



Do You Have What It Takes to Go Solo?

[By Judith Earley]

At one time or another, most paralegals—indeed, most people—think about going it alone and joining the ranks of the millions of self-employed workers in America. For some, becoming self-employed is a necessity; perhaps your firm has gone through downsizing or you need to be at home for a child or other family member. Others dream of the independence and flexibility that come with being one's own boss. As with any work situation, there are both pluses and minuses to consider before you take that giant leap of faith and launch your own freelance paralegal business.

L. Jane Bourgoin is a freelance paralegal in Evergreen, CO, with more than 30 years of paralegal experience, and she has been freelancing for the last 13. "I would never go back to a 'real' job," said Bourgoin. "I love the freedom, variety, rewards, and challenges that freelancing presents. The potential also exists to make a lot more money as a freelancer than as an employee."

Bourgoin stressed that the decision to go solo is not one to be taken lightly. "One must be willing to work hard, live with uncertainty, and be prepared to network and market all the time," said Bourgoin. "The most important advice I could give to anyone wanting to freelance would be to 1) possess at least five years' experience as a paralegal and 2) have a financial cushion (six months' expenses, minimum—12 months' is better). The financial cushion speaks for itself. The experience is vital. Experience is what you will be selling to a potential client attorney. Law firms are seldom willing to engage anyone on a contract basis who does not know the ropes. More importantly, your first clients will probably be your former employers or people you have met and impressed in the course of your employment."

Dorothy Secol and Peggy Stalford were already experienced legal assistants when they decided that they could succeed working outside of the traditional law office. And *voilà*, Paralegal Services, Inc., was born. "It seems we have been freelance paralegals all of our lives," said Stalford. "Dorothy

and I have been partners for 20 years. We started together July 1, 1986. We were both freelance paralegals before we joined forces, but we knew each other from law firms we worked at prior to working as freelancers."

Stalford continued, "I can tell you that the hardest part of being a freelance paralegal is marketing your services and growing your business. You cannot wait for attorneys to come to you. You must be visible, and your work has to be as close to perfect as possible. You have to be ready to handle what we call 'radiator-burned' files on an emergency basis because, of course, the file has been sitting around on the radiator, and the hearing is tomorrow morning."

"Your reputation for excellence is your best marketing tool," she added. "Your dedication to the profession and your business savvy play a big part, as well. Our biggest challenge has always been to keep pushing ourselves to be better than we were yesterday. We ask a lot of our employees and enjoy watching them grow professionally and personally with us. We belong to community associations, paralegal associations, and our state bar association. We volunteer in the community and constantly support our profession. One also must learn how to juggle a business and home life. We've raised our children and now enjoy our grandchildren and always make time for our husbands. Our reward for all of our hard work is self-satisfaction—a genuine feeling of accomplishment—and our respect and love for each other."

If you are bound and determined to go solo, here are a few resources to help you along the way:

- Visit the U.S. Small Business Administration website (www.sba.gov) for some information on start-up, marketing, and ongoing support for small businesses.
- At Entrepreneur.com (www.entrepreneur.com), you can research information on business start-ups, marketing, and financial management from noted experts.
- Join the National Federation of Paralegal Associations (www.paralegals.org) and chat with other members who are freelancing.
- Pick up a copy of *Paralegal's Guide to Freelancing: How to Start and Manage Your Own Legal Services Business* by Dorothy Secol.

ON THE NET

Paralegal Services USA
www.paralegalservicesusa.com

L. Jane Bourgoin
www.paralegalsfreelance.com/bourgoin,_lj.htm

Paralegal's Guide to Freelancing: How to Start and Manage Your Own Legal Services Business
www.allbookstores.com/book/0471152692/Dorothy_Secol/Paralegal's_Guide_To_Freelancing.html