Executive Summary

This paper focuses on a mid-sized law firm in Portland, Maine, and discusses training practices for each category of employee. Currently the firm only provides training and development for attorneys. Support staff interested in training opportunities must identify programs on their own and submit a proposal to human resources. By completing a SWOT analysis, it was determined that staff development is an ongoing weakness at the firm, and that a potential threat in the future is increased turnover due to a competitive job market in our area. With these two concerns, it’s important to start a rigorous training program for staff. The purpose behind this is twofold: demonstrate to employees that the firm values the development of its staff and improve employee performance.

The proposed training and development program involves following the strategic management process. The planning phase will identify the applicable key leadership members who should provide oversight of the initiative and become champions of what the firm is trying to accomplish. The planning phase will also review data gathering processes used to determine what training topics should be pursued. The implementation phase will require rolling out the program in such a way that attorneys are supportive of it and staff engaged with it. Finally, it will be critical to complete an evaluation of each step of the program. By evaluating the outcome, the firm will be able to fine-tune elements of the initiative so that its ongoing use continues to be as effective as possible.
Using Strategy to Introduce a Training & Development Program

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MSA 698

Paper # 2 – MSA 603: Strategic Planning for the Administrator

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Introduction

The subject organization for this study is a mid-sized law firm in Portland, Maine. The main problem the firm is currently facing is a decrease in performance by support staff. The specific areas of concern are technical ability, calendaring, organization, and the prioritization of assignments. This is problematic because it is impacting the firm’s ability, as a service-based organization, to deliver the high quality legal services expected by our clients. The question this paper will specifically address is how to plan and implement an internal training and development program for support staff that resonates with the existing culture and objectives of the firm. A SWOT analysis will be completed to help determine what the firm’s strategy will be.

The Firm

The firm was founded in 1965, and has doubled in size since 2003. Currently the firm has approximately 85 attorneys and 45 staff members, for a total of around 130 employees. The firm is divided into four primary practice areas: business and corporate services, school and local government, labor and employment, and litigation. Each practice area is also composed of smaller groups within it. For example, school and local government contains municipal, special education, higher education, and general school representation. Organizationally the employees are categorized as: support staff (legal assistants, paralegals), administration (human resources, tech support, finance, marketing), associates (new attorneys with less than five years’ experience), attorneys (practicing lawyers with five plus years’ experience), and shareholders (attorneys with equity ownership in the firm).

The Firm’s Values

The firm does not list a clear vision or mission statement, but rather provides information about our relationships with clients and how attorneys approach the practice of law. The firm aims
to “provide a full spectrum of legal and consulting services for our clients throughout the United States” (firm website, n.d.). Additionally, our website states:

The main goal at [the firm] is to provide our clients with services that address their immediate legal needs while taking into account their long-term goals and objectives. We never forget that every client is unique; effective legal solutions are never one size fits all. By drawing upon the expertise of our attorneys and consultants within a range of service groups, we can efficiently and creatively respond to the unique needs of every single client (firm website, n.d.).

**Current Training & Development Strategy**

The firm does not have one training and development strategy for the entire firm. Rather, the firm has a different approach for each employee group. This section includes details for the different strategies for each group, as well as information about continuing education in the legal industry.

**Associates.** Associates are new attorneys, with less than five years’ experience. The firm has an Associate Development Committee (ADC), made up of eight shareholders. Two times each year the ADC meets with each associate as well as the shareholders the associate has recently completed work for. The ADC identifies where the associate is performing well and what could be improved. The ADC assigns mentors to the associates from various areas of the firm, so that each associate can delve into different areas of law. Ballaro and Polk (2017) comment that the use of a mentorship is a great way to cultivate internal talent. This method is beneficial in that it helps the associate determine what area of law he or she would like to specialize in the future.

**Attorneys.** This group includes lawyers who have been practicing for at least five years, and who are not shareholders. Attorneys are generally made up of “laterals,” meaning they’ve been
practicing at other firms before joining ours. Attorneys are reviewed by the ADC on an annual basis, and, as needed, assigned a mentor to assist development.

**Shareholders.** Shareholders are equity owners of the firm. Attorneys are not considered for shareholder status until they’ve been practicing with the firm for at least seven years, and must be voted in by the existing shareholders. Shareholders are peer-reviewed by the other shareholders in their practice group once every three years. Shareholders meet with the board of directors individually once every January to discuss performance for the previous year, in terms of billable hours and total revenue generated.

**Support staff and administration.** The firm does not have a formal strategy for ongoing training and development for support staff or administrative professionals. The current approach is on an individual basis. Employees are able to identify any off-site training programs they would like to attend, and submit a proposal to human resources for consideration. As the HR manager, I meet with applicable group heads or attorneys to determine if the training would be beneficial for the staff member’s role. For the past year, all proposals submitted have been approved. Additionally, if a staff member is changing roles or being introduced to a new area of law, I research upcoming training opportunities that may be available.

**Librarian.** The firm has a librarian on staff that coordinates training opportunities with professional memberships that the firm subscribes to. The firm subscribes to the Practising Law Institute (PLI) and Westlaw by Thomson Reuters. Both subscriptions include access to online databases, webinars on demand, and offsite seminars. Additionally, we have trainers from both vendors visit the firm to provide instruction to firm staff and attorneys on how to best maximize their services.
**Continuing Legal Education (CLE).** All three categories of attorneys are required to complete Continuing Legal Education credits (CLEs) each year in order to keep practicing law. Currently for the state of Maine attorneys must complete 11 credit hours of approved CLE each calendar year. Our librarian researches upcoming CLE opportunities, and proactively shares them with attorneys to encourage they meet this requirement early in the year.

**SWOT Analysis**

While the firm is clearly putting a great emphasis on associate development in particular, it’s important to also consider the non-attorney professionals working at the firm. Before starting the planning process for how to best proceed with a training and development program for support staff, it’s imperative to look at the firm’s overall performance to identify any areas of concern. To complete this, a SWOT analysis was performed. The SWOT analysis allowed me to look at the firm’s internal strengths and weaknesses, and to look at what opportunities and threats I see in our industry in the Portland, Maine market. The purpose is to identify what has been working and what hasn’t, and to see what gaps we have so that they can be addressed (Shannon, 2011). The SWOT analysis can be seen on appendix I.

The specific areas identified in the SWOT analysis related to staff include a general lack of training for staff, areas of concern in terms of performance (technical ability, calendaring, and prioritization), and a high assistant to attorney ratio. Based on a survey for Portland-based law firms, the average assistant to attorney ratio is four to one. Our firm is significantly higher at six to one. Additionally, an opportunity from the SWOT analysis included completing an analysis of assistant and attorney pairings. Currently, our assistants support a variety of attorneys who practice in different areas of law. This means an assistant may have six different attorneys, who practice in four different areas of law. While it is helpful having a spread so the firm has adequate absence
coverage or additional support in cases of turnover, it may ultimately be affecting an assistant’s ability to master the subject matter of what he or she is working with. While the main purpose of this paper is to analyze how best to proceed with a training and development program for staff, it may be beneficial to consider realigning the legal assistant and attorney pairings so as to reduce the areas of law an assistant would be required to be knowledgeable of.

**Training & Development Strategy**

While the firm actively puts effort into its development of all attorneys, the firm’s training and development strategy needs to be expanded to include all employees of the firm. By introducing a training and development program for staff, the firm will not only be communicating that staff development is also important to the firm, but also setting up all employees to improve performance and give them the tools needed to grow and be successful (Sanderson, 2015). In addition to drive and motivation, we’ll also need to look at educational opportunities we can introduce in order to improve skill sets that will drive performance and success within the firm (Ballary & Polk, 2017). The remainder of this section will include details on the strategy management process for the firm’s training and development program.

**Planning**

Thoughtful effort must be put into the planning phase. The likelihood of the program succeeding will diminish if significant investment is not made in this stage of the process. The objectives of this stage are to determine who should be included for guidance and oversight, what the firm’s training needs are, and what resources exist in-house.

**Guidance and oversight.** The first initial step should be to identify who should be included in the planning process. It’s important to include members of the firm’s leadership, in order to place key supporters throughout the organization. Without support and encouragement, any efforts
made may very well be futile (Ross, 2016). While I will likely administer the majority of the program as the HR manager, the guidance and historical knowledge leaders would be able to contribute would also be beneficial. For this purpose, I would recommend including the managing partner, director of operations, and the group heads of the four practice areas to provide oversight of the program. Additionally, it is both beneficial and recommended that any strategic planning combine resources from multiple areas of any organization in order to be most successful (David, 2014).

**Training needs.** To determine what the specific areas of concern are regarding support staff performance, an anonymous survey was first conducted. Completed by attorneys voluntarily, the survey focused on open-ended questions such as what skills or qualities superb staff have had, what they would like to see staff become more proficient in, and what difficulties attorneys are having in managing their practices. Additionally, staff were requested to submit suggestions for what they would like additional training on or where they feel like they have gaps in knowledge.

The firm does have four different practice areas, which would require support staff to have different skills and capabilities. For this reason, it’s important to not just look at the firm as a whole, but rather by practice areas (Anonymous, 2011). Meeting with each of the group heads, and including them in the planning process, will help determine what the objectives should be for staff in each practice area. For example, the labor employment and school/local government groups both emphasize client service and projecting professional demeanors due to a high volume of client interactions, both by phone and in-person. The corporate services group completes business agreements and loan transactions, and therefore requires exceptional attention to detail. Finally, the litigation area puts prominence on organization and calendaring abilities. Between group head
feedback, survey results, and employee suggestions, it should be clear what specific items should be included on the new training plan.

**Existing resources.** Without a budget allowance for such an endeavor, the firm will need to determine what existing resources it has available in-house. The firm already owns equipment that allows for teleconferencing between all offices, ensuring that all staff will be able to attend any training programs without requiring time and money spent traveling. Since there currently is no budget to bring in consultants to lead any trainings, I would look at in-house subject matter experts to conduct the trainings. Since most of the technical training would be on software the firm is currently using, the firm would identify who among the staff is most proficient with each item. Examples of potential training sessions include Microsoft Word and Excel, Nuance Power PDF, ProLaw (the firm’s billing and case recordkeeper), and FileSite (the document management system). In addition to systems and software training, I would recommend introducing brown bag lunch style meetings, where staff can meet and discuss approaches to common problems in the workplace, such as how to prioritize, stay organized, or any other tips and tricks they’ve learned along the way that they would like to share with one another.

**Implementation**

A successful implementation will require gaining support from the attorneys, vocal support from key leaders within the firm, and a clear communication strategy to impacted staff. The firm currently has a robust approach to evaluating and developing attorneys. Unfortunately, this is not shared firm wide, and will require gaining support from the attorneys that this would be a worthwhile investment for staff. Pulling staff away for any training will likely be met with some resistance from the attorneys. As a services-based organization, attorneys greatly rely on support
Using Strategy to Introduce a Training & Development Program

staff. Attorneys can delegate work, and focus on items that only they, as the attorney, can do. Conquering this obstacle will rely on the next component in this section.

It will be vital to have key leaders within the firm vocalize their support for the training and development efforts being implemented. When looking at how law firms are run, it appears that the general trend is for conventional business practices from decades ago, as opposed to innovative practices seen in commonly referenced companies or firms like Google and Deloitte (Westfahl & Wilkins, 2017). With a history of primarily using resources for attorney development, key leaders within the firm, such as the managing partner, board of directors, and groups heads, will need to vocalize their support of the program to the other attorneys. By putting their weight behind the endeavor, it’s more likely that the remaining attorneys will support their assistants joining in the training sessions.

The third significant matter for a successful implementation is utilizing a thorough communication plan for the impacted staff. It will be crucial to explain the reasoning behind the training in such a way so that staff recognize the importance of the program, without feeling disheartened about their current performance. Providing staff the opportunity to suggest training topics will also help to keep the employees engaged with the training program.

Evaluation

The final phase of the strategy management process is evaluation. Once the training program has begun, it is vital to monitor its progress and document each initiative’s end result, so that the firm is able to learn how to fine-tune it over time. According to David (2014), it’s not the planning phase of a strategy that will bring change to the organization, but rather what the organization does during implementation and evaluation. Especially since this strategy relates to
training and development, it is expected that this is merely the introduction to a new ongoing endeavor that will continue on for the foreseeable future.

**Conclusion**

The question sought out in this paper was how to introduce a training and development program for support staff in a firm that currently only provides development support for attorneys. The completion of a SWOT analysis helped identify that staff development is an ongoing weakness. Not only is staff performance declining, but with a threat of increased turnover due to the competitive job market in the area, it’s important to have more capable employees to weather any period where the firm is short-staffed.

A new training and development program will be more likely to succeed if it’s established using the strategy management process. The first phase will require careful planning and the recruitment of key leaders to support and actively promote the program. Once training initiatives are identified, the implementation phase will follow. Assuming the program has full support and employees remain engaged, the firm should then complete an evaluation to monitor each training program’s outcome. By completing an evaluation, the process is able to be adjusted as needed over time. Since the firm will continue to grow and see change, it’s never too soon to start the training and development process.
References


## APPENDIX I – SWOT ANALYSIS

### INTERNAL FACTORS

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<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Teamwork approach throughout the firm</td>
<td>• Lack of training for support staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Natural emphasis on client service</td>
<td>• Support staff – increased occurrences of missed deadlines, failing to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Associate development</td>
<td>appropriately calendar items to attorney calendars, and technical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Variety in practice areas – can appeal to more potential clients</td>
<td>ability called into question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lots of small clients (our eggs aren’t all in one basket)</td>
<td>• Assistant to attorney ratio is too high (far leaner than competitors)</td>
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### EXTERNAL FACTORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Threats</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Improve and introduce training firm-wide</td>
<td>• Located in the “legal hub” of the state – lots of competition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Restructure attorney and assistant pairings to optimize growth and</td>
<td>• Retention – very aggressive job market that is favorable to job-seekers;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>upcoming ventures</td>
<td>increased turnover is a growing concern</td>
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