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# CHAPTER 1

## THE PARALEGAL PROFESSION

### Learning Objectives

When you complete Chapter 1, you will be able to:

- Describe the qualities that make a good paralegal
- Explain the differences between various legal work environments
- Cite areas of the law in which paralegals can specialize

### Introduction

Professions in the legal field are challenging and rewarding. It is no wonder that every year more and more people seek employment in the legal field. The paralegal profession in particular is growing quickly. More law firms and other companies are realizing the need for paralegals and more people are choosing to compete for paralegal jobs. Be sure to study hard and give yourself the advantage over your competition!

What exactly is a paralegal? You are probably aware of some of the things that a paralegal does, but paralegals do many things. This is why it is difficult to define the term *paralegal*. Basically, paralegals are legal assistants who work alongside legal professionals. They have many of the same skills as lawyers, and are called on to perform a large number of tasks to assist lawyers. Paralegals are trained to handle any legal duties except those that involve the practice of law, such as representing clients.

# BECOMING A SUCCESSFUL PARALEGAL

As a Blackstone student, you have already made the decision to enter this exciting career field. In this chapter, and those that follow in this Study Unit, you will receive helpful tips on entering the profession, identifying job opportunities, preparing job search correspondence, and interviewing.

## Characteristics of a Good Paralegal

Working with the general public is not always easy, so good communication skills are a must. A good paralegal must be able to take a logical yet flexible approach to a case. They are also courteous, patient, and comforting to clients under all circumstances. Effective paralegals must be organized and keep track of the events of a case so that the attorney can also operate as effectively as possible. Additionally, in a field that is full of moral issues, paralegals must always behave ethically.

Some of the most crucial skills for a paralegal to possess include:

- *Communication*—both oral and written, as well as the ability to listen effectively.
- *Organization*—paralegals need to be able to prioritize tasks in their order of importance as well as keep track of work flow in their offices.
- *Computer skills*—as offices become more and more paperless, the abilities to use word processing software for documents, send e-mail, perform electronic legal research, and scan documents for easy sharing and recall are becoming vastly more important.
- *Interpersonal*—the ability to get along with and work with a variety of personalities.
- *Resourcefulness*—the ability to handle difficult situations and find appropriate solutions.
- *Professionalism*—maintaining confidentiality, following ethical standards, and representing clients and employers in a businesslike manner are important skills.
- *Initiative*—taking the lead and resolving issues on your own will make you an invaluable member of the legal team.

## A Challenging and Rewarding Career

In general, a key to success in the paralegal field is to always develop your skills and increase your duties—in other words, keep challenging and improving yourself. On the other hand, dissatisfaction with this profession usually comes from working for employers who under-utilize or improperly utilize paralegals. When job hunting, be sure to find out if your potential employer understands what paralegals are trained to do and appreciates the important services they can offer a company.

## Professional Development Opportunities

Opportunities for advancement usually come with experience. In large firms or companies you may have a chance to move to a managerial position. Smaller firms may not be able to offer you a supervisory position, but in exchange you may be given more responsibilities. Certification is one way to demonstrate your growth in the paralegal profession. See page 74 of this Study Guide for more details on certification exams available to paralegals. Additional information on certification is provided in Volume XIV, *Ethics for Paralegals*.

## LEGAL WORK ENVIRONMENTS

While private law firms first come to mind when you think about places that employ paralegals, there is a very large variety of possible work environments, from large private law firms and corporate legal departments to legal aid societies and non-profit agencies. Your job responsibilities will vary with the type of environment you have chosen to work in. You may find that your personality is suited for one particular area, but you may also wish to experience a variety of work locations throughout your career.

### Private Law Firms

The majority of paralegals (over 70%) work in private law firms. These firms employ as many as 35 paralegals for every 100 attorneys. There are both large and small firms. The definition of what constitutes a large firm depends on the size of the city in which the firm is located. Generally, however, a firm with over 100 lawyers can be considered large. Large firms are usually divided into departments that deal with specific types of cases. Some also have a separate department for paralegals, headed up by a paralegal supervisor. Large firms tend to be highly structured and offer a specific career advancement ladder.

Other characteristics of large firms include access to professional development opportunities and sophisticated resources and computer technology.

Small- or medium-sized firms may offer their own advantages. For instance, the work environment may be more relaxed and flexible, and you may be given more responsibility earlier in your career. Also, since many smaller firms are general practitioners, paralegals will likely be exposed to a wide variety of different cases. On the other hand, smaller firms may assign administrative or clerical tasks to its paralegal staff.

Bear in mind that these generalizations will not apply to all large or small firms—law offices are unique and will each offer their own advantages to a paralegal seeking a rewarding and well-paying position.

## Law Departments of Corporations

Paralegals working in the in-house legal departments of corporations can expect to deal with general corporate law as well as specific industry laws. The attorney in charge of the in-house legal department is usually called the general counsel. If you are working at a corporation, you might deal with employee contracts and benefit plans, shareholder agreements, and stock option plans. You might also be working with government regulations, banking or insurance regulations, and other similar areas. Businesses that have corporate legal departments include manufacturers, retailers, insurance companies, banks, real estate companies, hospitals and universities.

Working for corporations usually promises a fairly stable schedule, generally nine-to-five, forty-hour weeks. Paralegal wages for those working in corporate law are relatively high.

Some smaller corporations may use a paralegal for numerous aspects of their business operations. In those cases, the work might be like that of a paralegal, but there may be a distinctive title, like “specialist” or “special assistant.”

## Government

Many paralegals find rewarding jobs with the government. There are various departments and agencies of federal and state governments that could potentially use paralegals’ help, including administrative agencies, legislative offices and the courts. Federal government agencies that employ paralegals include the Departments of Justice, Health and Human Services, Treasury, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the U.S. Air Force. State and local governments also employ paralegals, but positions may be listed under titles such as research assistant or legal analyst. Government jobs can provide top-notch job security and