



The Successful Paralegal

Building a Career in a Fast-Growing and
Competitive New Field

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Life as a Paralegal: Are You Cut Out For This?

It goes without saying that deciding on a career will be one of the most important choices you'll ever make in life. Careful consideration must be given to your strengths, interests, personality and even your surroundings to settle on a profession that is rewarding, holds your attention and compensates you to your satisfaction. The paralegal profession is one of the fastest growing fields in the U.S. today, currently practiced by over 250,000 employees and expected to increase by 28% over the next ten years. The average salary of an experienced paralegal is in the mid-40's and can go up to the low 70's depending on the type of work performed, and it usually requires no more than a four-year degree.¹ Given such rosy projections, it is tempting to jump into the field as a "starter" career and expect a smooth transition to a high-paying job in a few years – this is unrealistic, and far from advisable. Paralegals must be organized, detail-oriented, willing to work long hours and deal with complex procedures and personalities. In addition, they must be committed to continuing their education and updating their skills regularly in order to stay competitive. Contrary to what some may believe, it is a career that can be maintained throughout one's entire work life and also provide many options for upward mobility. This guide will identify the most crucial steps involved in building a successful career as a paralegal, and help the user avoid many pitfalls that can hinder progress.

Identifying your Strengths and Weaknesses

For individuals who are still in school or have very little work experience, an evaluation of skills can be done during one's academic career through career counseling. A trained individual can help you assess your skills through a series of tests and exercises that determine your abilities in areas such as writing, problem solving, creativity, interpersonal skills, leadership qualities, organization and critical thinking. For many of us, however, the completion of a degree and entrance into the workforce will still find us trying to find our niche – that unique combination of abilities and passions that is well suited to a particular profession.

One of the most effective ways of mapping out a career path is using a method called the SWOT analysis. This system, developed by a Boston consulting firm, consists of evaluating a potential career by identifying one's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in the pursuit of that career (hence the SWOT acronym). The strengths and weaknesses would pinpoint internal factors; the opportunities and

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-11.

threats would explore external factors that one would need to consider. Creating a listing for each of these four areas allows you to have a visual of what your path to a paralegal career will look like. It is helpful because it not only allows you to map out a plan of pursuit, it also requires you to consider how much you are willing to sacrifice for that pursuit. For example, if being a paralegal requires you to take courses to enhance your computer skills, are you willing to devote the time and resources to taking computer courses? If there are more lucrative positions available in another city, are you willing to relocate for them?

Generally speaking, a paralegal must be able to communicate effectively in both written and oral form, have excellent organizational skills, enjoy conducting research, have advanced computer skills, the ability to multi-task, and be able to gather sizable amounts of data and analyze them, among other things. Consideration must also be given to the abilities you may have developed through other work or personal life experience, such as fluency in a second language or technical abilities such as web development. Taking these unique skills into account will allow you determine which field of law you might want to specialize in, and whether or not you can market yourself as a valuable asset to your desired employer.

Determining Your Future Goals

Chere B. Estrin, a former legal administrator who is now an author and CEO of the National Association of Freelance Paralegals, created an exercise of self- assessment to be used when deciding on the pursuit of a paralegal career. In her 2002 book, *Paralegal Career Guide*, she presents four areas of goal evaluation that prospective paralegals should examine before entering the field:

1. What are my compensation goals?
2. What are my professional development goals?
3. What are my marketing and recognition goals?
4. What are my day-to-day job goals?

Although each person has their own set of objectives in their professional life, those objectives usually fall into one or more of the categories listed above. Money may not be the only factor to consider, but it certainly is an important one. To determine the range of potential salary for the type of paralegal you want to be, visit www.salaries.com or the website of your local bar association to get an idea. Professional goals are another major consideration – for example, if a career in management appeals to

you, you might want to gain experience as a paralegal for five years or so, then parlay that experience into a position where you are managing a staff of paralegals for a firm or corporation. Marketing and recognition goals might include becoming a chairperson for a paralegal association, or writing for a law journal that focuses on paralegals. Last but not least, day-to-day job goals are a large factor to consider – deciding what you are most comfortable doing, when and how you have to work, and who you have to interact with will help you with your decision. In any case, mapping out what your long term objectives are will help you determine if the work of a paralegal is for you.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT EDUCATION PROGRAM

Once you've made the decision to become a paralegal, you must decide on the method of training and education you will receive, and with which institution you will receive it. The level of education you attain, along with selecting the right curriculum that aligns with your particular set of goals, will go a long way in determining what your future options are. There are a number of factors to consider when selecting an academic program, so research the graduation success rates, job placement, and academic accreditation of each school to make sure you will get the most out of your education.

What Courses Should You Take?

Currently, there are over 1,000 colleges and post-secondary institutions in the U.S. that offer programs for paralegal education. The majority of these institutions signify completion of the program by awarding an Associate's degree (A.A. or A.A.S.), which takes about two years of study. The Associate programs typically consist of some traditional college-level courses in areas such as liberal arts, science and information technology, and a concentration of legal specialty classes. Some schools offer a Bachelor's degree (B.S.) or even a Master's (M.S.) in paralegal studies, although these are less common. For individuals who have completed a Bachelor's degree or higher, certificate programs are an available option that focuses solely on legal procedure, writing, theory, and specialty, requiring about one year of study for completion. In each case, you should review the school's curriculum to ensure that it includes the courses that meet your educational needs. One way to determine this is to verify if the academic program is accredited by the American Bar Association (ABA). The ABA is the most sought after accreditation for paralegal programs and has specific guidelines for paralegal education. It requires that programs include a minimum of 60 semester hours of credit, with 18 of those hours in legal specialty. The legal specialty courses must be "in a specific area of law, procedure, or legal process (and) emphasize legal assistant skills, forms, documents, procedures and legal principles and theories... which is pertinent to the legal assistants' performance of a job".² Keep in mind that ABA accreditation is voluntary; therefore not every program will adhere to these guidelines.

² Guideline G-303 of the ABA Standing Committee Guidelines.

A comprehensive paralegal program will enhance the following skills:

- Critical thinking
- Organization
- General communication
- Interpersonal skills
- Legal research
- Legal writing
- Computer skills
- Interviewing and investigation

It will also develop knowledge in the following areas:

- Organization and operation of the legal system
- Organization and operation of law offices
- Paralegal profession and ethical obligations
- Contracts
- Torts
- Business organizations
- Litigation procedures

In addition, taking courses in a number of specific fields of law, such as bankruptcy, intellectual property, real estate, and family law will be helpful if you have already determined your interest in these fields.

“But I’ve Been Doing This For Years, Do I Really Need a Degree?”

Many paralegals began their careers working as file clerks or legal secretaries for their employers, then took on additional tasks such as legal research and interviewing clients as their supervising attorneys entrusted them with more complex tasks. These individuals may not see the need for receiving additional training and conclude that their existing skills are sufficient for their current role. This thinking could be inaccurate for three reasons – first, they may be charged with paralegal duties but receive the salary for a clerk or legal secretary, which is usually less than the earnings for a paralegal. Enhancing your skills with further education will improve your chances for promotion, and increase your paycheck as well. Second,

a number of states are currently considering mandatory regulation as a condition of employment for paralegals, requiring that a minimum level of education be reached before being legally entitled to take on the title of “paralegal”³. The enactment of such a law could cost many informally trained paralegals their jobs. Third, the planning of a successful career should always make provision for a worst-case scenario—in the event of a layoff or business failure, the paralegal should be prepared to seek employment elsewhere and ensure that their skills are transferable. Building a career that is viable and adaptable to changes in the industry requires that you think ahead, instead of customizing your skills solely for obtaining or maintaining one job throughout your career.

³ Durgin, Catherine R. “Getting Legal with Paralegals: A Look at State Regulations”. Business Law Today Vol. 16 Issue 1 (2007).

Starting Your Career on the Right Foot: Tips for Choosing Your Field

Now that you've completed your training, you may have given a lot of thought to the area of law in which you'd like to practice. Having an idea of the diverse areas of law in which you can be employed makes it a lot easier to chart your course and target the employers you are interested in interviewing with. The self assessment that you performed to decide on a paralegal career will be equally helpful in choosing an area of specialty. Keep in mind, however, that it is important to be flexible and allow for some changes to your strategy; you may need to work in fields that may not be your first choice, but will give you the valuable law firm experience and skills you need to be employable in your area. Below are a list of the most common paralegal specialties and their skill requirements.

Bankruptcy paralegal

This position requires an understanding of the Federal Bankruptcy Code, which includes options for debt relief through Chapter 7, 11, 12 and 13 bankruptcies, creditors' rights and the limitations of the bankruptcy stay. Paralegals in this area will be required to prepare bankruptcy petitions, assist in gathering debt information, file petitions on line, and calculate plans for debt repayment. Paralegals in this field will need to be good with numbers, analyzing data, and have excellent organizational and multi-tasking skills to handle several files at once. They must also have an extreme attention to detail to check for errors.⁴

Environmental Law Paralegal

This position is ideal for a person who is passionate about the environment. It requires the drafting of pleadings to be used in litigation for environmental abuse, a constant review of state, local and federal environmental laws, and a familiarity with agencies such as the EPA. Paralegals in this field should be comfortable with conducting extensive research and have exceptional writing skills, as they may be required to draft proposals for environmental legislation. Knowledge in areas such as earth science, agriculture, and global warming is also useful.⁵

⁴ Cheeseman, Henry R. & Goldman, Thomas F. (2008). *The Paralegal Professional*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall. P.684-687

⁵ Estrin, Chere. *Paralegal Career Guide*, pp 174.

Intellectual Property Paralegal

This position requires a familiarity with patents, copyrights, and trademark licensing laws. It requires extensive drafting for litigation and also familiarity with industries such as software publishing, music and entertainment law. A paralegal in this field will need excellent verbal and written communication skills and must be comfortable interacting with corporate executives, opposing counsel, entertainment figures, and others.⁶

Employment Law Paralegal

This type of paralegal will need to be skilled in document review and analysis, drafting and reviewing employment contracts and taking depositions for sexual harassment and employment discrimination lawsuits. Strong attention to detail will be needed for reviewing the facts of a case and drafting complaints. The paralegal will also need to be personable and have strong critical thinking skills to interview clients and ask productive questions when fact-finding.⁷

Immigration Paralegal

This position requires a strong familiarity with immigration law, dealing with issues such as citizenship, deportation, residency, visas, and political asylum. Communications skills are an absolute must, as well as an understanding of diverse cultures and customs. The ability to speak more than one language will be imperative in interacting with foreign-born clients. Paralegals who are passionate about human rights issues will likely gravitate towards this field.⁸

Family Law Paralegal

Paralegals working in this field must be comfortable with issues relating to marriage and civil unions, prenuptial agreements, divorce, child custody, child welfare, spousal and child support, and probate. In

⁶ Cheeseman, Henry R. & Goldman, Thomas F. (2008). *The Paralegal Professional*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall. P.736-745

⁷ Cheeseman, Henry R. & Goldman, Thomas F. (2008). *The Paralegal Professional*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall. P.618-641

⁸ Cheeseman, Henry R. & Goldman, Thomas F. (2008). *The Paralegal Professional*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall. P.641

some cases, they must be able to act as a mediator between disputing parties and be impartial and unbiased. The ability to handle emotional clients and sensitive domestic issues is crucial.⁹

Real Estate Paralegal

This field is ideal for the paralegal that is comfortable with a high volume of document production, drafting leases, mortgage contracts, loan and financing documents, and notices of default, among others. Paralegals will need to become familiar with real estate transactions, foreclosures, title and survey matters, and preparing for closings.¹⁰

Securities Law

Securities law is a rapidly expanding field in the legal industry, dealing with the exchange of financial instruments and the regulations that govern these exchanges. It requires an understanding of complex state and federal laws, and understanding the function of the Security Exchange Commission (SEC). A paralegal who wishes to be employed in this field may need to have a background in finance and have strong analytical skills.¹¹

Needless to say, the opportunities for paralegal work aren't limited to those listed above, but they provide an example of some of the interests and personality traits that you will need to work in a particular field. Your temperament for performing certain types of work needs to be considered as well – do you prefer to interact directly with people, or are you more content to work independently? Would you prefer work that is complex and challenging, or assignments that are more standard and routine?

⁹ Cheeseman, Henry R. & Goldman, Thomas F. (2008). *The Paralegal Professional*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall. P.584-682

¹⁰ Cheeseman, Henry R. & Goldman, Thomas F. (2008). *The Paralegal Professional*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall. P.527-542

¹¹ Cheeseman, Henry R. & Goldman, Thomas F. (2008). *The Paralegal Professional*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall. P.658-672

Gaining Meaningful work experience: How to land that first job

Temporary Agencies

As with any field, you may have to explore a number of options to gain working experience and get your foot in the door. Even with the best education and a resume glowing with recommendations, it may not be easy to instantly land a position that makes full use of your abilities, provides fulfilling, challenging work, and pays you handsomely. As unfair as it may seem, few law firms and corporations are willing to hire an individual without experience – they want someone who has proven their ability to function in a legal environment. Therefore, it is recommended that you consider options such as registering with legal staffing agencies, finding internships, or even freelancing in order to start working right away, rather than sit idly on your degree for months. Beginning your career with a temporary position will provide you with much-needed work experience and will expose you to various legal work environments. Don't be put off by the fact that these positions aren't permanent – many temp employees over time can enjoy attractive salaries and even benefits in some cases. Many reputable firms and corporations have relationships with legal staffing agencies and rely on them for highly skilled candidates. In fact, many firms prefer their candidates to be screened by a legal staffing firm instead of being contacted directly, since the process of screening and interviewing applicants is costly and time-consuming. Entering the legal field in this manner will help you to develop contacts that may help you land a permanent position.

Listed below are a few reputable legal temporary agencies in the Chicagoland area, as well as two that are recognized nationally:

Linder Legal Staffing www.linderlegalstaffing.com

This agency was founded in 2003 by Curtis Linder, a former contract paralegal who has 27 years of experience in the staffing industry. Assignments range from contract to direct-hire positions in areas of litigation, trial support, corporate, and transactional law.¹²

¹² Linder Legal Staffing, www.linderlegalstaffing.com

Robert Half Legal www.roberthalflegal.com

Ranked as the 1# company in Fortune magazine's "World's Most Admired Companies", Robert Half Legal is considered the gold standard of the staffing industry with a reputation for recruiting and placing highly-skilled individuals internationally. Extensive research is conducted on current hiring and employment trends, and their website provides helpful information such as a salary calculator tailored to the opportunities in your area. Opportunities for placement include positions in corporate/securities, litigation, and trademark/patent law.¹³

CLS Legal Staffing www.clslegalstaffing.com

CLS Legal Staffing provides temporary, contract, temp-to-perm and direct hire services for legal professionals in the Chicago area. It prepares its candidates with skills testing, background screening, interview evaluations, performance feedback, salary negotiations, and ongoing career counseling. Its counselors have an extensive knowledge of the legal industry in Chicago, and come highly recommended by many reputable law firms such as Seyfarth Shaw LLP and Drinker, Biddle, Gardner & Carton. Assignments include positions in corporate and securities, litigation, and environmental law.¹⁴

Kelly Law Registry www.kellylawregistry.com

Kelly Law Registry boasts nearly 25 years of service in the legal recruitment industry. It received the 2011 "Best of Staffing" Client Award by a satisfaction survey conducted by Inavero, a satisfaction research firm in Portland, and places candidates in positions such as pharmaceutical and corporate law.¹⁵

Internships

The word "internship" is considered by many to be the four-letter word of entry-level positions, bringing to mind hours of menial work with little or no pay. Many candidates may not be able to afford an internship while trying to handle multiple financial obligations. For those who are in between positions or working part-time, however, the internship is yet another way to gain valuable experience. Due to the current economic climate, the competition for an internship may be stiff, and the limited positions available may show preference for law students. To increase your chances, apply for these positions early,

¹³ Robert Half Legal, www.roberthalflegal.com

¹⁴ CLS Legal Staffing, www.clslegalstaffing.com

¹⁵ Kelly Law Registry, www.kellylawregistry.com

and search for opportunities directly related to your chosen field, not just with law firms or corporations. Hospitals, financial institutions, real estate agents, tax preparers, newspaper and web development firms may require assistance, as well as non-profit agencies. The Chicago Legal Clinic, for example, allows applicants to post resumes online to be contacted for open volunteer positions. Law schools and bar associations may provide opportunities as well. During an election year, the demand for workers to participate in voter registration drives and political campaigns provides a number of options for paralegals to sharpen their skills. The key is to avoid staying idle and equip yourself with as much experience as possible.

The Interview

Marketing yourself to an employer with little experience often means that you will have to get creative. There are a number of ways to make even the most seemingly insignificant jobs pay off in the long term. The trick is to demonstrate how your talents in a non-legal position can be utilized in other ways. For example, a background in customer service or sales can demonstrate your ability to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, and engage people in conversation that can reveal useful information. This is extremely valuable when interviewing clients and performing discovery to gather the facts of a case. Previous volunteering experience for an environmental or urban development organization can be an asset when applying for a position in an environmental law firm or nonprofit agency. Even written articles published in your college's newspaper can demonstrate your research and writing skills. Finding creative ways to market yourself shows that you have a clear sense of what you have to offer, and will allow you to stand out from other applicants.

Some additional tips for interviewing:

- **Be prepared to demonstrate knowledge of the legal field in which you are applying, as well as the needs of the employer itself.** You should already have some knowledge of the field, as well as what you will be expected to contribute. Conduct a search online about your potential employer to learn about their mission, significant cases that were successfully litigated, profiles of the associates and partners, and any articles published by or about them in law journals. If an associate has written a summary citing the use of a particular case, research the facts of that case to get an understanding of the facts and how it was used in the argument presented. Demonstrating your understanding of the employer's work method and the role you will play in

assisting them to reach goals will increase your chances of receiving challenging assignments that match your skill set.

□ **Be prepared to interview with multiple attorneys, sometimes all at once.**

Attorneys often share paralegals and/or rotate them for different projects, so you will want to demonstrate that you can interact well with all of them and adapt to their individual expectations. You will need to show that your interpersonal skills fit in well with the environment, and that you can handle working with them all at once. Attorney personalities can vary significantly from one attorney to another – some are friendly and cordial, some are brusque and even abrasive. Developing a “thick skin” is very helpful in the legal industry. If you are anxious about this, it helps to practice a mock interview with a few friends.

□ **Follow your interviewer’s lead with the tone of the interview.** If the interviewer is more casual and conversational during the interview, respond in a likewise manner; if he/she is more direct and formal, keep your responses short and to the point. This will demonstrate your ability to adapt to your employer’s working style.

□ **Bring a sample of your research and writing assignments to demonstrate your strengths.**

It goes without saying that this should be a sample of your BEST work. A portfolio that contains items such as case summaries and research of complex legal matters is often prepared during your paralegal education. Have your instructor or career counselor evaluate the work to determine if it is fit to show to employers.

Not just a “Glorified Secretary”: Utilizing Your Skills and Gaining the Respect of Your Employers

The paralegal profession is still fairly new, having developed over only the last forty years and still changing and expanding in its scope. Many law firms, agencies and corporations, particularly those who have recently begun to hire advanced legal staff, may still be uncertain as to how paralegals can be used effectively. As a result, many paralegals may find their job descriptions to be unclear, or may become frustrated when the lines between them and other lesser skilled administrative staff become blurred. It is perfectly understandable – after investing two years or more (and thousands of dollars) to master a particular trade, no one wants to be relegated to menial tasks such as copying, filing, typing and faxing. Paralegals who have decided to quit the profession and seek employment in other industries often cite a lack of challenging work, undefined job duties, and “not being part of a team” as their primary reason.¹⁶ Despite your best efforts, it may seem like you will never receive the respect you’ve worked hard for, and may feel as if you have wasted your time. This doesn’t have to be the case – planning your course of action ahead of time and being proactive in pursuing the assignments you enjoy can prevent you from being stuck in a rut and suffering from early career burnout.

Identifying Your Goals and Performing Self Assessment

As previously mentioned, determining your objectives in every step of your career will help ensure that you are on track for meeting them. When you are accepting a position, make sure that it meets not only your financial needs, but your professional needs as well. Many paralegals make the common mistake of accepting a position for its pay or convenience, but do not evaluate whether the position allows any opportunities to advance. Oftentimes this is difficult to avoid – you may need to accept the position for financial reasons or to gain experience. When taking a job, identify what, if any, opportunities for advancement exist—will you have to accept a position as a legal secretary, and have the option to be promoted as a paralegal in a year or two? You should be very upfront with your immediate supervisors that your goal is to move forward, and back up your words with a disciplined work ethic and exceptional performance. This can only fail for two reasons: 1) Your work leaves something to be desired or 2) your employer never had any intentions of promoting you in the first place. Make an honest evaluation of how you have contributed to your company’s goals – have you delivered consistently and shown yourself

¹⁶ Estrin, Chere. *Paralegal Career Guide*, pp 140.

worthy of receiving additional work, or have you performed at the “minimum” and demonstrated a need for constant supervision?

Analysis and Good Judgment: The Qualities of an Excellent Paralegal

One thing to keep in mind – your title, education level, credentials and even specialized skills are meaningless if an attorney does not feel you are prepared to accept additional challenges and responsibilities. According to NALA’s *Manual for Paralegals and Legal Assistants*, an attorney will most likely evaluate your preparedness based on the following criteria: intelligence, a positive attitude, a willingness to assume responsibility, communication skills, ethical and moral standards, imagination, reliability, analytical ability, and good judgment.¹⁷ The last two traits, analytical ability and good judgment, are perhaps the most essential- the former determines how well you will perform on individual assignments, and the latter determines how well you will perform in your overall role. Good judgment implies not only the knowledge and understanding of the duties given; it involves an innate ability to perceive the needs of your employer and function in a way that not only contributes to production but enhances it. The assessment of a paralegal’s good judgment can be measured by the following criteria:

The ability to adapt to procedures and the culture of your workplace. Every office has a “chain of command”, that is, an organized structure as to how duties are managed and delegated to each individual. Each function, from managing the files to reviewing the complex legal issues of a particular case, has a procedure that must be adhered to in order to avoid disrupting the system. Understanding the roles of your fellow employees and the dynamics of your office will demonstrate that you are able to integrate fully and support the firm’s objectives.

Understanding instructions and meeting the expectations of your attorneys. Following the specific instructions of your supervising attorney, as well as learning to anticipate their expectations, is an integral part of the paralegal’s job. Attorneys need to know that you can be relied on to understand their directions and respond to them accurately. You must also understand the reasoning behind your attorney’s instructions in order to anticipate these directions in the future. While it may be tempting to alter certain procedures in a way that is seemingly more efficient, this is overstepping your boundaries. Keep in mind that your job is to support the goals of the attorney, not abandon them for your own.

¹⁷ NALA’s *Manual for Paralegals and Legal Assistants*, pp. 110

Managing your time wisely. Paralegals must recognize which assignments need to be completed first, and anticipate ahead of time whether they can be completed in the timeframe given. This may mean requesting additional help or alerting certain attorneys that timeframes may need to be revised. Prioritizing tasks is essential – many law firms place heavy emphasis on billable hours in order to increase profit, so excessive time spent on administrative tasks is not productive. You must also become familiar with the schedules of your supervising attorneys so you can request feedback and assistance with difficult projects at appropriate times. Constantly missing deadlines or submitting work that is poorly done or incomplete shows a lack of organization, and is unlikely to work in your favor when making your case for receiving additional duties.

Avoid ethical dilemmas. As a paralegal, you are expected to uphold the same ethical and professional guidelines as your employer, and must be aware and extremely cautious of violating laws of ethical conduct. The most common ethical violation paralegals make is the unauthorized practice of law – that is, inadvertently answering client questions based on a legal issue, filing documents with the court, or giving advice that should only be performed under the direct supervision of an attorney. Unauthorized practice of law can result in costly fines, revocation of your attorney’s law license, or even imprisonment in extreme cases. The lines of performing paralegal work and practicing law are often blurred, so it is crucial that you consult with an attorney before performing any task you are uncertain of. Become familiar with the ethical guidelines of both your employer and your state, doing so will ensure that you are not perceived as a potential liability.

Accept constructive criticism, and apply it to your performance. The demanding nature of the legal profession leaves little room for most attorneys to conduct extensive training with paralegals; as a result, you will be expected to learn quickly and figure out many answers for yourself. Mistakes are inevitable, but attorneys will often have little patience for costly and time consuming blunders. Accept criticism, however harsh it is, as an opportunity for improvement. Take note of your attorney’s feedback and request additional direction when needed. Take advantage of the additional training that is offered by your firm. Demonstrate that you are a motivated employee who is willing to accept responsibility for your own progress, and you will be respected by your superiors.¹⁸

¹⁸ *NALA Manual for Paralegals and Legal Assistants*, pp.110-116

Networking: It's Not Just For Jobs

Traditional Networking

Throughout your educational and professional career, you will encounter a number of individuals who may serve as job contacts, career mentors and references. These contacts may serve as more than just job leads – they may keep you informed of recent technological trends in your industry or opportunities for additional training. An excellent opportunity for networking exists on many social networking sites, such as Facebook.com or LinkedIn.com. In addition to connecting to others in your field, the use of these sites can expose you to a wealth of information – such as how to gain access to online legal resources for a discounted cost, notifications of training and networking events, tips on legal research methods and other job procedures, and job prospects in other areas.

Professional Networks

One of the most beneficial forms of professional networking is joining a professional association. Professional associations for paralegals have existed almost as long as the profession itself, having emerged in the early 70's as a result of the growing industry.¹⁹ These associations serve to promote the employment of paralegals and validate it as a legitimate profession, providing continuing legal education and networking events, professional newsletters, established guidelines for professional ethics, and formal certification. Becoming a member of a professional organization enhances your appeal to prospective employers and provides a constant opportunity to update your skills and familiarity with professional standards. The majority of these associations require the successful completion of an ABA-approved paralegal education program, the passing of a certification exam, three to six years of experience in the field, or some combination of the three in order to grant membership. In many associations, membership also gives you the opportunity to serve on a committee or contribute to a newsletter or professional publication, giving you visibility to some of the field's most respected employers. Many paralegal associations exist on the national, state and local level, with some catering to specific legal fields.

Here is a list of some the most well-known national paralegal associations:

¹⁹ McCabe, Susan M. "A Brief History of the Paralegal Profession". Michigan Bar Journal Vol. 86 Issue 7, p. 18-23

National Association of Legal Assistants (NALA) – The National Association of Legal Assistants is the largest and most widely recognized paralegal association in the U.S., with a membership of over 15,000. It offers continuing education courses online for paralegals to refresh their skills in areas such as legal research, ethics, contract law, dispute resolution and written communication. Courses are offered to both members and non-members (registration fees are \$50 and \$75, respectively) and web-based seminars for specialty areas such as litigation, real estate, and immigration law are available as well. Upon successful completion of the certification exam, a paralegal will receive the designation of Certified Legal Assistant/Paralegal, a credential which can be maintained by completing 50 hours of ongoing legal education every five years. To qualify for membership, a paralegal must have successfully completed an ABA-approved Associate or Baccalaureate degree program for paralegal education, or have a non-paralegal related degree with six months or more of related experience, depending on the level of education obtained.²⁰

National Federation of Paralegal Associations (NFPA)

The National Federation of Paralegal Associations is a collaboration of over 60 state and local paralegal associations, promoting the use of paralegals with its emphasis on ethical standards, and monitoring the state and federal laws that propose to change the regulation of the industry. It has published newsletters and briefs to bar associations and government agencies to reinforce the importance of paralegals to the legal industry, and works with ABA’s Standing Committee on Legal Assistants (SCOLA) and the American Association for Paralegal Education (AAFPE) to continue improving the standards of paralegal education. Its certification exam, the Paralegal Advanced Competency Exam (PACE), awards the credential of PACE Registered Paralegal upon completion. In addition, membership in many state associations such as the Illinois Paralegal Association (IPA) grants automatic membership in the NFPA.²¹

American Bar Association (ABA)

The ABA allows paralegal professionals to register as an associate, exposing them to wealth of valuable industry information, newsletters, and networking opportunities. The website allows resume postings and employment listings, as well as career advice and ethics material.²²

²⁰ www.nala.org

²¹ www.paralegals.org

²² www.abanet.org/legalservices/paralegals

Continuing Education

Why is Certification Necessary?

Although many paralegal education programs, particularly those that are ABA-approved, take great measures to ensure that they are preparing their students for real world experience, a disconnect often exists between the exercises performed in a classroom and the challenges that await a paralegal when they begin their first job. Trends in the legal industry change rapidly, and these changes are not always reflected immediately in classroom study. Obtaining certification is a reflection of your commitment to your field, and your willingness to expand your knowledge and expertise. Many employers pay for the certification of their paralegals as an investment—a well-trained paralegal can provide greater assistance to attorneys and even demand higher billing rates in some cases.²³ In addition, the continued debate over mandatory regulation of paralegals in many states has motivated many employers to require certification as a condition of employment.

The Certification Exam: What to Expect

Although the specific format of the certification exam varies with the association administering it, the subject matter and structure are fairly similar. An assessment of the paralegal's proficiency in written communication, legal theory, judgment and analysis, and research are done with tests in both question and essay form, with a technical portion being used to evaluate legal research and software skills. The exams typically range from four to eight hours, and can be taken over a number of days. Courses are usually offered by the association to prepare before taking the exam. As an example, the CLA/CP certification exam for NALA consists of the following five sections:

Communications – written and oral testing of grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, verbal and non-verbal communications, along with interviewing skills;

Ethics – review of unauthorized practice of law, professional integrity, conflict of interest, and knowledge of the Rules of Professional Conduct from the ABA as well as NALA's Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibility;

²³ Monke, Debra J. "Why Paralegal Certification Counts". Utah Bar Journal Vol. 18 No. 5 (2005), pp. 56-59

Legal Research – reviews sources of law and authority, proper citation of the law, shepardizing, and identifying rule of law and relevant facts;

Judgment and Analytical Ability – evaluates comprehension ability, application of knowledge, organization and summarization; and

Substantive law – consists of a mandatory review of the American Legal System, along with the selection from nine field-specific areas for specialty.²⁴

²⁴ www.nala.org/examdesc

At The End of It All, Is It Worth It?

Job Prospects

By and large, the paralegal profession is one that has shown significant growth over the last few decades, and projections for its continued expansion are still being reported. The Occupational Outlook Handbook issued by the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts increased demand for paralegals in the fields of real estate, bankruptcy, medical malpractice, and product liability.²⁵ The increased demand for affordable legal help will drive up the use of paralegals in non-profit agencies and low-cost legal programs. Paralegals will also be heavily utilized in many levels of government, such as the Department of Justice, the Department of the Treasury and the Social Security Administration. However, the majority of paralegal jobs – 71% -- are held by paralegals in private law firms.²⁶

Salary Potential

Salary projections for paralegals also continue to be favorable. The 2010 National Utilization/Compensation Survey released by National Association for Legal Assistants reports an average salary of \$46,120, with the top 10 percent earning salaries in excess of \$73,450. According to the report, the highest average salaries occurred in the Western region of the U.S. (\$62,417), with the lowest taking place in the New England/East Coast region (\$45,488). The top five states of the highest earning paralegals are Washington D.C., New York, California, Alaska, and Illinois. The average starting salary for a paralegal with one to five years of experience is \$49,008, with average salaries of \$53,000 for those with six to ten years of experience, and \$55,446 for those with ten years or more. The average salaries of paralegals by specialty practice are as follows:

Bankruptcy Law -- \$51,209

Immigration -- \$59,475

Employment/Labor Law -- \$56,390

Intellectual Property --\$61,133

Environmental -- \$54,489

Real Estate--\$53,281

Family/Domestic Law -- \$45,012

Securities --\$60,872

²⁵ <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos114.htm>

²⁶ <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos114.htm>

Moving on: Future Career Options

One commonly held assumption about the paralegal profession is that it is merely a stepping stone in the path to practicing law as an attorney. While this is certainly true in many cases, not every paralegal aspires to become a lawyer. Opportunities for paralegals extend beyond positions that require the immediate supervision of an attorney. Many paralegals take an active role in their professional associations, writing articles and resource guides for other paralegals. Paralegals who demonstrate strong leadership qualities often promote to management positions and supervise other paralegals. A growing number of professionals receive specialized training in areas such as real estate and bankruptcy, then obtain mandatory licensing to begin their own companies, assisting clients with bankruptcy forms, wills, and other legal documents. Others apply their skills to positions such as title examiners, health and safety inspectors, investigators, law clerks, and claims adjusters.

Regardless of your chosen path, the work of a paralegal can provide rewarding purpose and interesting challenges, positive recognition, and a strong sense of accomplishment. With this endeavor, the end result will be dependent on what you are willing to invest, and the attitude you apply toward it.