



## *Getting That First Job as a Paralegal*

*by Greg Wayment*

**M**y first piece of advice, if you want to be a paralegal: start working at a law firm. Experience is crucial. Seek a position working as a receptionist, runner, file clerk, or assistant. Any entry-level position at a firm or in the legal group of a corporation is a great stepping stone. You want to look at firms that practice in the area of law you are interested in and ones that have a structure in place where paralegals are a key part of the process.

Some firms, for example firms that specialize in personal injury and litigation, tend to utilize paralegals more than other practice areas. I work in litigation and trial support at a firm that specializes in intellectual property and commercial litigation so a lot of my advice is geared towards a career in that area, but most of these principles will apply to any paralegal job.

I recommend that you be proactive and that you seek a position out instead of passively watching the classifieds for job postings and responding to those. One suggestion would be to get a copy of the Utah Business Magazine, which annually publishes a list of the largest law firms in the State of Utah, and work your way through the list. The list is based off of number of attorneys as opposed to revenue, etc. Go online, make some telephone calls, and get email addresses for the key hiring people at these firms.

There are also many smaller, but great firms, that do not appear on this list, but which can be great places to work as well. However, the smaller the firm, the less likely they are to hire a paralegal. Larger firms tend to have more support positions and turnover. Another resource is Martindale Hubble, which lists attorneys and law firms, including by practice area. Once you have a name, email address, and phone number, put a professional cover letter and resume together and start sending them to the key hiring people. You may even want to call and introduce yourself, but if you do be professional and brief.

During the interview process, demonstrate what you have accomplished in the past for organizations for which you have worked. Show that you are comfortable and sure of yourself in high-pressure situations and that you understand that in a

supporting role at a law firm, you may have to work long hours at repetitive tasks. Make sure you research the firm and know what kind of work it does and what kinds of cases with which it has been involved. If you can work your knowledge of the firm into the interview discussion, it will help you stand out from others who have not done this research.

Once you get a position at a law firm, learn everything you can and constantly look for opportunities to expand your skill set. A lot of the skills necessary to be an effective paralegal are learned on the job. Find mentors from whom you can learn. People you can emulate and get ideas from, both within your firm and within the paralegal community. You will find that most paralegals are very gracious and are more than willing to explain what they do, pass along information and advice, and have an interest in your success as a paralegal.

When you have progressed far enough along that you are promoted to a legal assistant or paralegal position, start utilizing all the resources that are available to you. A great place to start is the Paralegal Division of the Utah State Bar (Paralegal Division) and the Utah Paralegal Association (UPA). These are professional organizations that exist to promote the profession and ultimately serve the community.

The Paralegal Division is sponsored by and is a division of the Utah State Bar. You have to be actively employed as a paralegal to be a part of this organization, and you have to complete ten hours annually of continuing legal education or CLE to keep your membership current. It is a great way to refresh your skills and

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learn new ones as well as meet other paralegals. It is also helpful to see what other paralegals are doing at their firms. There are some additional benefits that come along with the membership, and overall it is just a great way to promote the profession. For more information about the Paralegal Division of the Utah State Bar, visit its website at: <http://paralegals.utahbar.org>.

Another professional organization is Utah Paralegal Association, which is a branch of NALA or the National Association of Legal Assistants. These organizations are a conduit for the CLA and CP study courses, exams, and designations. Having these designations may be beneficial in showing potential employers your seriousness about being a paralegal and a professional and may help you get an interview and stand out from the crowd of applicants. Also, these designations may be important when making a job transition, especially out of state. One benefit of UPA is that they accept students who are currently studying to work in the paralegal profession, as opposed to the Paralegal Division, which only accepts actively employed paralegals. For more information about UPA, visit its website at <https://www.utparalegalassn.org/membership>.

In tandem with your position at a firm, pursue a bachelor's degree from a reputable institution. There are some schools that offer programs in legal studies, and these schools have classes that are directly geared towards and relevant to your work as a paralegal. However, I would suggest that you study whatever it is that you really enjoy. English, accounting, or especially computer science are some examples of four-year degrees that would help you directly in a paralegal role. But, there are many other degrees that would be acceptable.

Being a well-rounded person is helpful in the paralegal profession. Many paralegals pursue post-baccalaureate certificates in paralegal studies and if you chose to pursue this route, make sure the program is approved by the American Bar Association. Whatever path you pursue, carefully weigh the educational costs with your expectations about benefits and salary and availability of jobs when you graduate. The attorneys at your firm can give you a good idea of what their educational expectations are for a paralegal.

Alright, now you have the position and the education, what skills are going to help you be a successful paralegal? The most important thing is to be a problem solver. When an attorney gives you an assignment, listen closely, pay attention to the details, take notes, and then see what you can accomplish without going back for additional clarification. If you run into a wall and cannot figure out what to do, it is okay to ask for additional guidance, but always try first to see if you can find a solution. Pull from your

resources, research on the web, and figure it out. If you need more guidance, you may be asked by the attorney what you have already done to solve the problem, and it is important that you can show how you have been working through the process.

Pay attention to the cases and what is going on at your firm. If you are working in litigation, whenever possible read the pleadings. Skim through the depositions if you do not have time to read them in their entirety. Read the hearing and trial transcripts. Review the correspondence that is going back and forth with opposing counsel. A lot of this communication is going to happen via email now, which you will not be privy to, but pay attention to the formal communication.

Know your clients and their business. It will keep you engaged, it will help you to connect to your attorneys and firm, and the clients will appreciate it. One of the biggest complaints about the legal field is unresponsive attorneys. It is a reality that the attorneys you work for will not always be able to return calls and answer emails as quickly as they would like. If the client can call you, and feel confident working with you, that is a particularly valuable asset you can bring to the firm.

Go to hearings when you can. Sit in on client meetings and depositions if you get the chance. Ingrain yourself in the process as much as possible. You will find there are always opportunities to serve.

Create your own niche. If no one is really in charge of ordering transcripts, volunteer for that responsibility. If your firm has a document database, be the in-house expert on how to use it and be ready to train new personnel.

Own projects. Take initiative. If you see a white board that needs to be hung, boxes that need to be taken to the trash, or files that need to be made, do it. As a paralegal you may be required to make copies, answer phones, clean up conference rooms, or do other things that you may think are outside your formal job description. If there is something that needs to be done, or a new process that you can initiate that will help your firm be more effective, do it.

The paralegal profession can provide a great opportunity for an engaging and satisfying career but the landscape of the profession is always changing. To be an effective paralegal you have to have the right attitude, experience, and education as a foundation. From there, effective paralegals are masterful at pulling from resources, constantly seeking to expand knowledge, and are always willing to take on new projects and responsibilities.