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Become a Paralegal

Paralegal: Career Overview

Are you interested in legal work, but not law school? While attorneys assume the ultimate responsibility for the legal services they provide their clients, paralegals (also referred to as legal assistants) assist them in almost every aspect of their work. As one of the fastest growing careers in the US, you'll find plenty of paralegal jobs in every part of the country.

The only legal services paralegals explicitly can't perform are presenting cases in a court, giving legal advice, setting fees and accepting cases. This leaves a wide variety of legal duties paralegals can do.

The American Bar Association (ABA) definition of this role reads as follows:

A legal assistant or paralegal is a person qualified by education, training or work experience who is employed or retained by a lawyer, law office, corporation, governmental agency or other entity who performs specifically delegated substantive legal work for which a lawyer is responsible.
(Adopted by the ABA in 1997)

Paralegal: Job Duties

Paralegals provide valuable assistance to attorneys by helping them prepare for closings, hearing, trials and corporate meetings by:

- Trial assistance for attorneys
- Drafting contracts, mortgages, separation agreements and trust instruments
- Assisting in the preparation of tax returns and planning estates
- Coordinating the activities of other law office employees
- Maintaining financial office records
- Investigating cases
- Researching legal documents
- Locating witnesses
- Helping prepare legal arguments, draft pleadings and motions
- Obtaining affidavits
- Organizing and tracking case files

Depending on where you choose to work, your paralegal duties can vary widely.

Paralegal: Education & Training

Paralegal programs usually include courses that introduce students to law and legal research methods. Furthermore, you may study a specialized legal area, like contract law or real estate. Private employers may prefer applicants with this type of training, since their firm may focus on a specialized field.

You have several options for study when pursuing a paralegal career.

Associate's Degree Programs

Associate's degree paralegal programs offered at community colleges are the most common. These programs usually take 2 years to complete.

Certificate Programs

Certificate programs are an equally popular paralegal training option. Most certificate programs are designed for students who already hold an associate or bachelor's degree, although some certificate programs may only require a high school diploma or GED for admission. Certificate programs often take only a few months to complete.

Other Programs

A small number of schools also offer 4-year bachelor's and/or master's degrees in paralegal studies.

Paralegal: Gaining Experience

Many paralegal training programs include an internship. These provide students several months of practical experience working in professional locations such as:

- Private law firms
- Public defender or attorney general's offices
- Banks
- Corporate legal departments
- Legal-aid organizations
- Government agencies

Experience gained in internships is a valuable asset when seeking a job after graduation. Prospective students should examine the experiences of recent graduates before enrolling in those programs.

Paralegal: Growth Opportunities

If you decide to become a lawyer after working as a paralegal, then you'll already have experience in the legal field, giving you a competitive edge. However, a paralegal education and law school education are not equivalent. Graduates of legal assistant programs lack qualification and eligibility to take the bar examination. Also, academic credit for paralegal courses is not transferable for advanced standing in law school.

Paralegal: Salary

According to the National Association of Legal Assistants, paralegals earn an average salary of \$38,000 in 2000.

Paralegal: Career Spotlight

Linda Michalik

Job Title: Paralegal, Cozen O'Connor

Years in Field: 15 years

How did you become a paralegal?

I was making a career change from social work. I'd done child sexual abuse and child protection work for ten years, and needed to make a transition out of that. Paralegal work seemed good, I could use the skills I had: interviewing, case management, investigation. My college undergraduate degree was entry level for that work, and I could take a certificate program, which wasn't as expensive as doing a master's degree.

So I started with a solo practitioner in Montana, as his office assistant. As he saw my skills, he suggested that I go on to actually do the training. I took the paralegal program at Clark College in Vancouver. Later I moved to Salt Lake City, and that's where I had my first paralegal position. I've worked in family law, personal injury work, and now insurance subrogation, determining which company is responsible for a loss.