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From the Hallways to the Highrise: The Library's Role in Orienting New Associates

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Introduction

As the leaves turn brown and the weather gets chillier, law firms in San Francisco are saying goodbye to their summer associates and saying hello to a new class of fall associates. Some of these associates may have been summers in prior years; some are braving the depths of a law firm for the first time. In either case, librarians can help their firms and win lasting fans and library patrons by presenting an organized orientation on research and firm resources to these new lawyers.

Billable Hours

Reviewing the firm's CALR policies and provider pricing plan with new associates is a good first step in training. One commonality between law firms is the need for employees to produce billable hours, and to do so quickly after being hired. It may be tempting for new associates to ignore the print library in favor of electronic resources while trying to work as many hours as possible. New associates may be more comfortable with online resources – as law students they were able to use both major online databases free of charge. However, they may not be familiar with the pricing. Having to explain that first online research bill to a partner, who will then have to justify it to a client, can be a rude shock. Once the associates understand what their searches cost, explain when it's a good idea to turn to Lexis first (i.e., to pull a case if your library no longer subscribes to reporters), and when it's needlessly expensive (conducting searches for California cases in a subject that has been covered by Witkin or a detailed subject-specific treatise). Make it clear that the library is the best, most effective, most client-friendly starting place for research, and that the ten minute walk or three minute call to the library will save them a lot of time later in the research process.

Basic Research in the Firm Library

Most law schools teach law students how to research legal topics, so your new associates have the research foundation to build upon in the firm environment. However, the assignments in law school had clean edges, written expectations of how long they would take, and the questions were clear. This isn't always the case in the practice of law in a firm. Remind the new attorneys to keep talking to their supervising partner until they understand the scope of the question they are researching, and suggest they get a "due date" or estimate of how long they should spend on each project. A new attorney may end up writing a treatise when all his partner wanted was a one paragraph summary.

Once the associate understands the scope of the question, where in the library should he or she go? This section of a new attorney orientation varies widely from firm to firm. Does

your law firm do a lot of work outside of California? Show the new associate the digests that cover all the states. Does your new associate come from outside of California? Introduce them to invaluable California-specific resources such as Witkin and Rutter guides. Do you know what practice group (section, department) your new associates will be working in? Customize your library tour to show where relevant materials are located. Do you have electronic resources that are underused? Include a tour of those. Emphasize the value of keeping a research log which will save them work in the long run, will help them justify the number of hours billed on a project to clients, and will give their supervising partner confidence in their results. Let the new associates know that if they are stuck, or have a question, the library staff is available to help. Often, the librarian will have experience with the research topic and more importantly be familiar with the practice areas of the firm, and will be able to direct them to resources at the firm and provide context to the research question.

Knowledge Management

Once your new associates know where to find information, and how to report the findings back to the supervising attorney in a timely manner, they'll have more work than they know how to handle. Something else to include in a library orientation is strategies on knowledge and time management, both of which will be invaluable when the new associates are juggling multiple complex projects. Like a research trail, a knowledge management system keeps your associates from redoing work that's already been done and enables them to tap into exemplars prepared by more senior attorneys at the firm through the firm's document management system. Though a number of firms have sophisticated KM software and document management systems, others have a simple paper or electronic filing system. The librarian, in conjunction with practice groups, marketing and IT can provide instruction and context on utilizing the firm's KM resources, such as brief banks and document managements systems.

Keep the Door Open

When the library orientation is over, the new associates may be feeling overwhelmed by information, but will feel more confident in their ability to do the job well. Make sure that the associates know the librarian's door is still open, and that more in depth training is available when needed. Remind them that as a librarian, you are there to help. If they have any reference questions in the future, you can show them where to go and what to do. If they hit a wall, you can show them other resources, or confirm that the research is at its end. At the end of the day, the new associates should have information on where to go and what to do, and know that the firm's librarian is a great resource for saving time and money.

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