

- **Recordkeeping systems and procedures** – Filing, docketing, information retrieval and telecommunications systems and procedures should be logical, well-organized and comprehensive to maximize efficiency and effectiveness and ensure flawless documentation of the office's work product.

**“Organizational practices
can be implemented
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to compete effectively
for talent ...”**

A well-managed legal practice improves the ability to respond to client needs, leads to a better working atmosphere for the legal staff, enables the office to respond expeditiously to workload shifts and results in greater professionalism in the office.

Utilization of Human and Technology Resources

Because government legal offices operate with greater fiscal limitations than do their private sector counterparts, they face ongoing challenges in recruiting and retaining highly qualified, motivated professionals and taking advantage of available technological resources.

Compensation is a major issue in most public sector law offices and bears directly on the frequency of

turnover and ability to attract and retain the legal talent needed to deliver high quality services to the government entity and citizens it serves. Appropriate use of legal technology can dramatically improve efficiency and significantly enhance the working environment of the office.

Organizational practices can be implemented to enable the legal office to compete effectively for talent and make the best possible use of technology. There are a number of key areas on which to focus:

- **Compensation** – The office must achieve compensation levels that are, at minimum, competitive with comparable positions in other government law offices in the same area.
- **Allocation of work** – Lawyer, paralegal and clerical work should be appropriately distributed and efficiently delineated.
- **Training and development** – Training and professional development opportunities will improve the ability of legal and non-legal staff to meet their responsibilities.
- **Performance reviews** – Managers must regularly evaluate and identify strengths, weakness and opportunities for lawyers and staff to improve efficiencies and effectiveness of operations and procedures.
- **Career development and progression** – Managers should regularly look for career development opportunities to motivate and retain their legal and non-legal staffs.
- **Technology resources** – Evaluation of technology resources will ensure the effective use and best blend of people, systems and equipment.

A legal office with a staff of highly qualified, dedicated professionals and appropriate technological resources

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will run smoothly and provide the highest level of service to its clients.

Implementing Change

To achieve and maintain change in a dynamic environment is not easy. Too often, clients and legal office personnel struggle with management issues inherent in their working relationship, rather than taking the time to find mutually beneficial solutions to the problems.

Focusing the office's energy, creativity and intelligence to realize its full potential is the most important leadership challenge. A direct and thorough understanding of client needs and satisfaction will provide a blueprint for addressing the chal-

lenge of change. Creating a sound organizational structure will form the foundation of successful change. Building mutual trust and respect among lawyers, staff and the diverse client base will be the cornerstone of the process. This may take time to achieve, but the benefits will be enormous. ♦

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