

Best Practices in Law Firm Administration and Administrators

Ten Things that Make a Great Law Firm Administrator by James S. Wilber, Altman Weil, Inc.

I'm often asked, what makes an exceptional law firm administrator? Having consulted to law firms on the topic of administrators and administration for more than 25 years, it's not difficult to answer that question — but it can be hard to find someone who has the right combination of skills and understanding needed to be successful. As the administrator's role continues to gain in significance, I believe it is more important than ever before to put in the time and effort to find just the right person for your firm.

Here is my list of the ten things that make a great law firm administrator:

- 1. The Mission of Administrators:** First and foremost, all law firm administrators need to understand that they, and the rest of the administrative managers and staff who work with them, are there for one essential purpose – to improve the firm's profitability. Administrators with specialized education and training will excel in functional job responsibilities that are not within the scope of most lawyers, and at the same time they will free up lawyers to better serve clients and generate more revenue. This is the whole reason law firms have turned to business managers instead of practicing lawyers to manage firm operations.
- 2. Law firm economics:** This leads to the second attribute – a sound understanding of law firm economics and the drivers of profitability. Even in firms that have true chief financial officers, the principal administrator must be cognizant of the economic issues and where profit comes from. He or she also needs to ensure that the entire administrative staff is aware of how they can add value to the firm and thus justify their own existence. See attribute #1.
- 3. Resilience:** Equally important to the first two characteristics of a great administrator is having thick skin. Law firms are challenging places to work. They are owner-operated businesses where all the owners work on site and where many of them spend time scrutinizing the performance of the administrative managers and staff. Enduring that scrutiny and the sometimes unpleasant partners who wield it can be a daunting task.

- 4. People skills:** The fourth important characteristic stems from the adage of knowing one's audience. Savvy administrators understand that, at least in general, lawyers behave differently than other people in several key areas of importance to their work lives. Personality testing reveals that in comparison to the general population, lawyers most often have a higher sense of urgency; are not thick-skinned themselves and don't take criticism well; are excellent conceptual thinkers, which, when coupled with their heightened sense of skepticism means that they are good at poking holes in the ideas and plans of others; are more introverted, and hence less enamored of a team orientation, than the general population; and they have a fierce sense of autonomy and don't take kindly to being told what to do.
- 5. Market knowledge:** Great administrators are conversant in the forces buffeting the legal services marketplace in today's tough competitive times. They are aware that deep changes are occurring in how legal services are delivered and they therefore are abreast of what other firms are doing in terms of pricing (alternatives to hourly-billed work); work and process efficiency (legal project management); the extreme importance of partner lateral recruiting (one of the only ways in which many firms are achieving growth and staying relevant); the scary environment related to IT security (protecting not only their own data and information, but that of their clients too); and how their firms can use issues like these to their own competitive advantage.
- 6. Leadership:** A great administrator understands the difference between management and leadership. He or she knows that hiring good managers in the underlying functional areas (IT, HR, etc.) is of critical importance, but that in them, and especially in the principal administrator, leadership is extremely important too. Leadership skills will enable the administrator to communicate the firm's vision and sell it to achieve buy-in throughout the ranks.
- 7. Management:** As a superior manager of people, a great administrator hires the best managers and staff possible, provides them with what they need to do their jobs, assists them where they need it, but allows each person to operate in their own areas free from micro-managing or other behaviors that mark insecure people. While allowing managers and staff the freedom to show what they can do, administrators also need to hold

- them accountable for their performance, and coach and mentor them toward achieving their goals.
- 8. Professional standards:** A great administrator understands the hallmarks of the legal profession and helps the firm manage its operations in strict compliance with the hallmarks. Those standards include: the laser-like focus on quality and getting it right; the overwhelming importance of confidentiality in general and client confidentiality specifically; and the fact that it is a hard-working profession and those who perform well, whether they be lawyers or administrators, work long hours and need to be available to the lawyers on an almost 24/7 basis.
- 9. Client service:** A superior law firm administrator appreciates the importance of superior client service. He or she also understands that for the firm's staff there are two sets of clients to satisfy – the firm's underlying clients, but also the lawyers and other professionals whom they are there to support.
- 10. Attitude:** Finally, like anyone in today's fast-changing world, a great administrator recognizes that to be able to not only withstand all the pressures, but to survive and thrive in the face of them, he or she needs to be engaged in a job that provides psychic and professional reward, that is important, and that is fun. Although they need to take their jobs seriously, they never should take themselves too seriously.

About the Author

Altman Weil principal **James S. 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. Contact Jim at jswilber@altmanweil.com. Visit the **Altman Weil Job Bank** at www.altmanweil.com/jobbank.

This article is one of a series on best practices for law firm administration written by Altman Weil principal James Wilber. Additional articles in the series can be found at www.altmanweil.com/LFAdmin.