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Legal Assistants And Paralegals – A Closer Look

By Kevin Erickson

One of the most important tasks legal assistants and paralegals perform is to assist lawyers as they prepare for corporate meetings, closings, trials and hearings. Although the lawyers take ownership for the legal work, they will often delegate many tasks to legal assistants and paralegals. As a result, they continue to take on a growing range of tasks inside the nation's legal offices and perform many of tasks traditional done by lawyers.

On the other hand, they are still strictly prohibited from performing any duty that is considered to be the "practice of law" – such as setting legal fees, giving legal advice, and presenting cases in court. Legal Assistants and paralegals also do much of leg work like verifying and looking into the facts of cases to ensure that all points are thoroughly covered. They also identify appropriate laws, judicial decisions, legal articles and other materials that are relevant to assigned cases.

After they analyze and organize the information, paralegals may prepare written reports that attorneys use in determining how cases should be handled. Should the decision be made to file a lawsuit, a paralegal may then be given the responsibility to help prepare the legal arguments, draft pleadings and motions to be filed with the court, obtain affidavits and assist the attorneys during trial. Paralegals also organize and track files of thee all important case documents and make them available and easily accessible to the attorneys.

In addition to preparatory work, legal assistants and paralegals also perform a number of other vital functions. For example, they help draft contracts, mortgages, separation agreements and instruments of trust. In addition, may assist in preparing tax returns or estate planning. Some may even be given the responsibility to coordinate the activities of other law office employees and maintain financial office records. Of course, additional tasks differ, depending on the employer.

Legal Assistants and paralegals are found in all types of organizations, but most are employed by law firms (about 70%), corporate legal departments and various government offices make up most of the remaining 30%. In these organizations, they can work in many different areas of the law, including litigation, personal injury, corporate law, criminal law, employee benefits, intellectual property, labor law, bankruptcy, immigration, family law, and real estate.

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As the law has become more complex, legal assistants and paralegals have responded, like many professions, by becoming more specialized. And within specialties, functions are often broken down even further so that legal assistants and paralegals may deal with a specific area. For example, legal assistants and paralegals specializing in labor law may concentrate exclusively on employee benefits.

The duties of legal assistants and paralegals also differ widely with the type of organization in which they are employed. Those who work for corporations often assist attorneys with employee contracts, shareholder agreements, stock–option plans and employee benefit plans. They may also help prepare and file annual financial reports, maintain corporate minutes' record resolutions and prepare forms to secure loans for the corporation.

Legal Assistants and paralegals often monitor and review government regulations to ensure that the corporation is aware of any new requirements and to ensure they are operating within the law. In

addition, an ever increasing number of experienced paralegals are taking on additional supervisory responsibilities like monitoring team projects and serving as a communications link between the team and the corporation.

The duties of legal assistants and paralegals, working in the public sector varies between agencies. However, as a general rule, they analyze legal material for internal use, maintain reference files, conduct research for attorneys and collect and analyze evidence for agency hearings. They may prepare informative or explanatory material on laws, agency regulations, and agency policy for general use by the agency and the public. Legal Assistants and paralegals employed in community legal–service projects help the poor, the aged and those in need of legal assistance by filing forms, conducting research, preparing documents and when authorized by law, representing clients at administrative hearings.

Legal Assistants and paralegals in small to medium–sized law firms usually perform a variety of duties that require a general knowledge of the law. For example, they may research judicial decisions on improper police arrests or help prepare a mortgage contract. On the other hand, those employed by larger law firms, government agencies or corporations are more likely to specialize in one aspect of the law.

Being computer literate has also become an essential skill of legal Assistants and paralegals. Using the internet to search legal literature and extracting vital information stored in computer databases and on CD–ROM is also an important skill set. In litigation involving many supporting documents, paralegals usually use computer databases to retrieve, organize and index various materials. Imaging software allows paralegals to scan documents directly into a database, while billing programs help them track hours billed to clients. Various software packages are also used to perform tax computations and explore different scenarios of various tax strategies for clients.

As you can see becoming a Legal Assistants and paralegals profession is an exciting and ever–demanding field that requires a wide range of skills and knowledge. If you're looking for a career, not just a job and you have the willingness to push yourself then this field is ripe for the picking.

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Career As A Paralegal

By John Daye

The paralegal profession is currently experiencing a great deal of growth and prosperity. With the average USA annual salary averaging around \$34,000 for local and state work, nearly double that for Federal Government work, and much more in the private sector, it's no wonder this career field is growing. Let's take a look at just a few reasons why a career as a paralegal is so rewarding.

Challenging Work

Attorneys pass much of their workload along to paralegals, also known as legal assistants. However, paralegals may not perform all of an attorney tasks, these tasks include setting legal fees, giving out legal advice, and presenting court cases. But they may play a role in virtually everything else.

Case preparation is part of a paralegals workload. Paralegals often help lawyers with background information and research, legal history, case studies, fact-finding investigations, document preparation and analysis, plea documents, folder, record and file handling. The work they perform is often involved with hearings, trials, closing comments, and corporate functions.

Jobs are available for paralegals in many types of companies and organizations. They work with employee benefits, labor law, criminal law, corporate law, government (at all levels), real estate and bankruptcy. And you'll find them working in personal injury law and litigation as well.

Career Tidbits

The following list includes a few pieces of interesting information concerning paralegals:

– Paralegals usually work year round, although temporary paralegal work is available. Although 40 hours is average, heavy workloads are a possibility. Work isn't always at the office; paralegals need to work in libraries and often travel in order to gather relevant information.

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– In 2004, there were 224,000 paralegal jobs, with private practices employing roughly 7 out of 10 of them.

– Job opportunities for paralegals are expected to climb at a faster than average rate through the year 2014.

There's no better time to check into being a paralegal than now!

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