



Feature

Career Tips for Paralegals and Other Legal Staff

By Allyson Parks

With the economy down, legal staff turnover is expected to decrease, and in this highly competitive atmosphere, it is more important than ever for paralegals and other support staff to set themselves apart in finding jobs and strengthening them once they are secured.



According to a recent article on LegalWeek.com, a survey on the website found that almost two-thirds of respondents think the present commercial market will cause staff turnover to drop. Respondents projected

performance evaluations to become more demanding, with the implementation of a Darwinian approach to eliminate the weakest staff members. However, the current predicament of American markets along with the abundance of material on the Internet should allow the fields of intellectual property, corporate governance, and bankruptcy to see some growth.

Rather than searching through newspaper ads or browsing an endless array of online listings, the website LegalCareerExpo.com suggests such innovative job-seeking steps as attending industry conventions, trade shows, and expositions. These events present a multitude of contacts and are an excellent way to become acquainted with new companies and products as well as learn more about the industry. Call your local chamber of commerce chapter and nearby convention centers to obtain a listing of such upcoming events.

Other methods of job seeking include registering with industry or trade associations, which sponsor networking luncheons and send newsletters containing information about employment opportunities. Volunteering is also a great way to gain experience and is particularly helpful if you are looking for a job in the nonprofit sector.

Attending chamber of commerce functions also provides an opportunity to speak with others about how they got into the industry, and they may direct you to the relevant people in your field. Additionally, you can always research various companies and call individuals for whom you are interested in working and tell them you wish to send them a resume.

To stand out in a crowd of applicants for a paralegal position, the National Federation of Paralegal Associations

website advises that a polished and well-written resume and cover letter are key. Before starting a first draft, you should realistically analyze your skills, look back to previous employment, and evaluate former job responsibilities to see if this new job is suitable.

Employers typically look for resumes which are extremely clear, concise, and not more than two pages long, with descriptions of job duties and when and where the applicant previously worked. Paralegals, legal secretaries, library personnel, and receptionists are assessed largely on analytical, communicative, and organizational skills, so a carefully detailed, meticulously proofread, well-structured resume with job descriptions in reverse chronological order is essential. It should be written in bullet-point form with an emphasis on action verbs (such as "initiated," "communicated," and "enhanced").

A heading in the top right corner of the first page should include your name, address, telephone number, and email address.

Law firm administrators are highly interested in achievements that saved money and time for other employers, and specific numbers and percentages should be given. Your most significant accomplishments should be detailed in the top half of the first page.

For legal support staff, important achievements to reflect upon in a resume include establishing practices that improved customer service or cut costs, garnering awards, training others on office procedures, organizing events and projects, multitasking, using a multiline phone system, and being lauded by customers or clients.

Employers also look for volunteer work, which indicates a readiness to assist others at work. Hobby, age, and family details are of little interest to employers and need not be included on your resume.



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Your cover letter should be personalized, succinct, and focused on the particular position for which you are applying. It is essential to research the company and show how your skills are well suited to its goals.

Your cover letter and resume should be typed and printed on high-quality paper in cream-colored or gray shades, with no more than two different type styles.

Once the interview has been landed, prepare by researching the organization, knowing the names of those with whom you will be interviewing, and refreshing yourself with details about your prior job history and accomplishments.

You should wear formal office attire to the interview, arrive several minutes early, shake the interviewer's hand, and

maintain eye contact and alertness throughout the interview. You should look interested, listen well, and prepare a few questions of your own to ask the interviewer.

Once you have secured your job, it is vital to work toward strengthening your position. Becoming technologically savvy is essential as there is currently a new wave of outsourcing in the legal field in the emergence of virtual assistants, independent legal and paralegal administrative entrepreneurs who work offsite assisting with completing legal tasks, research, office tasks, and billing invoices.

Taking on additional responsibilities, developing new skills, asking for feedback, networking, and seeking out a mentor who has mastered the same field are essential ways to get ahead at your current job.

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