

PERSPECTIVES: A Members' Forum



"Perspectives" is a new section in AALL Spectrum. It will serve as a members' forum and will include articles on issues of concern to the profession.

Who Are You? Or, Do Job Titles Matter?

by Susannah Crego

Chief Marketing Officer. Director of Information Services. Associate. Librarian. Editor. Which would you rather be? Does it matter?

Law firms, large and small, are populated with attorneys and staff. Attorneys, be they associates or partners, are recognizable. They are sometimes referred to by staff as "my attorney." (Used as "my attorney needs this NOW.") Attorneys may share in the profits of the firm or they may hope to share those profits someday.

Staff, on the other hand, are often referred to as "non-professionals" or "non-lawyers." These "non" people may be out on a mail run or negotiating a multimillion-dollar contract with an IT supplier.

Staff can be differentiated by job title. A title can define a staff member within a law firm and outside of the firm. A title can affect everything—from whether the staff member has business cards and can attend out-of-town seminars to whether the staff member can command a high salary in the job market.

Do titles matter when the staff member is a marketing professional? Sally Schmidt (president, Schmidt Marketing, Inc., Burnsville, Minnesota) says that the title

connotes a lot—both the level (director vs. manager) as well as the qualifier ("business development" vs. "marketing").

One of the hottest titles today in law firm marketing departments is "chief marketing officer." The CMO is the highest level marketing professional in the law firm. Increasingly firms will hire a CMO and then hire marketing directors for the various office locations. According to Linda Sedloff Orton (president, Intelligent Marketing Solutions) whose placement firm focuses on senior level marketing placements in the legal industry, the designation of CMO implies a more strategic role but, she adds, "what the firms do with these 300,000 people remains to be seen."

A person's title, however, according to Orton, is only one piece of the pie. "Titles count up to a point, however, what you do with your position is what matters most."

Lee R. Nemchek (information resources manager, Morrison & Foerster, LLP, in Los Angeles), compiler of the *Directory of Multitasking Librarians*, would agree that the same is true for librarians and information professionals. "Title is not as important as job description," says Nemchek. The directory of 87 information professionals includes such titles as "director of information services," "information resources manager," and "manager of competitive knowledge." These titles reflect the fact that the professionals do more than act as the firm's librarian. As multitaskers, they may implement policy firmwide and supervise more than one department. The job description is what gives the position its value, both within the firm and outside the firm, says Nemchek.

Some law firms use titles as a means of recognizing contributions. James D. Jordan (Munsch Hardt Kopf & Harr, PC, Dallas) reports that his firm shifted to corporate-type titles years ago for the administrative staff. Jordan's title of chief executive officer and chairman of the board is but one of the corporate-type titles employed at the firm.

But what about law firm staff that do not fit within the clearly recognizable administrative departments? Does a title matter?

One example of people who do not fit within traditional law firm administrative staff are lawyer-writers. Often unknown within their own law firms, many people with law degrees and bar admissions toil as brief writers, newsletter editors, ghost writers, and researchers. Whether they are working on the firm's intranet, Web site, seminars, or client alerts, they need to be identified with a title. What should it be?

One lawyer-writer, Jill Westmoreland (Loeb & Loeb, New York City), is an associate at her firm. She produces white papers, client alerts, manages articles and link pages for the firm's Web site, and places articles, in coordination with the marketing department, in various publications.

Westmoreland does not draw as much salary as her fellow associates, but her hours are manageable and she calls it "the perfect day job." Jill Westmoreland's status, however, is derived from her firm's commitment to the position. As was pointed out in an article in the *New York Law Journal* by her boss, James Taylor, a partner at Loeb & Loeb, "We've empowered this position and we've empowered Jill."

Other lawyer-writers work in law firm marketing departments or libraries. Without the appellation "attorney" or "associate," these people may have little status and power. Because they are usually the only one of their kind in their firms, they often feel that they are unique and alone. Most important, they have no benchmarks for negotiating salaries or benefits. They have no career ladder and no opportunities for networking with their peers and may feel that they are unable to leave their firms because they are not marketable themselves.

The title of "attorney" or "associate" or "research attorney" would fix most of the problems the lawyer-writer encounters. Identifying themselves as an associate with a firm will often result in faster (and more positive) callbacks from publishers when they are attempting to place articles.

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Associates are more likely to have extensive secretarial assistance and are more likely to receive calls from headhunters. Salaries usually fall in line with that of low-level associates or high-level paralegals than with the salaries of editorial staff in publishing companies. Job satisfaction increases as the value of the lawyer-writer's contribution to the firm is acknowledged.

Do titles matter in law firms? For most, it is the job description and the job functions that determine the professional's place within the firm. But, for some, such as the lawyer-writer, the placement of the job in the "attorney" category rather than the "staff" category can be affected by the title given to the position. A lawyer-writer associate with the same job description as a marketing writer will most likely receive greater respect within the firm than outside the firm.

What does this mean for law-firm staff members? Because job descriptions are most important to staff members, they should constantly update their written job descriptions, especially when their responsibilities change. If your responsibilities are not clearly reflected in your title, consider updating the title. And for those seeking new positions, some advice from Linda Sedloff Orton (president, Intelligent Marketing Solutions): "When joining a firm, all administrative professionals should ensure that their title is in alignment with other professionals at that firm. A director in one place may be a manager or a chief officer at another place."

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