

PARALEGALS

OVERVIEW

Paralegals, also known as *legal assistants*, provide support to lawyers. One of their primary duties is to help lawyers prepare for trials, hearings, closings, or corporate meetings, but they may also be responsible for conducting legal preparatory work such as research and writing drafts. The most popular method of educational preparation for a career as a paralegal is an associate's degree. Approximately 263,800 paralegals are employed in the United States. Employment for paralegals is expected to grow much faster than the average for all careers through 2018.

THE JOB

Paralegals are trained and certified to help lawyers with much of their work. They may be viewed by some as merely legal aides, but many paralegals conduct their work independently and, in today's legal offices, have many of the same responsibilities as lawyers. However, paralegals are prohibited by law from giving legal advice, setting legal fees, or presenting a case in court. Paralegals work in a variety of legal specialties such as bankruptcy, corporate law, criminal law, employee benefits, family law, immigration, intellectual property, labor law, litigation, personal injury, and real estate.

Paralegals conduct research; maintain general contact with clients; and draft and revise contracts, depositions, closings, or agreements. Paralegals have other additional duties or functions depending on their area of specialization.

Paralegals working for large corporations or independent law firms may be involved in litigation. When assigned a case, paralegals may have general duties such as maintaining a database of current court rulings or reviewing past legal periodicals and all material relevant to the case or area of law. They may also maintain a litigation docket, calendar, or tickler system to help keep track of important deadlines, meetings, or court appearances.

FAST FACTS

High School Subjects

Computer science
English
Government

Personal Skills

Communication
Following instructions
Judgment and decision making
Time management

Minimum Education Level

Some postsecondary training

Salary Range

\$20,000 to \$55,000 to
\$80,000+

Employment Outlook

Much faster than the average

O*NET-SOC

23-2011.00

GOE

04.04.02

DOT

119

NOC

4211

Paralegals prepare legal documents and conduct research or any necessary investigation before bringing a lawsuit to trial. Tasks at this stage include preparing the client's background information, interviewing witnesses, and examining public records that are relevant to the lawsuit. They are responsible for locating and hiring expert witnesses, if necessary. If the case goes to trial, paralegals coordinate the deposition schedule with the client and attorneys, including the opposing counsel. They also help in reviewing and assembling all documents to be used in the depositions, including drafting an outline of all examination and cross-examination questions used in court. Paralegals are often available to help prepare witnesses for a deposition, including discussing courtroom etiquette with the client and witnesses. They also work with graphic designers and multimedia artists to coordinate exhibits, videos, animations, or any computer presentations used as trial evidence. Post-trial, paralegals may draft a notice of appeals or documents regarding satisfaction of judgment.

Paralegals specializing in immigration law also have similar general duties as those working in litigation. They are responsible for maintaining a tickler file to keep track of deadlines for filing extensions, petitions, and applications with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) or the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL). Oftentimes, they must draft letters and affidavits, or organize required documents supporting these applications and petitions. Some documents—such as foreign birth records, military service records, or police records—may be difficult to obtain. All documents must be certified as valid. *Immigration law paralegals* are often responsible for coordinating the translation of foreign documents or determining the equivalency of foreign degrees. Some may be responsible for preparing the client for interviews with officials from the USCIS, or perhaps outlining immigrant and nonimmigrant visa alternatives. Another important duty is acting as a liaison between the USCIS, USDOL, and the law firm.

Some paralegals specialize in tax law. Their additional duties in this area include maintaining records and drafting returns for corporate income tax and annual and quarterly employer returns, as well as completing applications for tax-exempt organizations, charitable organizations, or private foundations. They gather information for audits and tax reviews and maintain federal and state tax form files and publications. Paralegals may also research current tax laws and recent tax court decisions, especially if these laws are applicable to current cases.

Paralegals employed in a real estate office, or mortgage and title office, specialize in real estate law. They may use a lawyer's notes or perhaps an interview transcript to draft a purchase agreement or make necessary revisions to an existing agreement. They pay special attention to details such as dates and any contingencies listed in the contracts. *Real estate paralegals* may conduct title searches and check the property's legal description against a map and county records. In preparation for a real estate closing, paralegals review insurance agreements and contracts, prorate property taxes and utilities, and adjust closing figures. They create a final closing checklist and folders. If necessary, paralegals may accompany lawyers to real estate closings.

Paralegals have additional administrative duties, regardless of their specialty. Depending on the size of the office, paralegals may be responsible for

126 Hot Jobs

office management, especially the supervision of legal secretaries and other paralegals. They maintain financial office records and coordinate in-house training sessions, seminars, or continuing educational classes. Some paralegals also act as their firm's notary public.

The work environment for paralegals depends on the firm or company and its specialty, though most paralegals work in comfortable, well-lit offices or law libraries. The office atmosphere is professional in manner of dress and conduct. At times paralegals may be required to assist lawyers while at court, especially if assigned to a major or high-profile case.

Paralegals work a standard 40-hour workweek, with time off on weekends and holidays. However, paralegals should expect to work longer hours, especially during the busy season, in order to prepare for an important case or to meet a deadline. Travel is sometimes necessary to complete an investigation, to conduct additional research, or to interview witnesses.

REQUIREMENTS

HIGH SCHOOL

Take a wide range of subjects in high school to prepare for college. These include government, computer science, social studies, and foreign languages, especially Latin and Spanish. English and speech classes will help you to develop your communication skills.

POSTSECONDARY TRAINING

The most popular method of educational preparation for a career as a paralegal is an associate's degree in paralegal studies. Some people enter the field after earning a bachelor's degree in another field and a certificate in paralegal studies. A few schools offer bachelor's and master's degrees in paralegal studies. Some employers provide on-the-job training to legal secretaries or promising college graduates who do not have legal experience.

More than 1,000 postsecondary programs offer formal paralegal training programs. Approximately 260 paralegal programs are approved by the American Bar Association (ABA). Visit the ABA website, www.abanet.org/legalservices/paralegals/directory/home.html, for a list of approved programs. The American Association for Paralegal Education also offers a list of programs at its website, www.aafpe.org/m_search.

CERTIFICATION AND LICENSING

Certification, while voluntary, is highly recommended. It is an excellent way to stand out from other job applicants and demonstrate your mastery of paralegal duties to prospective employers. Certification is offered by the National Association of Legal Assistants, the American Alliance of Paralegals, the National Federation of Paralegal Associations, and NALS...the association for legal professionals. Contact these organizations for more information.

OTHER REQUIREMENTS

Paralegals may be responsible for multiple cases at a time, or they may be assigned to work with a group of lawyers. It is important for paralegals to be

well organized in such situations and to be able to juggle a variety of tasks, deadlines, and personalities. They also need excellent oral and written communication skills. Paralegals are in steady contact with lawyers, other paralegals, legal secretaries, court workers, law librarians, and others throughout their workday. Other important traits include excellent research and investigative skills, an understanding of legal terminology and procedures, a mastery of legal databases and computer programs, and a willingness to continue to learn in order to upgrade their skills throughout their careers.

EXPLORING

There are many ways to learn more about a career as a paralegal. You can read books and magazines (such as the National Federation of Paralegal Associations' *The National Paralegal Reporter*) about the field, visit the websites of college paralegal studies programs to learn about typical classes and possible career paths, and ask your teacher or school counselor to arrange an information interview with a paralegal. Professional associations can also provide information about the field. The National Association of Legal Assistants and NALS...the association for legal professionals provide a wealth of information on paralegal education and careers at their websites (see For More Information). You should also try to land a part-time or summer job in a law office. This will give you a chance to interact with paralegals and see if the career is a good fit for your interests and abilities.

EMPLOYERS

Approximately 263,800 paralegals are employed in the United States, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. Seventy-one percent work for private law firms. Paralegals are employed by law firms, federal government agencies [such as the Justice Department (the largest federal employer), Federal Trade Commission, Social Security Administration, Treasury Department, Internal Revenue Service, and Interior Department], state and local agencies, corporate legal departments, and other organizations that provide legal services. An increasing number of insurance companies, real estate and title insurance firms, and banks are hiring paralegals. Some paralegals start their own freelance businesses and offer their services on a contract basis.

GETTING A JOB

Many paralegals obtain their first jobs as a result of contacts made through college internships or networking events. Others seek assistance in obtaining job leads from college career services offices, newspaper want ads, and employment websites. Additionally, professional associations, such as the National Federation of Paralegal Associations and NALS...the association for legal professionals, provide job listings at their websites. See For More Information for a list of organizations. Those interested in positions with the federal government should visit the U.S. Office of Personnel Management's website, www.usajobs.opm.gov.

ADVANCEMENT

There are many advancement avenues for skilled paralegals. In addition to pay raises, paralegals may be asked to manage other paralegals, legal secretaries, and other workers. Some may move to more prestigious law firms and take on more demanding duties. Others may decide to attend law school and become lawyers, or earn a master's degree in education and become paralegal studies professors.

EARNINGS

Salaries for paralegals vary by type of employer, geographic region, and the worker's education, experience, and skill level. Paralegals earned salaries that ranged from less than \$29,800 to \$75,700 or more in 2009, according to the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL). They earned median annual salaries of \$46,980. Paralegals employed in the legal services industry (the largest employer of paralegals) earned mean annual salaries of \$48,460. The USDOL reports the following mean annual earnings for paralegals by government level: federal, \$62,570; state, \$44,160; and local, \$50,480.

According to the National Association of Legal Assistants' *2010 National Utilization and Compensation Survey Report*, paralegals earned an average of \$55,281 in total compensation (\$52,188 in salary and \$3,093 in bonuses). Salaries ranged from less than \$20,000 to \$80,000 or more.

Employers offer a variety of benefits, which may include the following: medical, dental, and life insurance; paid holidays, vacations, and sick days; personal days; 401(k) plans; profit-sharing plans; retirement and pension plans; bonuses (as compensation for working long hours); free legal representation; a leased car/mileage; and educational assistance programs. Self-employed workers must provide their own benefits.

EMPLOYMENT OUTLOOK

Employment for paralegals is expected to grow much faster than the average for all occupations through 2018, according to the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL). Because paralegals are able to perform many of the same tasks as lawyers, but do not command a lawyer's salary, it makes economic sense for employers to hire paralegals to share in the legal workload. Many law firms, government agencies, and, especially, corporations, are moving in this direction. Additionally, the growing U.S. population will require more legal services. The USDOL predicts that this growth will create especially strong opportunities for paralegals in criminal law, elder law, environmental law, health care law, intellectual property law, and international law. Other promising areas include real estate, bankruptcy, medical malpractice, product liability, and community legal service programs.

Despite the prediction for strong growth, there will be considerable competition for jobs. Many people are attracted to the field because it offers good pay and only an associate's degree is required to enter the field. Paralegals with advanced education, experience, and industry certifications will have the best job prospects.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For certification information, contact
American Alliance of Paralegals
 4001 Kennett Pike, Suite 134-146
 Wilmington, DE 19807-2315
www.aapipara.org

For a database of paralegal studies programs and advice on choosing a program, visit the association's website.
American Association for Paralegal Education
 19 Mantua Road
 Mt. Royal, NJ 08061-1006
www.aafpe.org

For information about careers in the legal field, contact
American Bar Association
 Standing Committee on Paralegals
 321 North Clark Street
 Chicago, IL 60610-7598
www.abanet.org/legalservices/paralegals

For information on careers, contact
Association of Legal Administrators
 75 Tri-State International, Suite 222
 Lincolnshire, IL 60069-4435
www.alanet.org

For information on careers and certification, contact

NALS...the association for legal professionals
 8159 East 41st Street
 Tulsa, OK 74145-3313
www.nals.org

For information about education, careers, earnings, and certification, contact

National Association of Legal Assistants
 1516 South Boston Avenue, Suite 200
 Tulsa, OK 74119-4013
www.nala.org

For detailed information about paralegal education and careers, contact

National Federation of Paralegal Associations
 PO Box 2016
 Edmonds, WA 98020-9516
www.paralegals.org

For information on paralegal schools, contact

National Paralegal Association
 PO Box 406
 Solebury, PA 18963-0406
www.nationalparalegal.org

Interview: Mianne Besser

Mianne Besser is the immediate past-president of the Rocky Mountain Paralegal Association (RMPA), current RMPA board advisor and primary representative to the National Federation of Paralegal Associations, Inc., and is employed as a senior litigation paralegal at Otten Johnson Robinson Neff + Ragonetti in Denver, Colorado. She has worked as a paralegal for 14 years. Mianne discussed her career with the editors of *Hot Jobs*.

Q. What made you want to become a paralegal?

A. I always had a distinct love, if you will, for the law and I always wanted to be a lawyer. When the opportunity presented itself to make a career change, I wanted to enter law school and obtain my juris doctorate, but having children who would attend college, a husband who had a career of his own, as well as balancing the needs of the family, I felt it was

inappropriate to burden the family with an unplanned college expense as well as the possibility of not being able to be fully present in the lives of my family. Taking into account my needs and those of my family and balancing these issues, I decided that becoming a paralegal would satisfy the want and need to have a career in law. Plus, becoming a paralegal would help me decide if I really wanted to be a lawyer.

Q. What is one thing people may not know about a career in the field?

A. We, as paralegals, can actually do a great deal of what attorneys do—in so far as document preparation, talking with clients, dealing with opposing counsel, drafting complaints and discovery, conversing with counsel, in-house or opposing counsel. However, we cannot represent clients in the courtroom; also, we cannot sign legal documents. Paralegals are not issued a license by the state bar association where they live. While I can do many of the tasks performed by attorneys, I am careful to identify myself as a paralegal. While there has been a misconception, perhaps, that we are glorified secretaries or just push papers, that is not the case at all.

Q. Do you do any legal research for cases?

A. I do conduct legal research, but not all paralegals are assigned such a task—it is really dependent on the type of law firm. Some firms and/or attorneys will have paralegals conduct research; others prefer to have new associate attorneys do the research as a way to familiarize them with cases and case law.

Another aspect of a paralegal's role as part of the legal team is that since we are able to do so many different things (in terms of helping with a case) we are able to keep legal costs down for a client. That is a great component of being part of the legal team. We are able to do so much of the work and help people who may not have the resources for more expensive services. While we are able to provide legal assistance to our clients, we are always working under the auspices of an attorney. It is considered unethical for a paralegal to work with a client without being supervised by an attorney.

Q. What are some of the most important qualities for paralegals?

A. Personal: You have to be cheerful in every way. It's important to have a good attitude. Of course you can't have a good day everyday—it's just not possible—but you also can't let a bad day alter your ability to do good work. It's important, when working with your client and team, opposing counsel or opposing paralegal, to put a good face on and carry forward with the tasks at hand. You also need to be a self-starter. When looking at a case, you need to be able to say, "What's the next thing?" Another personal trait, and perhaps also an important professional trait, is that you need good writing skills and good language abilities. This is especially important when dealing with people on the telephone.

Professional: You need to have the ability to think "outside the box." There are some set ways to go about completing a particular task, such as obtaining a document, and it may be this way for almost every case. But you will get that one case where you can't finish by falling back on something that's rote. You are going to have to find a different way to complete the task, tracking down the documents, or locating the witness(es). You also need confidence to do your job, and that is something that comes from within. You should present yourself well and dress accordingly. Your firm's

office culture will help cultivate your professional dress within the office. It is important to note that some firms do offer a “casual/dress down Friday,” but that is not always the case. Again, it’s the culture of the firm, the attorneys themselves, that will dictate the dress code for the entire office.

Q. What are the pros and cons of your job?

A. Pros. I would have to say unraveling the mystery of any case is the biggest pro. For example, it’s identifying what “it” is—whether a document or witness or something else—that is going to push your case forward. Or perhaps reaffirm your client’s position. Or shed light on the possible position of your opponent. How do you find this? How do you go about solving this mystery? How do you go about finding this “smoking gun?” And absolutely, the “what” will differ from case to case.

I have spent the majority of my career working on personal injury cases. So where I am now, working on corporate law/real estate law, is a complete shift for me. My challenges now are a little different from those previously experienced. Nonetheless, I attack them the same. Some of the resources I used while working in personal injury law can be applied for real estate and corporate practice.

It’s also important to establish relationships with other people in the legal community. This is a definite pro. By building relationships with paralegals from your firm, co-counsel, or the paralegal community within your city (maybe even on a national level) it becomes possible to gain resources and assistance.

I also feel the ability to exercise independent thought is very important. While I discuss cases with other members of my legal team, I am not necessarily told what to do. When faced with a task related to moving the case forward, I contribute ideas on how to accomplish tasks better. For example, I was working with a lawyer who wanted me to create a notebook of a particularly large volume of materials for his reference. I felt the time and effort, not to mention the resources, would not be justified to print out the thousands of pages that would eventually comprise the notebook, as well as being cost-prohibitive to the client. I proposed, instead, to create an electronic notebook for him. I explained to this attorney the benefits of this alternative and he agreed to the suggestion.

There are also the great mix of personalities you come across, whether in your own firm, or those of opposing counsel. I feel it is important to establish good relationships with paralegals from opposing counsel. This way things can get done for both sides and move the case forward, even if lawyers from opposing sides don’t get along.

Cons. The law environment can be very stressful, especially when you are gearing up to go to trial. Trial can be a very nervous time; people’s nerves can be frayed. Clients can be easily become upset. Your typical 8-to-5 day can easily change to a 7-to-midnight—or later—day. This schedule can last from two to three weeks until you actually walk into trial. So you can imagine there can be a lot of stress, however, you must be able to manage this with professionalism as well as completing your work efficiently and effectively.

Also, at some firms, there is a requirement for paralegals to have billable hours—these are hours billed to a particular case/client. Your firm, should they use a billable hours standard, will give a paralegal his/her annual target and you will have to meet or exceed this target in order to justify your firm’s need to keep you on staff.