



Paralegal Patty Dietz-Selke Practices Patience

[By Robin Salisian]

While patience is a virtue, it's also a necessary trait for working in immigration law, at least according to Patty Dietz-Selke, a paralegal in Troutman Sanders's immigration department.

In fact, "patience," says Dietz-Selke, choosing this quality from a long list, "is probably the most crucial."

"A paralegal will need patience to (a) handle the constant calls from the foreign nationals checking on their petitions, (b) explain the immigration procedures, forms, and fees to HR managers, who delve very little, if ever, into this area of law, and (c) handle the bureaucracies and massive paperwork of the [Department of State] DOS, the [Department of Labor] DOL, the [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services] USCIS, etc., that change laws and procedures so regularly that it seldom makes the news."

In 1982 Dietz-Selke graduated from the University of West Florida with a B.A. in International Studies and a minor in management. A year later, she obtained a paralegal certificate. And in 1997 Dietz-Selke began a 10-year teaching stint for several Atlanta-based and online paralegal programs, teaching courses such as Introduction to the Paralegal Profession, Introduction to Westlaw, Fundamentals of Immigration Law, and Paralegal Ethics as well as job search-skills and resume-writing workshops, an unauthorized practice of law seminar, and an immigration law fundamentals seminar.

Dietz-Selke also served as a court-appointed special advocate (CASA) for abused and neglected children from 1993 to 1998 as well as on the board of directors for the Georgia Association of Paralegals in roles including

pro bono director, job referral director, and vice president.

"Immigration law is not only a fascinating area of law but also quite a hot topic since 9/11 and with recent developments," says Dietz-Selke. "These days, I get frequent inquiries from paralegals who are either interested in entering this specialty area of law or who have questions on aspects of immigration law that have touched their particular casework or assignment."

Immigration law is both detailed and technical and "like other administrative law fields...is procedural, form- and document-driven or oriented." In other words, it is "notoriously complex."

"One of the main duties of an immigration law paralegal is to function as a liaison between the attorney, the client, and the various governmental agencies, such as Immigration, the Department of Labor, the Department of State, and others," she continues.

"Additionally, an immigration paralegal drafts applications and petitions for filing and coordinates the filing of those applications and petitions, drafts letters and affidavits to support applications and petitions, obtains and organizes documents and researches availability of foreign documents, coordinates translations and equivalency evaluations of foreign documents and degrees, researches immigrant and non-immigrant visa alternatives, and prepares clients for interviews."

As a paralegal one must—it seems—don many hats. Thankfully, Dietz-Selke thrives on this.

"Variety is the spice of life," she says, so she loves the various personalities, nationalities, complexities, and intricacies that are part of her job. She also relishes change and enjoys the "frequent client contact and high level of independence or autonomy of [her] job."

Today, Dietz-Selke works for the immigration department at Troutman Sanders, LLP, in Atlanta, Georgia, a law firm that "focuses on all aspects of business immigration law."

"We assist with the transfer of international business personnel for U.S. and foreign companies, the defense of corporations charged with employer sanction violations, training of HR personnel, the acquisition of work visas, labor certification, permanent resident status, and citizenship in the United States, as well as the representation of corporate clients and individuals before various administrative agencies and in the federal courts," says the firm's website.

Typically, Dietz-Selke works 45 hours a week, plus overtime, which isn't unusual for her.

"The work is fast-paced, varied, and at times quite hectic," she says. "Many a day will pass during which sudden emergencies or higher priorities appear and supersede all other plans or priorities. By the end of those types of days, I usually have completed tons of



work but absolutely none of the items which I had planned to accomplish. This is where patience, multitasking, and flexibility [are] really...key."

What other factors play key roles in managing such a hectic job? Dietz-Selke offers further advice:

"The keys to being an efficient and effective immigration paralegal are sound organizational skills, skillful time

management, good follow-through, follow-up, and the creation of work systems and checklists. Master lists of information and documents needed for each type of petition or application; templates for various types of cover letters, correspondence, notifications, etc.; a calendaring system to mark approaching deadlines, follow-up dates, and overdue approvals or responses; [and] a personal library of reference material, books, and resources are all vital in successfully executing the job duties."

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