



While senior paralegal Cindy Hines, left, says younger attorneys are more likely to handle things like revisions and email, Renée Lane-Kunz, chief operating officer at the same firm, says it's less a function of age than of personality: "You can have associates who are much younger ... who are still very needy," she says. (The Daily Record/Maximilian Franz)

## Technology changes expectations for legal support staff

By: Lauren Kirkwood Daily Record Legal Affairs Writer January 13, 2015

When James E. Edwards Jr. first began practicing law in 1982, he quickly learned to delegate certain tasks — such as transcribing and typing up documents — to his legal secretary.

"One of the senior partners came by and said, 'Here's a Dictaphone — you need to learn how to use this,' which was at the time the state-of-the-art," said Edwards, now a principal at Ober | Kaler and co-chair of the firm's litigation group. "Obviously, the state-of-the-art has progressed quite a bit in those 30-plus years."

As technology changed over the decades, so did the needs and expectations of attorneys who embrace it, and so, too, has the role of support staff such as legal secretaries and paralegals.

Many local firms said they now employ one legal secretary for every three or four attorneys, compared to the one-to-one or two-to-one ratio that used to be the norm. This ratio is typical of firms nationwide, although some count as many as six lawyers per secretary, according to an article in the American Bar Association's Law Practice Magazine.

"Lawyers are doing more word processing, more online research and more electronic filing, and I think that changes the role of the legal secretary," said Barry Rosen, chairman and CEO at Gordon Feinblatt LLC.

And it's not just attorneys who are using technology to save time, said Joanna Trela, firm administrator at Rosenberg Martin Greenberg LLP.

"A lot of typical secretarial duties with technology can be done so much quicker," Trela said. "An old-school secretary was constantly answering the phone and taking phone messages, but between instant message and voicemail, the need for that has been decreasing, as well."

Even with an average of 3.5 attorneys to one secretary at her firm, Trela said, these changes have resulted in secretaries taking on more advanced work.

"With secretaries having more time available, attorneys can use them at a higher capacity," Trela said. "They're doing more research, drafting simple documents — they can take on that bigger role."

### A new generation

While there may be the perception of a generational divide between younger lawyers and more senior attorneys when it comes to adopting technological trends, several people said it's not that simple.

"I think that there is certainly support for the premise that the younger generation uses technology more and needs administrative support less," said Renée Lane-Kunz, attorney and chief operating officer at Shapiro Sher Guinot & Sandler. "But it's not strictly generation-based; it's still very much a personality trait. You can have associates who are much younger ... who are still very needy."

Robin Welbourn, the human resources manager at Pessin Katz Law P.A. in Towson, agreed.

"I think that there are more experienced attorneys who use technology to the maximum just as well as some younger attorneys," she said. "Sometimes there's a stereotype there, but I think here everybody's using technology to the best they can."

That includes the secretaries themselves, as technical skills have become more marketable than traditional secretarial functions, said William W. Carrier, managing partner at Tydings & Rosenberg LLP.

"It's hard to find a legal secretary. Nobody wants to learn typing; it's just a different world," Carrier said. "And rather than having typing skills, we want them to have technology skills. We go out and we look for people who are versed in technology and versed in mastering certain kinds of software."

Most legal secretaries today welcome the trend, Trela said.

"The newer generation of secretaries embraces it because they want to do more than simple clerical work — they want to feel like part of the team," she said.

Of course, each firm is different and there's no one-size-fits-all approach, Trela said. Legal secretaries' specific duties vary depending on how individual lawyers choose to use them, as well as what practice area they're assigned to.

For example, she said, secretaries supporting a litigation practice group might have more paper documents to deal with on a day-to-day basis than secretaries working for a corporate practice group.

But Edwards, co-chair of the litigation group at his firm, said the majority of lawyers there create and edit the documents they produce themselves.

"As a result of that, we've had a more than one-third reduction in secretarial support over the last 10 years," he said.

### **Paralegals still plentiful**

For the most part, local law firms haven't seen the same decrease in the number of paralegals they employ.

"We don't see a ratio shift with paralegals, at least not here," Rosen said. "There may be large national Big Law firms that are outsourcing some discovery functions and that's the reason they have less paralegals."

But the role of the paralegal has evolved over the decades, said Cindy Hines, senior paralegal at Shapiro Sher. Hines, who has worked at the firm for about 20 years, described her current role there as a "jack of all trades."

"When I began, I was definitely working for one department only, and usually only one or two attorneys," Hines said. "I would be assigned a case or a caseload and I would only work on those cases. Now, I work on almost every case here, at least a little bit."

That's typical of paralegals at the firm, she said. Rather than working only with a particular lawyer, the work they do depends on their individual level of experience and their skill set.

The type of tasks they're assigned also depends on the needs of the attorneys they're supporting, Hines said.

"Some of the older attorneys, when they need me to handle something, I do almost all of it — revising the document, emailing the document — whereas when I work with younger attorneys, I'm at more of a higher level of dealing with intensive document production, putting together exhibits and things like that," she said.

But since the firm's legal secretaries are able to take on tasks beyond administration, Hines said, she and the firm's three other paralegals are comfortable handling a diverse array of assignments.

"Our paralegals just do more of a wide range of things, and secretaries now do some minor paralegal work," she said. "I feel like I work for everybody here."

## ABOUT LAUREN KIRKWOOD

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