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15 Warning Signs of Poorly Managed Assignments

By

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You can't tell me you've never blown an assignment. I mean, simply *everyone* has blown it at one time or another. The magnitude of your misguided endeavor may vary but let's face it: blown is blown. Yep. Right next to everyone's glowing Hall of Fame is that tiny little door leading to the glowering Hall of Shame.

Abilities and characteristics, such as teamwork, willingness to learn, attention to detail, promptness, and amount of billables, all take a backseat to the skill upon which you are most critically judged: your ability to handle and deliver quality work product. No matter how many hours you bill, even someone billing 2300 hours a year is not going to get a great raise if a good chunk of those hours are worthless.

A senior-level paralegal once told me that her opinion on properly handling assignments revolves around this:

1. Did you find out *exactly* what final work product is supposed to look like?
2. Did you find out *exactly* what final work product is due and why?

With the exception of those who slept during the last decade and snored soundly right into the next, I'm certain you have heard, read, and practiced open communication techniques. Yet, in a law firm environment, a good percentage of write-offs of billable time occur because of failure to issue clear directions or to interpret those directions correctly. Paralegals can be victimized by these poor communications, and law firms lose profit, attorneys lose time, and clients lose confidence as a result. Not a pretty picture.

Warning signs of problematical workflow are everywhere. But we have to look! Recognizing warning signs allow us to prevent bottlenecks, overloading, missed deadlines and well, career-limiting encounters with unhappy supervisors. Distinguishing warning signs should alert you to take action to correct your present path. If not, a collision of some sort is inevitable.

Here are just a few warning signs that you or your firm/corporation, or both, are not managing assignments effectively:

1. You miss deadlines because you are handling too many matters.
2. You are receiving assignments from more than one attorney and cannot prioritize them.
3. You are consistently receiving assignments that you don't know how to complete.
4. An attorney stops you in the hallway and demands your immediate attention to a matter. You drop other assignments, causing delays.
5. You are routinely given ASAP and RUSH deadlines. A difference of opinion emerges regarding interpretation of these deadlines.
6. You are trying to complete an assignment and need additional paralegals to help you. However, either no one is available or there is not enough time to bring someone up to speed.
7. Had you known about an impending event (a closing, a deposition, a filing, meeting, and so forth), you may not have allowed yourself to get overloaded. Or, you could have anticipated an assignment and completed it last week when you had more free time.
8. You are afraid to go on vacation. Enough said.
9. You can't seem to get adequate assignments or you can't seem to get the kinds of assignments you would like. You find yourself frequently having to knock on doors looking for work.
10. Your access to online services, LEXIS/Westlaw or other services is restricted, limiting your ability to complete assignments.
11. Your time is written off or you are criticized because the assignment took you much longer than the attorney anticipated.

12. You are criticized for having too much administrative (non-billable) time.
13. Because so many different paralegals have been assigned to a matter during different phases, no one particular paralegal knows the matter inside and out, making it difficult for you to complete an assignment.
14. Because you are a star, attorneys seem to always request your services, and not those of a more junior member of your staff. Consequently, you are performing assignments below your level of expertise and you are overloaded.
15. You are asked to redo an assignment.

Poorly thought-out workflow planning has caused many paralegals to leave otherwise satisfying positions. Ask yourself some hard questions: What is your plan of action? What do you intend to do to ensure that you have continued job satisfaction? If you are looking to upgrade your assignments, how do you plan on proceeding? A paralegal's place on the organizational chart and a job description that includes the phrase "performs routine and repetitious tasks," can make upward movement appear unreachable. By having a plan of action or guidelines, you may redefine the niche between the attorney and secretary and break through any perceived glass ceilings.

Taking a proactive rather than a reactive approach can enable you to direct your own career. Being proactive does not translate into rebelling. It simply means that you take charge of those circumstances that are within your control. Yes, there will be instances in your career you cannot control, as in any other aspect of life. However, being master at the helm can allow you to enjoy, profit from, and steer your career at your own choosing.

In future columns, we'll explore a few of those options, techniques and new possibilities. I welcome your suggestions, questions and hot tips. Feel free to send me an email and let's start a collaborative dialogue through your paralegal association publication. I'm looking forward to hearing from you. Here's to outrageous success!

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