

EXHIBIT D – SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

After working with more than a dozen area law offices, meeting with attorneys and support staff, attending numerous Continuing Legal Education seminars, conferences, and training sessions, reviewing numerous related publications, and participating in countless discussions with other legal employees and educators during Spring Semester 2010 (see preceding exhibits), following are my findings:

By far, the biggest demand for local law offices is in the technical arena—not one office commented on the lack of substantive (purely legal) preparation, but countless times they all expressed a need for computer expertise and writing skills. It did not appear to matter what the size of the firm was or what the specific title was given to their support staff, they expected proficiency in whatever program they had elected to use. The good news was they did not anticipate that applicants would come in as experts in their given software preference, but what they did expect was a transfer of learning, an ability to be flexible and apply prior knowledge to new software. There was no universal agreement as to what that preference is—not even with respect to word processing, where one office had no interest in Word 2007 (very happy with 03), one didn't even know what version they were using, and one was still deeply, and happily, entrenched in WordPerfect, with no plans to switch. The latter, however, was the most flexible, saying that they would still hire a person untrained in WordPerfect since in their experience, for our students who come in knowing Word well, the transfer is painless, and most of their staff now regularly use both.

The same was actually true for any bookkeeping needs or specific legal software—Quicken was the most common program for general bookkeeping, even though the CLE training session I attended (“The \$6,000 Law Office”) called using that program tantamount to sending out billings on an old dot-matrix printer! Nevertheless, no two law offices seemed to use the same specialized software, nor did they consider that to be an issue, as long as students were experienced in some version and able and willing to learn others. My interview notes reflect which offices use which types, but the message came through clearly that they were happy with the exposure students received ahead of time in ADSC1517 and still expected to re-train in their own specific systems.

Equally as interesting were the findings about writing skills—across the board, attorneys and hiring personnel expected legal support staff to come in with good vocabulary and English skills at a minimum, and they were surprised that this was not always the case. One office has the practice of sending students back for further training if they make too many errors, and another said that was the only time they had ever let a legal secretary go, when she “seemed to treat English as a second language, and without much interest in improving.” Not all offices use an entry test, and rely rather on the personal skills exhibited at the interview and by the resume; however, one in particular includes an advanced word processing project—formatting tables—on their test, along with a transcription exercise where the English skills, particularly basic proofreading and homonym errors, often prove to be the deal-breaker for them as to whether or not to hire that applicant.

Not surprisingly, law office managers frequently mentioned the important of teamwork and being “a good fit” for the office, specifically stating that no one, including the attorneys, is above making coffee if the need arises. I was very impressed with the number of support staff who were completely accepting of the “whatever it takes” philosophy and who were far less hung up on job titles than on just getting the work done. Most offices used the paralegal title, but when one applicant preferred the title legal assistant, the office accommodated that preference, even though the position description was identical to that of the other paralegals on staff. Perhaps the most instructive pattern I found was that by and large, all the local paralegal positions start off as administrative support/legal secretary, after a period of time phasing into “quasi-paralegal” duties, and then move into more traditional paralegal positions as the employee proves themselves and a position opens up. This underscores the need for entry-level skills in both programs and reinforces the current curriculum changes.

The above findings, among other things, resulted in the following specific curriculum revisions at the course level: ADSC1515 Law Office Applications will now use the electronic CLE Pro forms for probate form practice and the Miller Davis online forms for real property in lieu of the former Word and .pdf forms. ADSC1517 already teaches Summation and Abacus, along with half a dozen other programs, but emphasis will be added covering .pdf files, metadata, electronic discovery, and e-filing. ADSC1525 Legal Transcription/Word Processing Applications will now require a specialized word processing reference text, with assignments highlighting each of the specific functions law offices are now expecting. Students will also receive a list of recommendations on specific legal dictionaries and writing handbooks to be carried in the bookstore for assistance in these areas. Between ADSC1525 for the beginning legal word processing exercises and ADSC2520 for the advanced, projects will be required for working with tables, merges, styles, redline/strikeout, document compare, comment, track changes, and Tables of Authority, all of which were an expectation of the offices.

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“No one has ever started out here as a paralegal right off the bat—we start them all as receptionists at the front desk, to learn the ropes.”

“All the paralegals do their own word processing, with no separate secretary.”

“There is a difference between true paralegal work (an extension of my legal mind) vs. essentially secretarial work, by whatever name it has traditionally been called.”

“I am surprised at the lack of a required computer class for paralegals, who need those specific skills, and at a higher level, than even the secretaries do at our firm.”

“Which particular legal award or program title an applicant has really doesn’t matter to us—it’s the skills they bring that we care about.”