



Feature

The Case of the “Promotable” Paralegal

By Judith Earley

Are you a “promotable” paralegal? Or are you stuck in what feels like a dead-end situation? If it is the latter, then step up and take charge of your own career. Like it or not, the responsibility for change rests almost entirely on you.



Years ago, a paralegal was “promoted” by receiving increased responsibility and more complex assignments. Today, paralegals can be promoted to positions such as case manager, manager of paralegals, trial specialist, and assistant corporate secretary.

While the “promotable” paralegal is entrusted with bigger and better assignments, those are never given to you. Why? One reason could be that you are not putting forth the effort. If your firm does not have a training program—and many do not—it is up to you to continue your education and expand your skill set. Many paralegals will not take the time to learn more, because either their firms won’t pay for it, or they feel they do not have the time to invest, or both.

If you really cannot financially afford additional formal training, then study and practice on your own. When you feel confident, let your supervisor know that you are ready and willing to work on better assignments—and that you are able to handle them. Keep track of your accomplishments and contributions by putting together a portfolio that shows off your best work and highlights your skills and experience.

The “promotable” paralegal looks the part. There is an old saying: Dress for the job you want, not for the job you have. If you want more responsibility, dress responsibly. Even though you may work in a casual office, present yourself in a manner that inspires confidence in you by those around you. Save your jeans for the weekends!

The “promotable” paralegal is a pleasure to work with. Every office has its share of whiners and complainers. Make sure you are not one of them. Maintain a positive outlook and a can-do attitude even when you don’t feel like it, and make your co-workers feel good about their lot even when they don’t deserve it.

The “promotable” paralegal can move up because there is someone else available to take his or her place. But what if there really is no one behind you to assume your duties? Train someone! Select the most realistic candidate to succeed you and teach him or her everything you know. Do not worry that you are working yourself out of a job; when someone else can pick up for you, you are free to move up. Plus, you are helping to open doors for that person.

“Promotable” paralegals make their own breaks. Pay attention to what is going on in your firm, and evaluate its needs and challenges. If you see an area that is being neglected, create your own opportunity by writing up a new job proposal and description for yourself.

“Promotable” paralegals work for forward-thinking firms. If associates in your firm are performing work that is normally viewed by other firms as paralegal work, tactfully point out to them that clients are being billed too much and may leave to go elsewhere. Increase your value by decreasing their workload.

Though it is difficult, “promotable” paralegals are patient! Many employees, particularly those in their first jobs, don’t remain with one firm long enough to advance. Another paralegal’s resignation could mean a promotion for you, so hang in there!

A “promotable” paralegal is at the right place at the right time. Obviously, this is sometimes beyond your control. And if you already know that the senior partner resents you, your coveted promotion may not be a reality. But what you can do is to place yourself in a situation where you are more likely to succeed. Connect with a firm that has a culture befitting your work style and core values.

Finally, “promotable” paralegals are realistic. While none of us likes to admit this, we do have limitations. Perhaps the position that you seek is actually beyond your best ability.



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Make an honest assessment of your potential, then either make the best of where you are, or set off in a different, more fulfilling direction. More than likely, you have hidden talents that you have not yet tapped.

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