



SUPPORT STAFF SUPERSTARS

PRESENTED BY MEG POULTER, NICK BATEMAN AND GEMMA BERKHOUT



About This Paper

This paper has been prepared in conjunction with the Support Staff Superstars seminar, hosted by the NSW Support Staff Committee.

Advice on how to get the job by standing out in the job market, covering topics such as networking, preparing resumes and covering letters and interview tips

Presented by Meg Poulter, Managing Director and Senior Consultant at DGP Legal

Meg is the Managing Director and a Senior Consultant at DGP Legal where she has worked directly with legal support staff assisting with all aspects of the recruitment process for 13 years. Prior to commencing work as a recruitment consultant, Meg worked as a legal secretary for five years.

Meg will be presenting via PowerPoint and providing handouts relevant to these topics.

Tips for excelling as a legal support professional and what Lawyers want

Presented by Nick Bateman (Lawyer at Lander & Rogers) and Gemma Berkhout (Senior PA/Paralegal at Lander & Rogers)

Nick has been practicing in family law since he was admitted in 2014. He has worked in boutique family law firms and now works as a family lawyer in the Family & Relationship Law team at Lander & Rogers. During his studies, Nick worked as a paralegal. He has recently completed the Masters of Law (Family Law) with the College of Law.

Gemma is a senior PA / paralegal who has been working as a legal admin professional for ten years. She is the Founder and Chair of the Law Society's NSW Support Staff Committee and manages the Family Law Support Staff Networking Group.

Nick and Gemma will be presenting via PowerPoint in reference to the contents of this paper.

About the NSW Support Staff Committee

The NSW Support Staff Committee was formed in 2018 to represent administrative professionals within the legal profession. The Committee aims to bridge the gap between legal staff and support staff and provide administrative staff within the legal profession with:

1. A platform for networking and socialising with colleagues to improve morale, happiness and passion amongst support staff in the legal profession;
2. Access to mentors, educational seminars and other further learning resources to improve the knowledge and skills of support staff in the legal profession; and
3. Provide a voice to administrative professionals to raise concerns and discuss issues relevant to them in a confidential setting.

The Committee is comprised of 15 members representing various law firms, areas of law and administrative roles within the profession.

The NSW Support Staff Committee encourages all support staff to become a part of the community by attending Committee events and seminars, and signing up to the mailing list to receive Committee resources.

LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/company/nsw-support-staff-committee

Facebook: www.facebook.com/nswsupportstaff/

Instagram: www.instagram.com/nswsupportstaff

Or email our Chair on gberkhout@landers.com.au to be added to the mailing list.

How to Excel as a Legal Support Professional & What Lawyers Want

Presented by Gemma Berkhout and Nick Bateman

There are many reasons why people may wish to be an exceptional employee, including:

- Job satisfaction;
- Better working relationships;
- Career progression - including promotions to higher roles;
- Monetary benefit - salary increases & bonuses; and/or
- Increased employability when you are seeking employment.

This paper outlines skills and techniques that support staff professionals can work on in order to become an exceptional employee.

1. Knowledge (Experience and Education)

Experience comes naturally as you advance in your career. When you haven't been working in your role or field for many years, it may be difficult for you to demonstrate your knowledge.

You can gain knowledge other ways, including:

- a) Further education - attend courses or seminars, including those held by the Law Society of NSW
- b) Find a mentor.
- c) Research - look into what has been done in other matters, review firm precedents, check Court procedure checklists and CCH databases.

It is important and extremely valuable to have a sound knowledge of the administrative processes of the Court having regard to the area of law that you work in. You can be guided by the relevant rules of the court (eg. The Family Law Rules in family law matters, or the Uniform Civil Procedure Rules in litigation matters) It will often be the case that your solicitor does not know the administrative process which can cause delay and angst for the client (for instance when documents are returned to the office following incorrect filing procedures).

It is important to know the filing procedures for different Courts. You should be aware of the different procedures used in the relevant Court for the area of law that you work in. This will include:

- Costs for the filing of applications (and payment methods). For instance, some Courts will only accept payment by way of credit card.
- How to correctly file applications, whether certain applications are able to be filed online and those that have to be filed in person.

- Being aware of Court forms that need to accompany certain applications, (such as a Notice of Risk for an application in family law proceedings for parenting matters).
- Being aware of filing time limits, for instance response to applications in the Federal Circuit Court are to be filed within 28 days. It is best practice to put reminders in your solicitor's calendar both 2 weeks and 1 week out from the filing deadline.
- Being aware of the relevant notices that need to be filed and the timing restrictions for those documents, including notices of request to inspect and notices of ceasing to act.
- Having a sound understanding of the Court's electronic filing system, so that you are able to access information on matters regarding subpoena information, court orders and dates as well as being able to efficiently file documents on the portal.

It is also important to have up to date information relating to:

- The relevant Court contacts, including the associates' email addresses as well as the case coordinators' email addresses.
- Service addresses of major institutions for subpoenas. You should also be aware of the relevant conduct money that the major institutions will request like banks, the police and hospitals.

Barristers. Including their chambers, their contact number and email address and also their daily and hourly fees. Having this knowledge and setting up information schedules will make your job easier and will also streamline many of the Court processes. The benefits are passed on to the solicitor and the client by saving time and money. It will also save you time by not having to refer to outside sources each time one of these issues arises.

2. Accountability

One of the things that truly sets a good employee apart from an excellent employee is the ability to be personally accountable for their work and their actions within the workplace. Accountability is the ability for an employee to truly take pride and responsibility for their work and their work ethic. Accountability is the main foundation for a strong work ethic. It can take many forms, but typically includes:

a) Being reliable

It is important to always be on time to work and not take advantage of excessive and unnecessary sick days. If you are consistently late or not at work, your Solicitor will be unable to rely upon you, which can cause frustration.

b) Ensuring all tasks undertaken are performed to the standard expected of them

All work should be undertaken to the standard expected of you. This means completing work with efficiency and accuracy. You should ensure that you don't make the same mistakes over and over again and if there is anything you are unsure of or struggling with, you should seek help from colleagues or seek out further training.

c) Taking responsibility for your actions

When mistakes are made, you should take responsibility for them and assist in workshopping a solution to rectify the issue or minimise the damage. You should avoid making excuses and placing blame, and never use the words "it's not my fault."

Being personally accountable in your own role means that your supervising Solicitor will be able to rely upon you consistently and spend less time managing you and your workload.

3. Attitude

"There will be people better than you or cheaper than you, but if people like working with you, they will always come back. You have to be able to deal with the biggest disaster, the smallest mistake, whatever it is, you have to approach it with confidence, with politeness, with kindness and with a solution" - Jaclyn Johnson (Work Party Podcast).

Maintaining a positive attitude in the workplace will always be beneficial for yourself and for others in your workplace. A negative attitude affects personal morale and productivity within the workplace and will always impact negatively upon you as a legal support professional. It is important to stay positive, be proactive and willing to learn, and be willing to go above and beyond.

a) Staying positive

That being said, it is sometimes difficult, in our high stress roles, to always stay positive.

Some things that you can do that may assist in staying positive in the workplace include:

- Accepting new challenges and getting started on new projects.
- Setting goals for yourself and rewarding yourself when you meet them.
- Getting to know and make friends with your co-workers.
- Taking your lunch break outside of the office.
- Engaging in workplace activities like lunch time sport and social events like Friday drinks.
- Refreshing your work space with some spring cleaning and decorations.
- Avoiding gossip and complaining, as well as avoiding entering conversations with others doing the same.
- Remembering that everyone makes mistakes. You're human – don't beat yourself up when things go wrong.

b) Being proactive

Solicitors really appreciate someone who has the ability to have initiative and take action without being specifically asked to do so. This skill will come to you the more you become familiar with your Solicitor and firm's practices and the way that they work.

You should also endeavour to always continue learning and growing within your role. There are many valuable resources of information you can utilise within a workplace, including your fellow colleagues, research engines and document management systems. When you aren't sure of how to do something, make sure to ask, although remember that your Solicitor's time is valuable, and it may sometimes be more beneficial to ask other support staff within your team.

c) Willingness to go above and beyond

Displaying a willingness to go above and beyond doesn't always have to mean sucking up to the boss. You should show your worth by letting your work and your commitment to your role show for itself. There are countless ways you can show your willingness to go above and beyond, but they can include:

- Striving to always continue improving – constantly asking for and listening to feedback and continuing to learn new things.
- Avoiding the words “that's not my job / doesn't fit into my job description” – you are there to make your Solicitor's life easier and assist them in their role, whatever form that may take.
- Showing commitment by staying back or getting in early to ensure deadlines are met (within reason).

4. Communication

As a legal admin professional, communication is a vitally important aspect to your role. You will need to have exceptional communication skills, with clients, other people that may be involved with your files, and with your colleagues.

Basic Communication Skills

- Be professional in your communication, ensuring that you do not use slang words or profanity;
- Always remain courteous in your communications, even when dealing with your opponents;
- Be an attentive listener. Ensure that you actively listen when communicating and avoid interrupting the person speaking; and
- Be confident in your communications. If you don't know the answer, that's okay. Simply advise that you will need to revert to the solicitor with carriage of the matter and have someone get back to them shortly.

Taking Messages

Message Checklist

- Full Name

Check spelling if necessary.

- Organisation
- Relevant Matter Name
- Contact phone number
- Detailed Message

Get as much information as possible, as this will assist your solicitor in prioritising the return call.

- Make a file note and/or make sure the message is passed on to the solicitor

Send the relevant message onto your solicitor as soon as possible.

If necessary, make a file note of your discussion. This may be particularly helpful if the call is lengthy or you are dealing with a difficult caller.

Communication with Clients and Other Parties

There are certain best practices that may be involved in dealing with clients and other parties, including:

- Things you should remember when communicating via email;
- How to communicate with difficult people; and
- How you should communicate with clients, self-represented litigants, solicitors acting for the other party, and other people who may be involved in a matter such as Court staff, witnesses, barristers etc.

It may be helpful to refer to the Support Staff Committee's Best Practice Guide in relation to communication.

Communication With Your Boss

Communication is one of the most important qualities that forms your Solicitor/PA relationship and there are a few things that you should keep in mind when communicating with your Solicitor.

a) Communication styles

Find out what your Solicitor's communication style is and adapt to what they prefer. All different Solicitors have different communication styles - some may prefer email, dictating instructions or sitting down with you to chat about what needs to be done. It may be the case that your Solicitor receives countless emails within a day, in which case it may be necessary for you to bring urgent matters to their attention face to face. It may also be beneficial for you to sit with your Solicitor for five minutes in the morning to discuss what their goals are for the day and what they need from you. Find out what works for them.

b) Avoiding email in certain situations

You should always avoid using email to have important conversations, such as when you are asking for something, bringing up an issue or apologising for a

mistake. If you feel that it is necessary to have one of those handy “butt covering” emails, feel free to send an email to your Solicitor after your chat confirming the contents of your discussion and any next steps that either you or your Solicitor have agreed upon.

c) Speak up

Sometimes it is easy to be intimidated by someone who is your superior and you may avoid approaching them in certain situations. You will not be able to have a close working relationship with your boss if you can't communicate with them. There are a number of situations where you should absolutely speak up and ensure that you communicate properly with your Solicitor, including:

- Clarifying instructions that aren't clear.
- Asking for feedback about your work.
- Checking in with your boss. Ask them if they need anything instead of sitting around waiting for instructions.
- Keeping your boss informed about important developments and giving them updates on tasks that they have assigned to you.
- Speaking about any issues you are having. If there is something you aren't happy with at work, nothing will change unless you speak up about it!

d) Get to know your solicitor

Whilst it is not absolutely necessary to develop a personal relationship with your boss, it certainly makes your day to day work life much more enjoyable if you get along with your boss on a personal level and makes communicating with them generally a lot easier.

5. Efficiency & Time Management

In our roles as support staff, we can be bombarded with very heavy workloads and often have to manage a number of competing priorities. It becomes necessary to develop time management skills and the ability to appropriately prioritise tasks. There are a number of different ways that we can do this in our roles as support staff.

a) Correct prioritisation of tasks - the Eisenhower Principle

The Eisenhower principle involves the breakdown of tasks into categories: the urgent, and the important. To distinguish between important activities and urgent activities, urgent activities are those that demand your immediate attention, whereas important activities are those that lead to you achieving our professional and personal goals. In our context, it can also include the goals of our supervising Solicitor or the firm in which we work.

Essentially, all tasks can be broken down into four categories:

1. Important and urgent.
2. Important but not urgent.

3. Not important but urgent.
4. Not important and not urgent.

The principle suggests that effective managers should prioritise the tasks in the order above, and then delegate the lower priority tasks to others, if possible.

Whilst as support staff we may not always have the ability to delegate or discard tasks that have been allocated to us (unless you want some really annoyed Solicitors on your hands), this scale can certainly assist in how you prioritise the work that has been allocated to you.

- b) Avoid procrastination and the 5 Minute Rule.

Procrastination can be one of the biggest time wasters in the workplaces, and it can crop up even when we don't realise it. How many times within a day do you review your emails or task lists, and then decide to come back to a task later? You then come back to it later, re-read the email and may even then decide again that the task can wait until later. By the time that you end up getting to a quick small task, you may have read the email and not actioned it three or four times. This common occurrence of multi-handling emails wastes so much time! In his book *Work Smarter: Live Better*, Cyril Peupion suggests that checking your emails less frequently and focussing on the tasks that you already have in front of you can assist.

Another tip he suggests is to attend to tasks that takes 5 minutes or less straight away and schedule time in your calendar for tasks that take a more significant chunk of time (i.e. 30 minutes or longer).

6. Loyalty & Respect

You cannot have a meaningful working relationship with your boss without loyalty and respect - and that works both ways! There are many ways you can demonstrate loyalty towards your Solicitor, and it isn't just about how much time you have on the board working for them.

- a) You should never make your boss look bad in front of others. You should cover for them with clients when necessary and defend them if others are criticising them. You should never gossip about them or speak badly about them. If you are having issues with your boss, you should speak to them privately, rather than venting to others or arguing with them in front of other co-workers.
- b) Remember that your boss is human. They, like you, are under a number of different pressures in the workplace and, whilst not ideal, sometimes this means that you may bear the brunt of their frustrations.
- c) Find out what your bosses professional goals are and help them work towards them. Similarly, find out what tasks and aspects of your role they value the most and ensure that they are the things that you prioritise. For example, if your Solicitor prefers to work off of paper files rather than electronically, then you will have to prioritise your filing above other tasks.