



EA SEARCH

Revolutionising Law Firm Support Functions

How law firms are transforming
support functions for greater impact
and improved profitability.

Introduction

Why Are Law Firms Rethinking Support Functions?

Key Takeaways:

- Law firms are transitioning from traditional support roles like Typists and Legal Secretaries to more strategic positions like Executive Assistants (EAs) and Chiefs of Staff (CoS).
- EAs and CoS provide proactive, client-centric support, allowing partners to focus on higher-value tasks.
- This transformation is helping law firms increase efficiency, client satisfaction, and profitability.
- Firms that do not modernise their support functions are at risk of falling behind in an increasingly competitive market.

Law firms are under increasing pressure to enhance both operational efficiency and client satisfaction. Through conversations with senior executives at top US and UK firms, it's clear that the roles of Executive Assistants (EAs) and Chiefs of Staff (CoS) have evolved from being purely administrative to becoming indispensable strategic partners, directly impacting the firm's performance.

Historically, law firms relied on Typists and Legal Secretaries to handle routine tasks, but those roles are being phased out as the demands of modern legal practice shift. Today's law firms recognise the need for more proactive, client-centric support—especially for rainmakers, the partners responsible for generating the bulk of the firm's revenue. Modern EAs and CoS are stepping into these roles, offering high-level operational and client support that allows partners to focus on strategic tasks like client development and case management.

This transformation reflects a deeper trend across the legal sector: the shift towards what we call a 'white glove' approach to support. This involves more than administrative duties; it's about delivering high-touch service that addresses both internal and external needs. EAs and CoS are increasingly taking on responsibilities like managing complex projects, overseeing client communications, and driving operational improvements. These professionals are not just gatekeepers; they are trusted advisers, enabling the firm's top performers to operate at maximum efficiency.

Our discussions with senior executives show that this shift is having a clear financial impact. Practice groups that have embraced this white glove approach report increased efficiency, higher client satisfaction, and stronger client retention. By reducing the administrative burden on key partners, these firms are unlocking more time for high-value work, which ultimately boosts their profitability.

How Has the Role of Executive Assistants Evolved From Typist to Quarterback?

Key Takeaways:

- Modern EAs are no longer reactive; they are strategic partners, driving the operational success of law firms.
- EAs handle high-value tasks such as supporting client relations , overseeing projects, and anticipating the needs of senior partners.
- Transitioning to this proactive support model is key for law firms looking to improve productivity and profitability.

The traditional model of law firm support, where Typists and Legal Secretaries handled basic administrative tasks, is quickly becoming outdated. Today's law firms need EAs who can do more than respond to tasks; they need professionals who can act as quarterbacks for their practice groups, connecting the dots between client relations, partner needs, and internal operations.

At EA Search, we've seen this transformation first-hand. The best EAs are now managing high-value tasks that were once the exclusive domain of lawyers. These tasks go beyond traditional Legal EA responsibilities such as opening new matters, handling conflict checks, liaising with billing departments, and now include gathering crucial client intel ahead of meetings, proactively solving issues, and suggesting actions to keep clients engaged. The role of the modern EA is to anticipate the needs of their executive and address them before issues arise.

The concept of an EA as a quarterback is particularly relevant for top performing partners. These EAs are entrusted with much more than administrative duties; they help to manage client relationships, oversee key projects, and often serve as a gatekeeper for the firm's most senior figures. As our recent EA Spectrum report illustrates, high-level EAs are increasingly responsible for drafting communications, supporting client relations, and even assisting with business development initiatives.

Despite these advances, many law firms still cling to outdated models of support, underutilising the potential of their EAs. Firms that fail to capitalise on the strategic value of EAs miss out on opportunities for increased efficiency and productivity. The administrative burden on partners often leads to missed deadlines and lower profitability.

However, for firms that take the plunge and invest in modernising their support functions, the rewards are clear. By freeing up partners to focus on revenue-generating activities, firms can ensure their operations run smoothly in the background, leading to greater profitability and long-term success.



Traditional Legal Secretaries vs. Modern Executive Assistants

Criteria	Traditional Legal Secretary	Modern Executive Assistant (EA)
Leader's Challenges	Managing basic admin tasks	Supporting with complex client relations and strategic projects
Capabilities	Typing, scheduling, filing	Commercial acumen, high EQ, project management
Core Role	Reactive, task-based support	Proactive, strategic partner managing high-value tasks
Reporting Relationship	Partner/Attorney	Partner/Attorney/Executive Committee, often acts as an extension of senior leadership
Status Within Firm	Administrative role	Considered a key operational partner in the firm's success
Managerial Duties	Little to none	Often manages junior staff or oversees complex projects
Time with Leader	Limited, task-driven	Regular, strategic involvement, often attends key meetings
Advice Given to Leader	Minimal, task-specific	Provides strategic insights, manages projects, advises on client relations
Work Scope	Focuses on internal admin work	Engages in both internal and external-facing activities, manages operations
Problem-Solving	Follows direction	Anticipates challenges, proactively resolves issues
Client Interaction	Rare	Directly engages with high-value clients, supports business development, and has an understanding of the status and commercial context of key clients
Contribution to Growth	Limited	Drives revenue by supporting partner's high-stakes workload and client relationships

Positioning EA Hires

Role Level

Positioning

Entry Level Transactional

Calendar Management
Travel Coordination
Expenses & Reporting
Filing & Document Management
Data Entry
Answering & Directing Phone Calls
Ordering Office Supplies
Meeting Room Management
Basic Vendor Management

Suitable for Executives who are self-sufficient and require mostly transactional support, such as calendar management, travel, and expenses.

Example:
Lower to Mid Level Management or Executives in non-revenue generating positions.

Usually supporting many Executives.

Mid Level Operational

Coordinating stakeholder meetings
Communicating on behalf of Executive
Opening new matters and billing
Preparing basic reports and presentations
Organising company events and off-sites
Managing contracts, invoices, and vendors
Working with other teams to complete tasks
Onboarding new employees (if no HR)
Assisting with travel visa applications
Creating complex travel itineraries
Managing small ad-hoc projects

Suitable for busy Executives who are either in upper management or are directly responsible for revenue generation.

Example:
Partners, C-Suite (excluding CEO and Chair), Heads Of, etc.

Usually supporting 1 or a few Executives.

High Level Strategic / White-Glove

Writing meeting agendas and minutes
Setting meeting objectives for all parties
Executive meeting preparation & debrief
Handling post-meeting actions without prompt
Managing high-value client interactions and relations
Internal stakeholder management
Drafting high-level communications
Managing key projects independently
Anticipating Executive's needs
Proactively solving problems
Offering insights and feedback on strategic decisions
Acting as a gatekeeper and trusted advisor to the Exec
Managing high-stakes events and meetings
Representing the Executives office
Creating strategic initiatives to support company goals
Providing personal assistance for highly sensitive matters
Driving Executives brand and public presence
Supporting the Executive Committee

Typically hired into the CEOs office within large corporates or in 1:1 roles supporting Executives who are driving a significant amount of revenue into the firm.

Example:
CEOs Office, Executive Committee Members, Partners driving a significant amount of revenue.

Exclusively 1:1 support.

In some cases, there may be multiple EAs and a CoS to one Executive.

Should Law Firms Look Outside the Industry for Their Next Executive Assistant?

Key Takeaways:

- Top law firms are increasingly hiring EAs from industries like investment banking and private equity, where the skills developed are directly transferable to legal settings.
- EAs from outside the law industry bring strong commercial acumen, emotional intelligence, and an ability to handle high-stakes client work.
- Case study examples illustrate how EAs from financial services transition smoothly into legal practice, adding significant value to partners in high-pressure environments.

As the role of EAs has evolved, so has the talent pool from which law firms are hiring. Increasingly, firms are looking beyond the legal industry and turning to sectors like investment banking, private equity, and real estate. These industries produce EAs who have developed skills that align perfectly with the fast-paced, high-stakes environment of modern law firms.

For law firms, hiring EAs from financial services and similar sectors offers clear benefits. These professionals have had exposure to large-scale transactions, handling sensitive information, and liaising with multiple stakeholders. They understand the complexities of high-stakes work and have the EQ to navigate challenging client relationships. The ability to anticipate the needs of senior executives and manage multiple priorities at once is directly transferable to the legal world, particularly for partners working on private equity deals, mergers and acquisitions, or complex litigation.

Case Study

To illustrate this point, consider a case based on real-life examples we've seen at EA Search. Imagine an EA who spent several years working for a senior executive at a private equity firm. In this role, the EA was responsible for managing deal flow, liaising with investors, and coordinating across internal teams to keep multi-million-dollar transactions on track. This EA didn't just perform administrative duties; they anticipated challenges and solved problems in real-time.

Now, imagine this EA transitioning to a top law firm, supporting a Chair of a private equity practice. The skills they developed in private equity—managing complex schedules, preparing materials for high-stakes meetings, and liaising with clients—are immediately transferable. Their experience with deal structures and high-pressure environments means they can anticipate the partner's needs, already understand the private equity world, and have real-world insight into how deals are made on the 'other side' of the table.

Moreover, the EA's high emotional intelligence allows them to manage the stress and demands that come with high-value work. Just as in their previous role, they act as a trusted advisor to the partner, ensuring that potential issues are proactively addressed and that the partner remains focused on the most critical tasks. This example highlights the significant value that EAs from outside the legal industry can bring to law firms, particularly when supporting partners working in demanding, high-stakes environments.

How Can Law Firms Successfully Onboard EAs from Other Industries?

Key Takeaways:

- Structured onboarding is essential when hiring EAs from outside the legal industry to ensure a smooth transition.
- Aligning salary expectations is crucial when recruiting EAs from sectors like financial services, where compensation tends to be higher.
- A strong onboarding process should focus on familiarising the EA with legal-specific processes (e.g., billing, conflict checks).
- Chemistry fit between the EA and the partner is critical for success and should be assessed early in the hiring process.

While hiring EAs from industries like investment banking and private equity offers clear advantages, law firms must recognise that a structured onboarding process is essential to help these professionals transition successfully into the legal world. At [EA Search](#), we've helped numerous firms navigate this process, ensuring that both the firm and the EA achieve full productivity as quickly as possible.

Salary and Compensation Expectations

One of the first challenges law firms face when hiring from outside the industry is managing salary expectations. EAs from sectors like financial services often expect higher compensation packages than what is typical in law firms.

According to our [EA Search Salary Guide](#), top-level EAs in London and New York can command salaries in excess of £95,000 or \$200,000, plus bonuses. To attract and retain talent from these sectors, law firms need to offer competitive compensation that reflects market realities.

Onboarding: Setting the Right Foundation

The onboarding process should begin by giving the EA time to familiarise themselves with the specific workings of a law firm. It's crucial to ensure that the EA understands the legal industry's unique processes, such as billing systems, conflict checks, and opening new matters. Rushing them into direct engagement with their executive too quickly can lead to mistakes and frustration. A structured onboarding plan allows the EA to gradually take on more responsibility and build the confidence needed to thrive in the new environment.

[See our Executive Assistant Onboarding Guide for more insights.](#)

Maximising the EA's Potential

EAs coming from sectors like investment banking are used to dealing with demanding, client-facing roles. However, law firm partners often hesitate to fully delegate key responsibilities, even when a proactive EA is exactly what they need.

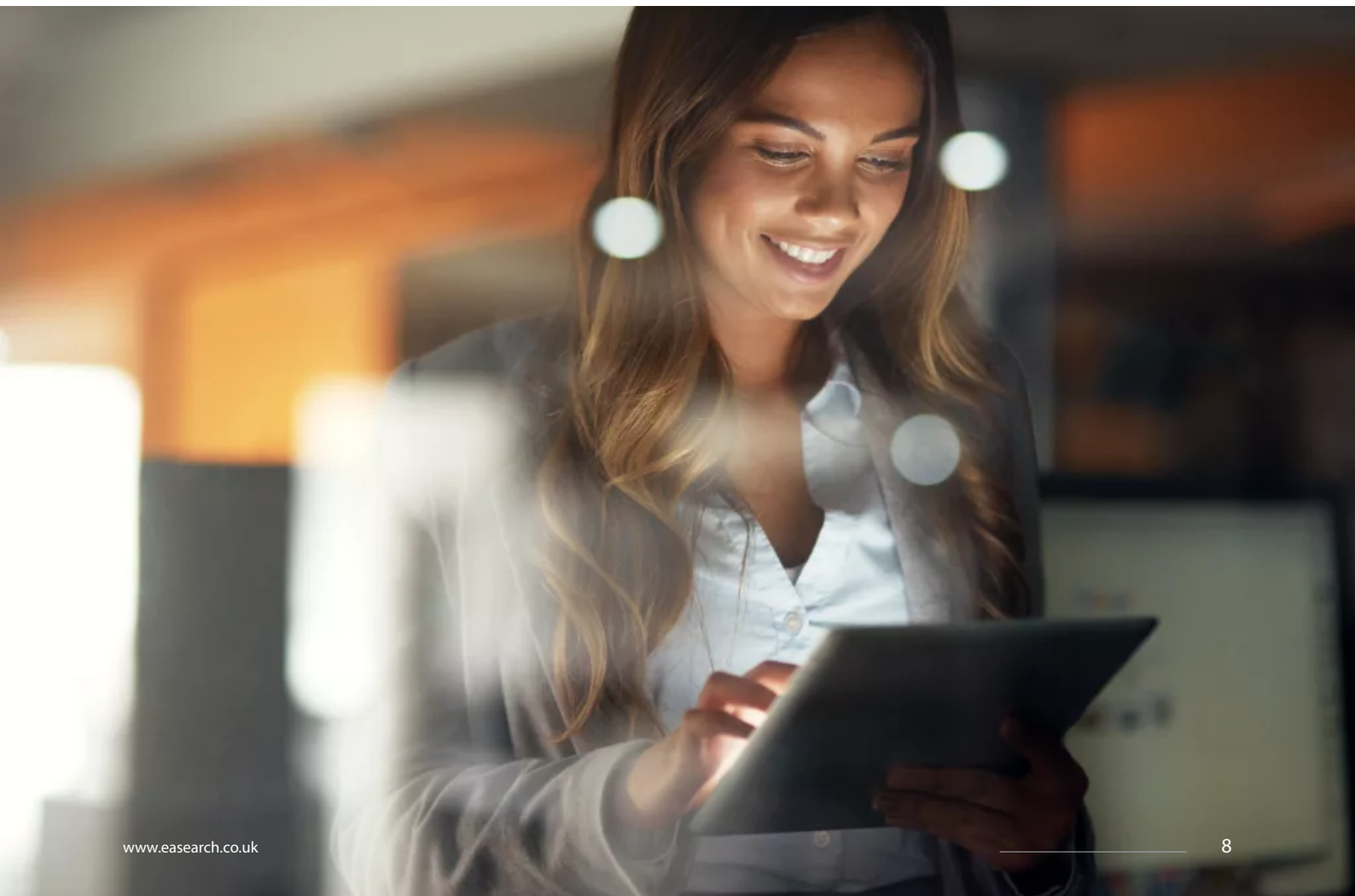
Our experience shows that when partners embrace the strategic potential of their EA—allowing them to take ownership of tasks like directly supporting client relationships, coordinating projects, and handling day-to-day operations—both the executive's productivity and the firm's operational efficiency improve dramatically. Of course, the transition isn't instantaneous.

Both the firm and the EA must recognise that there will be a ramp-up period before the EA reaches full efficiency.

Chemistry Fit is Essential

Chemistry between an EA and their executive is critical. EAs from financial services are often well-suited to a legal environment, as they are used to working with fast-paced, high-pressure executives.

However, it's vital to assess this chemistry early. We recommend scheduling a brief, 15-20 minute meeting between the EA and the executive during the early stages of the interview process to gauge compatibility before proceeding to the next stage.



Common Pitfalls in Hiring and Onboarding

From years of experience, we've seen law firms make the same mistakes when hiring and onboarding EAs:

- 01 **Delaying the chemistry test:** Too many interview stages without the executive's involvement can lead to time-wasting. For qualified candidates, assess chemistry with the executive early—this should happen in the first or second meeting.
- 02 **Lack of transparency in screening:** Be honest with candidates about the realities of the role. Partners in law firms, especially high-performing partners, tend to have demanding, analytical, and fast-paced personalities. Let the EA know what to expect to prevent mismatches.
- 03 **Relying on job ads instead of headhunting:** High-profile roles require specialist recruitment strategies. Job advertisements alone will not attract the calibre of EA you need. [At EA Search, we specialise in headhunting EAs, PAs, and Chiefs of Staff for some of the world's largest and most prestigious law and financial services firms](#). Our approach ensures you get candidates with the right experience, EQ, commercial acumen, and chemistry fit.
- 04 **Ignoring the executive match:** When hiring an EA for a rainmaker, it's critical to find someone who has supported similar executives in the past. They need to understand the pace, expectations, and pressures that come with a role tied to high-stakes, client-driven work.
- 05 **Allowing HR to lead the process:** While HR plays a vital role in the hiring process, high-profile EA roles require direct executive involvement from the start. When HR leads without executive input, the result is often a mismatch between the EA hired and the executive's real needs.

By avoiding these pitfalls and ensuring a clear, structured onboarding process, law firms can fully unlock the potential of EAs from outside the legal industry. Done correctly, this approach results in a more productive partnership between the executive and EA, and a stronger, more efficient firm.

Top Onboarding Tip: Setup a tiered folder system in the Executives inbox.



Executive to action

Emails the EA is confident are for the Executive to deal with.



Unsure how to action

Emails the EA is unsure on and requires guidance.



EA already actioned

Emails already actioned by the newly-hired EA.

What Does ‘White Glove’ Service Really Mean for Law Firm EAs?

Key Takeaways:

- The ‘white glove’ approach means providing meticulous, proactive support that reduces friction for both clients and partners.
- EAs need to anticipate the needs of their executive and clients, rather than waiting for instructions.
- This level of service requires a mix of high emotional intelligence, commercial insight, and strategic thinking.
- Law firms must hire EAs who can provide white glove service, as the traditional, reactive approach is no longer sufficient.

For high-level executives, particularly in client-facing roles, a ‘white glove’ approach is essential. This approach involves handling every task with meticulous attention to detail and a proactive mindset that reduces friction and stress for both clients and partners. A white glove EA ensures that the executive can focus on high-value activities, confident that the details are being managed seamlessly in the background.

A white glove EA doesn’t wait to be asked to gather insights before a client meeting; they have already prepared bespoke materials, identified key players, and briefed the partner ahead of time. They manage follow-up actions without being prompted and continuously track the partner’s network to maintain key relationships. Internally, they connect the dots across teams and departments, ensuring smooth collaboration.

What truly sets a white glove EA apart is their combination of commercial acumen and high emotional intelligence. These traits transform an EA from a reactive assistant to a proactive, strategic partner. This is the key difference between the traditional Legal Secretary role and the modern EA. Legal Secretaries may perform essential tasks, but they often operate in a reactive space, waiting for instructions. A white glove EA, by contrast, operates with foresight, driving actions that benefit both the executive and the client.

At EA Search, we have seen how the white glove approach can be applied differently depending on the executive. For instance, EAs supporting ultra-high-net-worth individuals may focus on service-oriented tasks, while EAs supporting partners at law firms must take a more aggressive and strategic approach. Law firm partners are responsible for winning and maintaining client relationships, and their EAs must be able to manage priorities, client relations, and workloads to ensure that the partner is always a step ahead.

Understanding these nuances is critical when hiring. Law firms must ensure that the EA is matched to the executive’s specific needs and the firm’s operational demands. Getting the ‘executive match’ right can make the difference between an efficient practice and one that excels.

Are Chiefs of Staff the Future of High-Level Law Firm Support?

Key Takeaways:

- Law firms are beginning to consider the role of Chiefs of Staff (CoS) in supporting high-value partners, particularly those leading significant, revenue-generating practice groups.
- A CoS provides higher level strategic support than an EA, supporting on business development, client relations, and strategic initiatives, while EAs typically also manage operational and administrative tasks.
- There is ongoing debate about whether a CoS is needed for individual partners, but for certain markets, CoS roles with industry-specific experience can significantly enhance a partner's ability to grow the business.
- The "Office of the Partner" model—similar to the CEO structure in corporate environments—pairs a CoS with EAs to improve partner efficiency and drive client success.

In recent years, law firms have started to consider a new kind of support structure—one that includes Chiefs of Staff alongside Executive Assistants. This shift is most prominent in practice groups where partners are leading significant business operations and need more than traditional support. In these cases, the CoS takes on a more strategic role than an EA, often managing key responsibilities that directly impact business development, client relations, and internal leadership.

Distinguishing Between Executive Assistants and Chiefs of Staff

While both roles provide critical support to senior partners, the responsibilities and scope of influence differ between an EA and a CoS. The EA's role typically focuses on operational efficiency, ensuring that tasks, schedules, and projects are handled smoothly. EAs manage daily operations, assist with administrative tasks, and help maintain client relationships by executing on logistical needs.

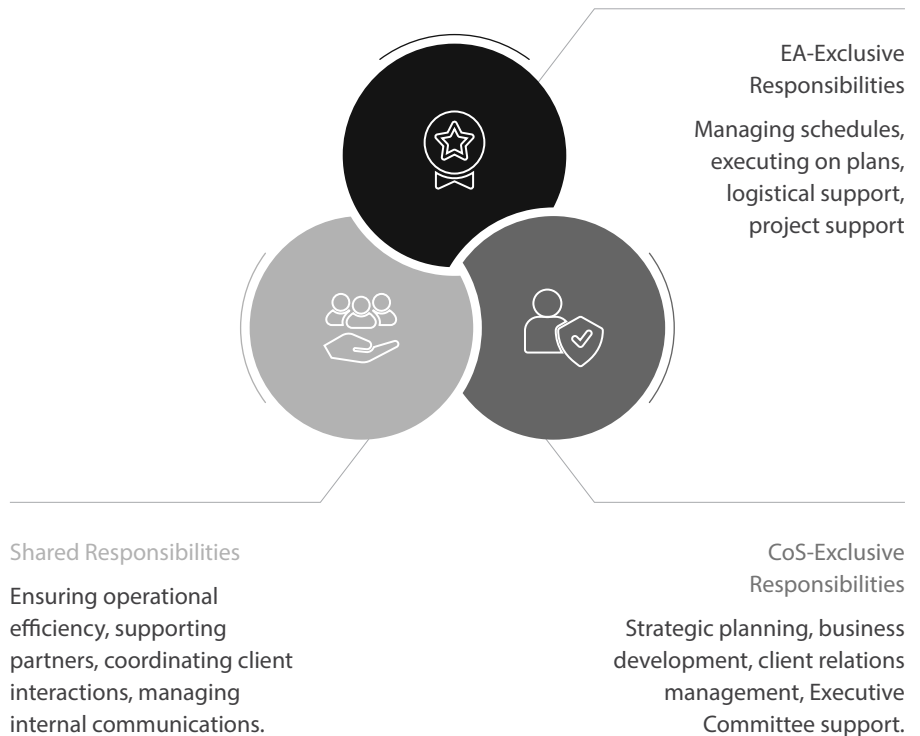
By contrast, the CoS operates at a higher strategic level. They are more involved in decision-making processes, support with high-level responsibilities such as supporting client relationships and contribute to strategic growth initiatives. In some cases, the CoS oversees certain operational areas, with EAs taking direction from them to execute plans. The CoS may also handle responsibilities related to the Executive Committee and long-term business planning, allowing partners to focus on high-value client work.

However, the need for a CoS can vary depending on the specific demands of the practice group. For partners operating in certain sectors, such as real estate or private equity, hiring a CoS with market-specific experience can be particularly beneficial. In one recent case we observed, a firm was looking to hire a CoS for a partner who chaired the Private Equity practice. They sought a CoS with hands-on M&A deal experience, ideally at the VP level, to support client relations, identify business opportunities across the wider market, and oversee revenue growth. This role did not involve legal responsibilities but was fully focused on expanding business and driving financial performance.

While there is debate about the necessity of a CoS for individual partners, there's no question that having a CoS for certain high-value roles can enhance a firm's effectiveness. Some senior leaders argue that Chiefs of Staff should only serve the Executive Committee to avoid confusion and title dilution, but for specific cases, the benefits of having a CoS can be transformative, especially when paired with proactive EAs.

The Office of the Partner Model

This approach is similar to what we see in corporate settings, where the CEO is supported by a CoS and one or more EAs. The CEO leads, the CoS manages key secondary responsibilities, and the EAs handle the logistics of executing those plans. Adapting this structure to the "Office of the Partner" within law firms could streamline operations and improve the effectiveness of high-revenue-generating partners. In some firms, this Partner/CoS/EA structure is already in place, proving to be a valuable model for managing complex and high-stakes client relationships.



This clearly demonstrates the complementary nature of these roles while emphasising the strategic differences between the EA and CoS.

Conclusion

What's Next for Law Firm Support Functions?

Law firms are evolving their support functions to stay competitive, increase efficiencies, and improve their bottom line. The introduction of high-level EAs and Chiefs of Staff signals a shift towards more corporate-like structures, moving further away from the traditional hierarchy of Managing Partner, Partner, Associate, and Paralegal.

Looking ahead, we expect the role of EAs to continue evolving into more strategic positions, while Chiefs of Staff may become standard in practice groups handling high-revenue matters. However, success depends on hiring the right talent. Law firms must carefully select EAs and CoS who have not only the necessary technical skills but also the commercial acumen and emotional intelligence to thrive in high-pressure environments.

At EA Search, we specialise in matching financial services and law firms with the right support professionals to drive growth and success. Whether you're looking to hire a high-level EA or considering introducing a CoS to your team, we can help you find the right match. Book a consultation with EA Search today or download our latest salary guide to learn more about current market trends and compensation expectations.

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