

Q: *Where Do Administrators
Stand in Your Law Firm?*

A QUICK QUESTION FROM...



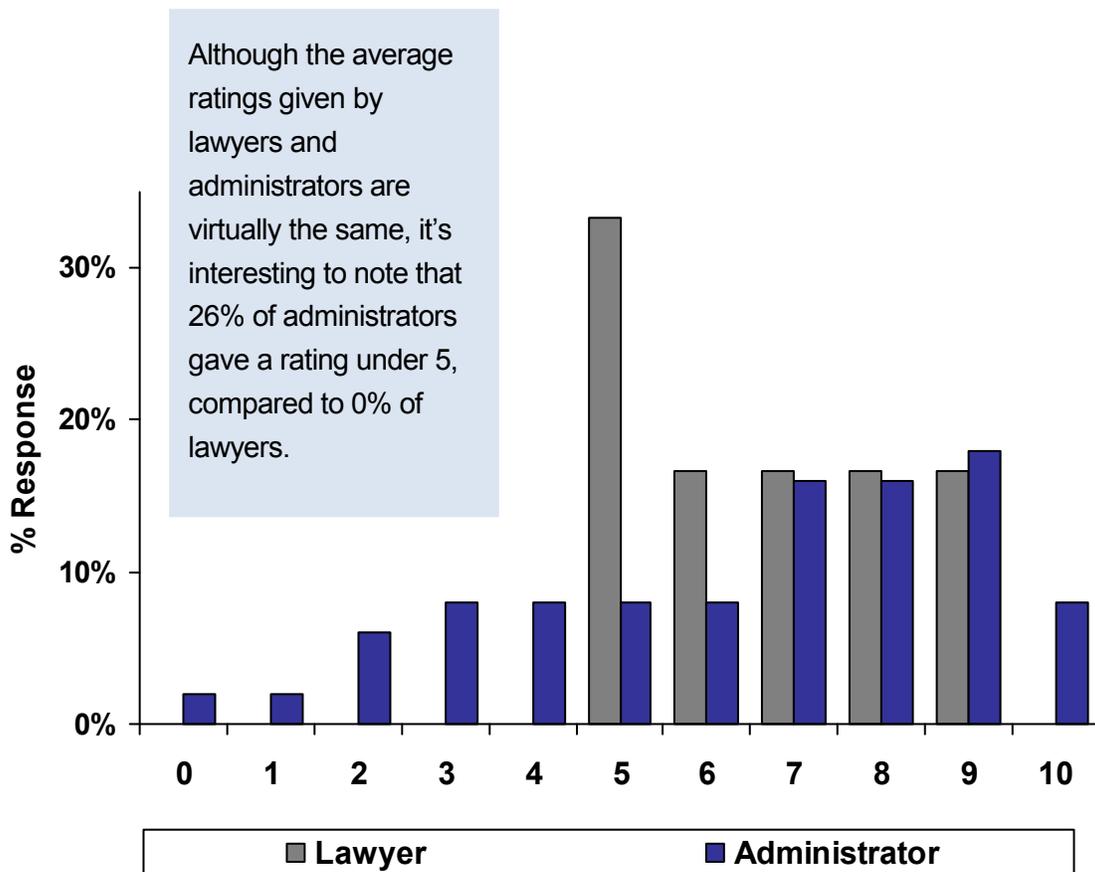
Where Do Administrators Stand in Your Law Firm?

Most law firms employ professionals to assist in managing their business operations. In small firms this may be a single all-purpose administrator, while large firms will have a full C-Suite of business, finance, strategy, IT, marketing, and HR experts, among others. However, across firms of all sizes, professional staffers (regardless of their expertise and experience) often find their efforts hindered to one degree or another by their 'non-lawyer' status among partners in the firm.

How would you assess the standing of senior administrators in your law firm?

Rate on a 0 to 10 scale:

0 = Administrators are available to advise, but any individual partner can override their decisions.
10 = Administrators have the full confidence of the partnership to act as they see fit in their areas of expertise.



	Average
Lawyer	6.7
Administrator	6.4

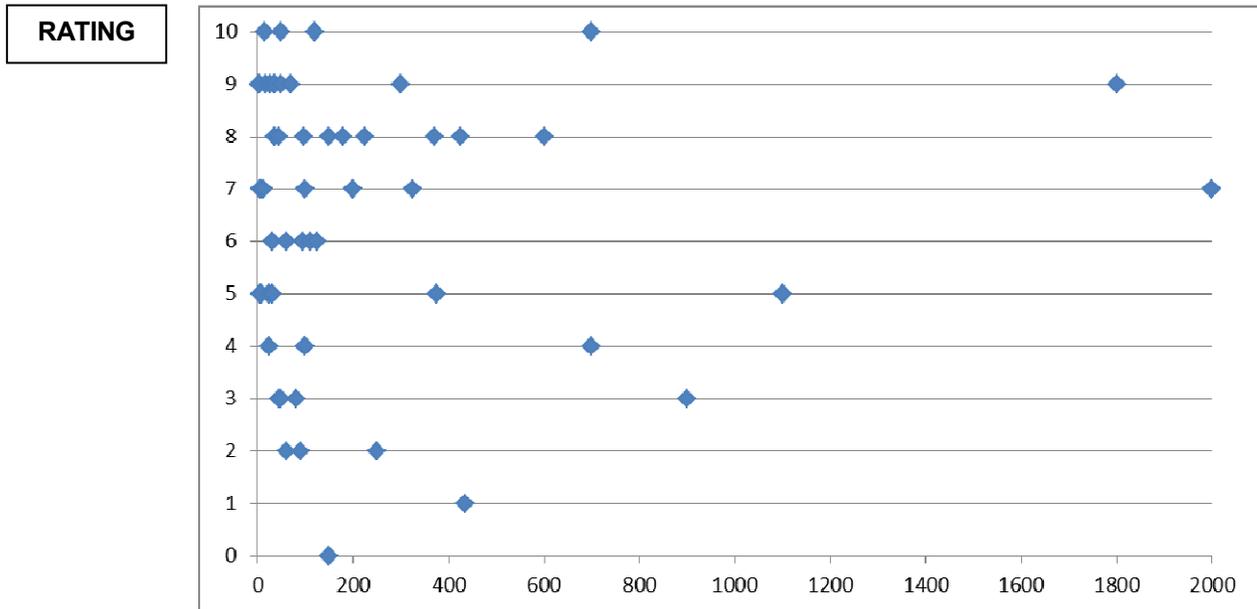
Where Do Administrators Stand in Your Law Firm?

BY FIRM SIZE

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Firm size is not a determinative factor in the standing of a law firm administrator, according to survey results.

	Average Rating
Under 100 lawyers	6.6
100-499 lawyers	6.0
500 or more lawyers	6.6

	Average Firm Size
0 – 3 RATING	229 lawyers
4 – 7 RATING	314 lawyers
8 – 10 RATING	231 lawyers

THE SURVEY

This one-question survey was posed to the readers of *Altman Weil Direct* in February 2015. We received 56 responses, 50 from administrative staffers and 6 from lawyers. Participating firms ranged in size from 3 lawyers to 2,000 lawyers.

OUR EXPERTS COMMENT



Altman Weil principal Jim Wilber heads the firm's Executive Search practice. Jim Wilber has placed hundreds of law firm executives and business managers over two decades. He advises law firms on administrative structure, management and leadership and is a former practicing lawyer and law office manager.

The survey shows that any firm, big or small, can confer appropriate authority and autonomy on administrative staff - *and any firm can do it wrong*. There are three keys to doing it right:

First, the firm needs to make certain that its lawyer leadership group is fully committed to finding, hiring, and delegating work to non-partners (i.e. administrators) who are usually non-lawyers. It is critical to determine whether any key leaders don't understand the importance of doing this in the right way and either find ways to change their minds or consider abandoning the idea of hiring a highly-skilled senior administrator.

A second key is to define in writing the specific responsibilities and authority being delegated to the administrator and make sure that lawyer leaders support that definition fully. A position description should be distributed to all lawyers in the firm to make certain that the key lawyers and lawyer thought-leaders on are on board with the definitions.

The third key is for the lawyer leaders to protect the administrator's authority from partner end-runs, overt attacks from partners, or any other activity that challenges the administrator's responsibility or authority. The first major assault on the administrator's authority that goes unanswered is the beginning of the end of that person's tenure and the effectiveness of the position itself.

Where Do Administrators Stand in Your Law Firm?

Additionally, making utilization of administrators effective and profitable for a law firm depends on the caliber of the people hired. The higher the caliber of the business manager or executive hired to be a senior administrator in a law firm, the more effective and profitable the arrangement will be. However, higher caliber administrators will have lower patience for working at firms that don't "get it," and in the absence of appropriate support they will quickly start looking for a firm that does.

The essential dynamic is difficult to achieve but simple to state: A law firm should delegate all of the day-to-day business and management activities, functions and decisions in the firm to the principal administrator (and therefore to the broader administration). It must also hold administrators accountable for the effectiveness of those activities, functions and decisions.



Altman Weil principal Eric Seeger works with law firms in the areas of strategy formulation and execution, practice group planning and training and organizational issues. Eric has held positions as Chief Operating Officer of a regional law firm and Strategic Planning Officer at an AmLaw 200 law firm.

One might think that in larger firms, or maybe in smaller firms, the administrator would tend to be granted greater latitude to act independently. Interestingly, firm size did not seem to correlate with the administrator's level of autonomy. Average ratings were similar for small, midsize and large law firms.

More than half the administrators reported enjoying a high level of confidence from partners (indicated by ratings in the 7 to 10 range), but few said they had the full confidence of the partners. This "trust but verify" mentality is a common dynamic in law firms that creates opportunities as well as frustrations.

How administrators can excel in a highly skeptical, highly demanding environment is a topic we'll explore in our March 31 webinar, "Becoming a Go-To Administrator."