



Feature

Freelance Paralegals: A Balancing Act

By Andrew Tan

Handling a career and a family at the same time can be difficult, especially if one is committed to a time-intensive profession such as the legal profession. So how does one with legal career and a family manage?



Because both men and women are expected to work for a living, time for the family is not at all abundant. However, a few individuals in the legal profession are finding ways to make it work. One of those ways is to turn freelance. "I became a freelance when I had kids," says Collette

Calkins, a freelance paralegal who worked for Tharpe & Howell, a law firm in Los Angeles. "It has worked out because I can work when I want to and take care of the kids."

Despite the flexible hours, freelancing is not for everyone. In fact, one of the most difficult aspects of being a freelance is keeping up with deadlines, because no one is physically present to hold you accountable. "You have to have self-discipline but, you also need to have a lot of experience behind you. Otherwise, attorneys will not want to hire you," replied Calkins when asked about the type of qualities one should have before even considering turning freelance. "Sometimes I get an assignment that is due the next day. If it means staying up all night getting it done, I will do it," she said. She also added, "If you love what you are doing, it helps with the motivation and discipline."

When comparing lifestyles between being a full-timer and a freelancer, Calkins mentioned that being a freelance does affect the types of assignments and using tools like e-mail might assist communication. But resources that are used widely by attorneys and paralegals—such as LexisNexis, an online research library—are lacking and could limit the types of assignments given. Furthermore, the treatment of freelance paralegals differs from firm to firm. For example, some firms might require their paralegals to clock in and out; others

might not. Nevertheless, because one will be working on a variety of jobs and must adhere to the standards of multiple employers, flexibility is a skill that one will always need. Therefore, while freelance work might have the freedom to choose one's hours, there are a few considerations that one needs to take into account. "One thing that I didn't have to do while I was a full-timer was spend time on advertising," she says. Because freelance paralegals are moving from job to job frequently, writing letters and placing ads in the papers become parts of the job description. However, word-of-mouth advertising is the best way to find work, because lawyers are sure to know at least one or two colleagues who could use an extra paralegal.

One of the concerns that law firms might have when hiring freelance paralegals is ethics. However, just like full-time paralegals, freelance paralegals are still professionals and therefore must adhere to the code of ethics attendant to the profession. "You have to be ethical in the profession and in the case of a conflict of interest, you just don't take the job," stresses Calkins. "So in cases where I find myself assisting a prosecuting attorney when I had just finished a job with the defense attorney for the same case, I never take the job. Otherwise I undermine my own credibility."

There are many uses for freelance paralegals, and all types of firms can benefit from their use. For smaller law firms, freelance paralegals are cheaper because the firm would only have to pay the hourly rate and not offer benefits. In addition, large law firms can use freelance paralegals to handle any extra tasks. According to the National Federation of Paralegal Associations' (NFPA) website, there are many ways a freelance paralegal might be used. Among these are running a paralegal business, which may or may not do work in various fields of law, or teaching paralegal classes.

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