

Frequently Asked Questions about the Paralegal Career

What is a paralegal?

Paralegals, also known as legal assistants, are a distinguishable group of persons who assist attorneys in the delivery of legal services. Through formal education, training and experience, paralegals have knowledge and expertise regarding the legal system and substantive and procedural law which qualify them to do work of a legal nature under the supervision of an attorney. (This is the American Bar Association's definition.)

Is there a difference between a paralegal and a legal assistant?

The terms are used interchangeably, much as the terms lawyer and attorney are used interchangeably. Every state, including Florida, regulates the practice of law through a licensing procedure. In all states paralegals/legal assistants are prohibited from practicing law without a license to practice law. There is no licensing procedure for legal assistants at this time although the Florida Bar has proposed a scheme of voluntary regulation for eligible paralegals.

How do you become a paralegal?

Today, most paralegals are trained in training programs in community colleges and 4-year schools. (In the past, many paralegals were trained on the job.) There are both public and private legal assisting programs. Most of the community college programs are A.S. degree programs which contain a component of general education courses but which are principally devoted to legal specialty courses. The B.A.S. degrees include more general education courses as well as more focusing on critical thinking and communication skills as they are utilized in the law. Employers are often looking for paralegals who have graduated from college programs approved by the American Bar Association (ABA). Attending a college with successful job placement services and gaining experience through internship programs are a big help in launching a paralegal career.

Although there is no licensing for paralegals in Florida, passage of a voluntary national certification exam called the Certified Legal Assisting Exam administered by the National Association of Legal Assistants adds to your credibility as a professional.

Those with a bachelor's degree are eligible to sit for the examination upon completion of fifteen credit hours of PLA prefixed classes.

What is American Bar Association (ABA) approval?

The American Bar Association approves paralegal educational programs which satisfy its strict quality guidelines. An institution's curriculum, faculty, administration, academic resources, student services, and library facilities are evaluated as part of the ABA approval process.

Where are paralegals employed?

The most obvious place to find paralegals is in the traditional law office. Although this career is relatively new, having emerged since the 1970's, today firms of all sizes regularly employ a variety of paralegals. Government offices use paralegals as do private companies. Sometimes the paralegal works in the corporate counsel's office and sometimes the paralegal hires the outside attorneys for the corporation!

What kinds of work do paralegals do?

Under the supervision of a lawyer, a paralegal may analyze legal issues; investigate and evaluate facts; prepare pleadings, contracts, forms, legal memoranda, and other documents; interview clients; assist in case management; and perform other duties to assist the lawyer in the delivery of legal services to clients. Areas of practice include litigation, business/corporate, real estate, trusts and estates, family law, criminal law, tax, bankruptcy, immigration, environmental law, collection, employee benefits, computer law, intellectual property, securities, entertainment law, and workers compensation.

Paralegals can be found interviewing clients or witnesses, preparing documents, conducting legal research, preparing exhibits for trial, probating estates, closing real estate transactions and an endless list of other activities. Just as there are an infinite number of ways to practice law, so there are an infinite number of ways to be a paralegal.

What is the difference between a paralegal, a legal secretary, and a lawyer?

Generally speaking, a paralegal works independently under the supervision of a lawyer or senior paralegal and uses knowledge of legal concepts and procedures. A legal secretary, on the other hand, assists attorneys and paralegals with tasks which do not require knowledge of the law. Many legal secretaries also perform some paralegal duties. An individual must graduate law school and be licensed as an attorney in order to practice law as a lawyer. Lawyers supervise paralegals and legal secretaries and are ultimately responsible to the client for the quality of the legal services delivered.

As a simple example, a paralegal may draft a will based on applicable law and the needs of the client. The attorney reviews the will and makes any corrections. The legal secretary produces a final version of the will ready to be signed by the client.

What is the salary range for paralegals?

Starting salaries in this area are between \$27,000 and \$32,000 depending on the size of the firm, your skills and your ability to market yourself.

What is the employment outlook for paralegals?

The U.S. Department of Labor projects that paralegal will continue to be one of the fastest growing occupations in the new millennium.

Why is paralegal such a growth field?

For centuries, all law-related work was performed by attorneys. However, as the amount of legal work has exploded in recent times, lawyers have had to become more efficient by using paralegals wherever possible. This process of transferring many legal tasks from attorneys to paralegals is expected to persist indefinitely, continuing to generate demand for qualified paralegals.

What personal qualities should paralegals possess?

Successful paralegals have strong reading, writing, and listening abilities, are disciplined workers, and are very attentive to detail. Computer knowledge is a necessity in most legal offices today. A general interest in law and the legal process is also important.

Do I have to know how to type?

Nobody types any more, but everyone (even the lawyers) has to know how to make the computer generate documents and charts and organize information.

Where can I find more information on the profession?

Try these websites for the two large national organizations:

www.nala.org

www.paralegals.org

.....or find a paralegal and ask him or her about their job. Chances are they love it and would be thrilled to talk about their career!

To find out more about an Associate in Science or a Bachelor's in Applied Science in Paralegal Studies at St.Petersburg College's ABA approved program contact 727-791-2557 or email reaves.rainna@spcollege.edu.