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Legal Assistants And Paralegals – The Future Is Bright

By Kevin Erickson

One of most common ways to become a legal assistant or paralegal is through a community college program that leads to an associate's degree. Another common route; primarily for those who already have a college degree, is through a program that leads to a certification in paralegal studies.

Many legal assistants and paralegals have associate degrees in paralegal studies or a bachelor's degree paired with a certificate in paralegal studies. Currently, a small number of schools offer bachelors' or masters' degrees in paralegal studies. A few employers train paralegals on the job, hiring college graduates with no legal experience or promoting experienced legal secretaries. Others have gained experience in a technical field useful to law firms, like tax preparation for tax and estate planning, criminal justice, nursing or health administration for personal injury practice.

With 250+ paralegal programs approved by the American Bar Association (ABA) and an estimated 1,000 colleges and universities, law schools and proprietary schools offering formal paralegal training programs – the field is highly represented. Although many programs don't require ABA approval, graduating from an ABA-approved program can enhance one's employment opportunities – it's a credibility thing for some employers.

Program admission requirements vary greatly – from a few college credits or courses to a bachelor's degree for others, to high school graduates, those with legal experience, passing a standardized test, to simply having a favorable personal interview.

Many legal assistant and paralegal programs include 2-year associate degree programs, 4-year bachelor degree programs and certificate programs that can take as little as a few months to complete. Most certificate programs provide intensive and specialized paralegal training for individuals who already hold college degrees. On the other hand, associate and bachelor degree programs usually combine paralegal training with courses in other academic subjects.

Obviously, the quality of paralegal training programs can vary with the higher quality programs usually including job placement services.

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Courses range from introducing students to the legal applications of computers, including how to perform legal research on the Internet to more and more paralegal training programs offering internships to assist students in gaining practical experience by working for several months in the real world. Internships could be with a private law firm, the office of a public defender or attorney general, a bank, a corporate legal department, a legal aid organization or a government agency. Clearly, the experience gained is an asset when one is seeking a job after graduation and for many can lead to a job with the company they interned with.

Most employers don't require certification but earning a voluntary certificate from a professional society does have its advantages when it comes to finding a job. The National Association of Legal Assistants (NALA) has established standards for certification that requires various combinations of education and experience. Paralegals who meet their standards are eligible to take a 2-day examination, offered three times a year at one of several regional testing centers. Those who pass can then use the Certified Legal Assistant (CLA) designation. NALA also offers an advanced paralegal certification for those who

want to specialize in specific areas of the law.

The Paralegal Advanced Competency Exam offers professional recognition to legal assistants and paralegals that have earned a bachelor's degree and have at least 2 years of experience. Once they pass this test they can use the Registered Paralegal (RP) designation.

Legal assistants and paralegals must have the ability to document and present their findings and opinions to their supervising attorneys. They also need to understand legal terminology, have good research and investigative skills and be able to do legal research using a computer and the internet. They also need to stay abreast of new developments in the laws that affect their area of expertise. The most common way many legal assistants and paralegals expand their knowledge is by participating in continuing legal education seminars.

Because legal assistants and paralegals deal with the public on an ongoing basis they need to be "shining examples" of ethical standards for the legal profession. The National Association of Legal Assistants, the National Federation of Paralegal Associations and a few States have established ethical guidelines for them to follow.

Employment Outlook Legal assistants and paralegals held about 224,000 jobs in 2004 with about 70% being employed by private law firms; most of the remainder worked for corporate legal departments and various levels of government. Within the Federal Government, the U.S. Department of Justice is the largest employer, followed by the Social Security Administration and the U.S. Department of the Treasury. A small number of paralegals own their own businesses and work as freelance legal assistants, contracting their services to attorneys or corporate legal departments.

As a whole, employment in this field is projected to grow much faster than average. The current trend of employers trying to reduce costs by hiring paralegals to perform duties formerly carried out by lawyers is expected to continue into the foreseeable future. As a result, employment opportunities are projected to grow much faster than average for the next 10 years or so.

As in all fields, compensation varies greatly due to the high number of variables but in general, salaries depend on education, training, experience, the type and size of employer and the geographic location of the job. As a whole, legal assistants and paralegals who work for large law firms or in large metropolitan areas earn more than those who work for smaller firms or in less populated regions. In addition to salary, many also receive bonuses. In mid 2004, the average salary for all legal assistants or paralegal was a tad over \$39,000 per year.

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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.
- 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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