



## Profile: Lee Davis, Owner and Manager, Lee Davis & Associates, Inc.

[by Regan Morris]

Lee Davis had been working as a paralegal for almost 10 years when she decided to open her own business in pursuit of more money and more flexibility. LawCrossing speaks with Ms. Davis about Lee Davis & Associates, Inc., and her role as a leader in the paralegal community.

Davis says she took a backward route to becoming a paralegal and an entrepreneur. Like many in the profession, she learned her paralegal skills on the job and then pursued a paralegal education. A good education, she said, is crucial to success in the field.

Davis was taking paralegal courses at Phoenix Community College when she transferred to Arizona State University to earn a Bachelor's degree in Business, thinking that she would eventually pursue a law degree. While at college, she decided to start her own business of contract paralegals. She worked full time in a firm as a litigation paralegal, studied, and ran her business part time at night.

Davis did some of the contract work and hired a friend from the law firm as a contract paralegal in the Phoenix area. Davis procured the clients and handled all the billing.

"And I made a dollar fifty an hour off of her, and I'll never forget at the end of the month when I did the billing. I'd make an extra \$100 or \$150, and I was thrilled," she said. "So that's really how I got started doing it."

By 1989, Davis was working in her business full time and created a network of paralegals willing to freelance on projects for law firms and corporate clients. Business, not law school, seemed like a more promising career for Davis.

"Being a paralegal, there really is only so far you can go. You're not an attorney; you'll

never be an owner of a firm; you'll never participate in profits, and that sort of thing. So while I think it's a very, very good career path, you're limited by the fact that you're a paralegal," she said. "So the only way I could really make the kind of money I wanted to make was to be an entrepreneur and have my own business."

Her business is project-driven, and she generally has between 5 and 15 paralegals working on projects. The firm provides paralegal services, trial consulting, and database creation for large-document cases, organizing the files for electronic storage so attorneys can find the information easily in the future. Davis also trains and sells legal-based software like Summation.

Davis, who worked for three law firms before starting her business, said it's important to have at least a decade of experience under your belt before freelancing. And if networking were an Olympic sport, Davis would be a gold medalist. She's been active in local and national organizations throughout her career, having founded or co-founded several organizations when she saw a gap in the market.

Right now, she is vice president of the American Alliance of Paralegals, Inc. (AAPA), a national, Internet-based organization focused on individual paralegals. She has been an active member of the National Federation of Paralegal Associations (NFPA).

"I sat on the board of directors of NFPA, and

then in 2001—I think it was—I became president of NFPA; so I really soared up through the ranks and worked very hard to get there as I was trying to build my reputation and my resume," Davis said. "We [AAPA] focus on the individual paralegal because we feel there are a lot of paralegals out there who are not served by local associations. Maybe they live in a small town and there isn't one or they live in the country. Or they work such long hours that they don't have time to participate in monthly meetings. So we're Internet-based."

AAPA has high educational standards for memberships and encourages paralegals to earn four-year degrees to raise the profile of the profession.

"While we feel there are many paralegals who are excellent out there who were trained on the job, I am one of them, we also feel it's very, very important for a paralegal to be degreed in order to be taken seriously as a profession," she said. "So we've started a certification program, and it's not some test that you can sit and study for and pass. You actually have to have some credentials in order to be certified by the American Alliance."

The certification program was just started in January, and details of the credential requirements can be found on the website at [www.aapipara.org](http://www.aapipara.org).

While Lee Davis & Associates is based in the Phoenix area, it handles cases in Ohio, Idaho, California, and Hawaii, she said. Davis said



she prefers a hands-on approach and meets personally with most clients at least once, even if another paralegal will be handling the project. That way, she said, if something goes wrong, there is a decision maker from her firm familiar with the case.

Davis said her business allowed her to make more money than she would in a firm while giving her extra time to attend her son's baseball games. Flexibility was the main attraction for starting the business and Davis said she has much more time for her personal life by being her own boss.

When hiring paralegals, Davis said she looks first for a good education and then for experience and computer skills. Too many applicants, she said, sell themselves short when they are just starting out in the profession.

"Take your life experiences into the profession," she said. "If you were a homemaker all your life, there are a lot of skills behind being a homemaker. There's organizational skills, planning, timing, finance, people skills. You bring all of that into this profession, and you find a niche where you can utilize those life skills. So I think that's a good point to be made."

Whether you were a homemaker or a clerk at a department store, Davis said the secret is to recognize and articulate your skills.

"You have skills, and you need to expand on those skills and brag about them a little bit," she said.