



# Western Association of Legal Assistants

Winter 1987/88

SPECIAL EDITION NEWSLETTER NO. 1

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This Special Edition of our newsletter is being mailed to law practices throughout British Columbia as well as to major corporations' legal departments, legal societies and branches of our Provincial Government.

We encourage all Legal Assistants to consider membership in our Association.

We offer current information to our members about employment, education, legislation as well as provide a forum of communication, not only within B.C., but across Canada.

## MEMBERSHIP REQUIREMENTS

Each member of WALA must either have completed a legal assistant course of study offered by an educational institution approved by the Board of Directors or have received a law degree from an educational institution approved by the Board. We also admit student members who are in the process of obtaining their legal assistant diploma. A sample of our membership form is attached to this newsletter.

For further information, please contact Theresa Johannsen, Membership Committee, Western Association of Legal Assistants, c/o Box 11130, Royal Centre, 3000-1055 West Georgia Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6E 3R3.



## AN INTRODUCTION



We would like to introduce the Board of Directors to all those members of WALA who have been unable to attend an Annual General Meeting, They are all volunteers concerned about the present and future role of legal assistants in B.C. They take time from their sometimes hectic schedules to work on behalf of both practicing legal assistants and legal assistant students who have joined the Western Association of Legal Assistants for the same purpose.

**ANNE ERLEBACH**

Anne is a second generation Vancouverite who began her post secondary education at the Faculty of Education at U.B.C. She completed the Capilano College Program in 1980 and began work as a legal assistant in litigation with an emphasis in professional liability in construction law. She has taught litigation at Vancouver Community College (1984) and for the G.V.L.S.A. in 1985. She was a member of the VCC ad hoc committee on a proposed Legal Assistant program. Having been one of WALA's first members, she currently is President of the Association, sits on the Education Committee and chairs the Newsletter Committee.

**FRAN BRETT**

Fran has been a corporate/tax legal assistant with Bull Houser Tupper for six and a half years and is Director of Corporate Services, heading a staff of 6. She completed the Institute of Law Clerks of Ontario Night School Courses in Oshawa, Ontario in the mid 1970s. Her experience in Ontario law firms, first as a legal secretary, then as a law clerk, was mainly with smaller firms where specialization was difficult, although she did work mainly in corporate and commercial law. Fran was a Director of the Institute of Law Clerks of Ontario for 2 years until she gave in to the lure of the West Coast in 1980. She is currently Secretary of the Western Association of Legal Assistants and chairs the Education Committee.

**GLENIS MILNE**

Glenis worked as a legal secretary in various areas of law, for smaller firms, from 1963 to 1973. She completed the Legal Assistant Studies night time program at Capilano College in June 1983. From 1973 to 1987, she has worked for small to medium sized law firms as a legal assistant in corporate, securities and tax law. She has been the supervisor of the Corporate Records Department at Norton, Stewart, and Scarlett, since May 1984. Glenis has spent her entire life in B.C. except for 1 year (1977-78) when she worked as an administrative assistant to the project engineer for a pulp and paper mill project on the Caspian Coast in Iran. Glenis is Treasurer of WALA and also a member of the Membership Committee.

**THERESA JOHANNSEN**

Theresa graduated from U.B.C. with a Bachelor of Education in 1976. Prior to that she was involved in an experimental program teaching in open area classrooms. Theresa obtained her law degree from U.B.C. in 1982, articulated with Friesen and Epp and was called to the Bar in September, 1983. She has been a legal assistant, by choice, with Bull Houser and Tupper since January, 1985. She works in insurance litigation, and in Solicitor's negligence in particular. Theresa is interested in computerized litigation support, learning through both formal courses and "hands-on" experience. As a Director of WALA, Theresa chairs the Membership Committee.

**ELISABETH DAHNERT**

Elisabeth moved to Vancouver in September, 1982 to enroll in the Capilano College Legal Assistant Program. She began her post secondary education at the University of Regina, studying Political Science. Since her completion of the Legal Assistant Program in April 1984 she has been working in insurance litigation at Harper, Grey Easton & Company, primarily in professional liability. Elisabeth is presently Vice President of WALA, heads the Program Committee and is a member of the Newsletter Committee.

**ANN HEWLETT**

Ann is the most recently appointed member of the Board of Directors. She completed the Capilano College Legal Assistant Program in 1979. From 1979 to 1981, she worked as a legal secretary in various firms in Vancouver in litigation and corporate records. From 1981-1984, Ann worked as a legal secretary in labour law for a large law firm in London, England. She began as a legal secretary at Pollard Morgan in June 1984 and in April 1986, became a legal assistant there. Her work is 98% personal injury litigation.

MEMBER'S MUMBLES

What is a Legal Assistant?

I think this is a good question-one that a lot of the non legal world is even too naive to ask.

More often than not when I tell people (who ask) that I'm a Legal Assistant they knowingly nod their head and say something like, "Oh yeah, I have friends who are legal secretaries" or worse yet - "Really! I worked as a legal assistant once too, but quit because I never did learn how to master a switchboard".

I've learned to live with explaining to people, in brief enough terms to hold their attention, some of my job functions in the hope that they will be able to distinguish me from a legal secretary. Unfortunately, I can't say that I'm always successful, even taking the situation this far.

I have found that even people in the legal profession hold varying ideas of what a Legal Assistant is.

A few secretaries I've worked with thought we were great people to unload their "rainy day" work onto.

Filing clerks are totally bedazzled especially after I tell them that I should be getting copies of inter-office memos dealing with the law and the B.C. Weekly Digest sheets, despite the fact that my name is not "on the list". Lawyers' conceptions of the type of work Legal Assistants do, and are able to do, vary as much as their stock portfolios.

In case you were wondering,  
the point I'm trying to make is that misconceptions  
about my profession are likely the result of:

1. a lack of information to the public and legal world;
2. the absence of any quality control.

Misconception on the part of the general population  
is tolerable and will change with time.  
Confusion on the part of the legal world would be resolved  
if there were a recognized standard required before someone  
could call herself a Legal Assistant.

The Western Association of Legal Assistants is trying  
to set a standard  
by admitting as members those who have completed the  
Capilano College Program or any other substantive law  
program approved by the Association.  
The Association is also looking into certification of  
Legal Assistants.

Sure enough, just when I get used to telling people  
I'm a Legal Assistant,  
I'm going to have to switch to say I'm a  
certified Legal Assistant.  
I can just hear it,  
"I was going to become a paralegal  
but I can only type 70 words per minute."

T. Wilson

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## COMPUTERS - HOW DO THEY AFFECT YOUR LEGAL CAREER?

By Anne Erlebach

In the past fifteen years computers have captured the attention of an increasing number of law firms. This is certainly not surprising as statistics indicate that two out of three office workers in the country have contact with a computer in some way, every day.

Legal office accounting is no longer the only computer frontier. There is a growing number of legal software packages, that, teamed with trained individuals can result in increased productivity and

efficiency in areas such as file management, client data, time management, bring forward systems, among others.

Some firms in the province have replaced memory typewriters (increasingly sophisticated in their own right) with computer terminals, thereby allowing secretaries access to data bases as well as all necessary word processing functions. Legal forms are not a problem. A variety of word processing features allows almost any form to be put into a precedent system. Some firms are

considering providing all lawyers with a terminal, allowing not only access to all manner of information but also, not unlike a personal computer, text editing features. Keyboard literacy, previously in the province of legal secretaries, will undoubtedly become a requirement for lawyers, legal assistants and administrators. How does this technology affect legal assistants?

The results of a survey conducted by "Legal Assistant Today", a U.S. publication, indicate that the widespread use of automation in the legal profession has created a significant increase in the need for legal assistants who have computer competence. They also indicate that legal assistants who have computer knowledge are likely to be rewarded with a higher salary. Of those surveyed, 32% reported that they enjoyed better job assignments as a direct result of contributing computer skills to the firm.

It is obvious that legal assistants need to examine the value of computer skills in light of the level of technology in use by their employers. It is also obvious that, because of the trend towards more complex automation, computer knowledge is becoming a professional requirement for most legal assistants.

At present, there is no course on computers offered in a legal assistant program, in British Columbia. Capilano College, at one time, offered a basic course in keyboard literacy, but cancelled it due to a number of factors. The Ministry of Education has determined that a finite number of credits

comprise the program. The College felt, and perhaps rightly, that the credits should be applied to courses that would meet the increasing demands of employers in areas such as Securities and Family Law. Also, there was a scarcity of equipment available and the course would have to be "hands-on" to be worthwhile. The College does advise their students to take advantage of the computer courses offered on campus by other departments.

Apparently, most students entering the program have some computer experience and those who took the computer course when it was offered, reported it to be too basic.

It appears that keyboard literacy by itself will not meet the increasing technological needs of the legal profession. Also, legal assistants are asking themselves if computer knowledge is necessary to remain competitive in the employment market.

Legal assistant educators will at some point, be re-examining incorporating computer knowledge into the Legal Assistant Program. (Why the number of credits required for the Legal Assistant Diploma must remain the same, is a mystery only the Ministry of Education can explain.) In the meantime, legal assistants may have to re-evaluate the level of their computer knowledge and consider taking computer courses offered in other areas of business. To draw definite conclusions on the advisability of taking a course would require speculation on the varied abilities of legal assistants. However, the benefits of investing in updated computer knowledge are obvious.



The definitions of the role of a legal assistant are almost as numerous as the law firms in Vancouver.

Who is she and just what does she do? (Our apologies to the males in the profession but for once, it makes sense to use "she" as opposed to "he" to include both genders.)

Does a law firm enjoy any advantages or benefits from hiring a legal assistant? A frequently heard argument is that a senior secretary has as much knowledge as a legal assistant and definitely more than a new legal assistant. That may well be true but there are functions which a legal assistant can perform that a secretary could not, and would not have time to do. The legal secretary and the legal assistant should not be vying for the same work. They both have valuable but different roles to play in the legal field.

Increasingly, law firms appear to be finding that there is a place and use for a legal assistant.

Ladner Downs, a large Vancouver law firm, employs many legal assistants. Mr. Don McDonald, the lawyer who co-ordinates the legal assistant department, has kindly provided us with some information about the department.

There are 88 lawyers in the firm and 37 legal assistants. A legal assistant is not usually assigned to a specific lawyer in a particular department but this frequently occurs on major files. The departments in which legal assistants work are collections, foreclosures, corporate, corporate finance, land, litigation, probate and tax.

Mr. McDonald states that one of the reasons legal assistants are hired is that they provide great assistance in providing efficient and timely delivery of legal services to clients.

In many firms, legal assistants are used in I.C.B.C. work as they are eligible for a billing number after one year of work in that area.

Mr. McDonald kindly provided us with an outline of a job description for a litigation legal assistant which is reproduced here:

TRIAL & SETTLEMENT

Subpoena and liaise with witnesses  
Draft expert's statements of opinion  
Prepare Trial Briefs  
Prepare Briefs of Authorities  
Attend at trial to organize documents, witnesses & experts  
Draft judgments  
Draft releases  
Prepare Bills of Cost and Affidavits  
Assembly of documents

INVESTIGATION

Locate & interview prospective witnesses & take statements  
Perform land, motor vehicle, company & Court Registry searches  
Interview witnesses  
Research to identify experts  
Interview & Screen potential expert witnesses  
File analysis of new matters  
Study of legal issues  
Investigative work to identify problems

PLEADINGS & INTERLOCUTORY

Draft & Revise pleadings  
Prepare Notices of Motion and Affidavits  
Draft Interrogatories  
Draft Demands for Particulars  
Draft various agreements including Contingency, Infant Settlements and Separation Agreements

COMMUNICATIONS

Initiate & dictate correspondence  
Frequently liaise with client on progress of file  
Use independent judgment & discretion  
Draft reporting letters to client  
Draft settlement letters  
Maintain a professional corporate image in dealings with the public

ORGANIZATION

Monitor all limitation dates  
Organize file  
Schedule dates for IME's, Discoveries & Trials  
Systemize complex files  
Computer management of complex files

RESEARCH

Legal Research  
Collect precedent material for precedent binders  
Prepare calculations and assessments of damages  
Monitor current substantive law

DOCUMENTS & DISCOVERY

Review documents outside office  
Review & maintain documents  
Prepare Lists of Documents  
Attend at Discoveries to take notes  
Follow up on undertakings emanating from discoveries  
Precis transcripts

APPEALS

Identify, organize & prepare materials to be included in Appeal Books

GENERAL

Knowledge of Court Registry procedures  
Knowledge of Supreme, Appeal and Federal Court Rules  
Travel as required



A members' Wine and Cheese Party will be held early in the new year. A notice will be sent to members.



REMINDER.....to our existing members that dues are outstanding for the 1987/88 year.

**EMPLOYMENT**

The Western Association of Legal Assistants would be pleased to advertise employment opportunities for our readers. To place an ad., please write to The Western Association of Legal Assistants, c/o Box 11130, Royal Centre, 1055 West Georgia Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6E 3R3 or phone Anne Erlebach at 685-2311.

Selective advertising space available; call Elisabeth Dahnert at 687-0411, or write to The Western Association of Legal Assistants, c/o Box 11130, Royal Centre, 1055 West Georgia Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6E 3R3.

**JOB OPPORTUNITY**

2070 Investments Ltd. is looking for a para-legal with experience in security law, corporate contracts and corporate minute book maintenance. Offering \$2500.00 per month.

If you are interested, please contact Ross Dickinson at 684-2524.