



Feature

Starting a Career as a Paralegal

A paralegal is someone who has some form of legal training or knowledge but works under the supervision of a lawyer. Because paralegals essentially function as highly skilled assistants to attorneys, paralegal jobs are available wherever there are lawyers, whether the field is, for example, criminal law, real estate law, environmental law, or estate planning. Paralegals provide valuable assistance to lawyers preparing for trials, hearings, or contract negotiations. They also draft contracts, mortgages, separation agreements, and trust instruments, and may help in the preparation of tax returns, investigating cases, and locating witnesses.



Some other roles for paralegals include helping to prepare legal documents, drafting motions, obtaining affidavits, and organizing case files. Indeed, you can see that there is a very wide range

of tasks that paralegals perform, so if you want to work as a paralegal, you need to be flexible and able to pick up new techniques quickly. It's also critical that you be able to work under pressure from time constraints.

In order to become a paralegal, you can take many paths. For example, you may have little or no education, just on-the-job experience, but this can be just as valuable within the profession as somebody who has a master's degree in another subject. Some of the minimum requirements/skills a paralegal career requires are successful completion of the Certified Legal Assistant (CLA) exam or graduation from a course for legal assistants. A bachelor's degree does not necessarily mean that you can automatically work in the field; such a degree needs to be approved by the ABA (American Bar Association).

A paralegal does not have to be licensed; instead, paralegals tend to be "registered" or "certified," which is voluntary in most states. The National Association of Legal Assistants (NALA) and the National Federation of Paralegal Associations (NFPA) offer the two-day exam that aspiring paralegals must pass to earn the CLA credential. This credential is not essential, but it is highly recommended as it could help you a lot in your paralegal career.

Some of the more traditional approaches to becoming a paralegal include gaining an associate's degree, a bachelor's degree, or a master's degree. An associate degree can be achieved by spending two years in college. The courses involved are generally half paralegal courses and half general

education. A bachelor's degree typically requires four years at a university. Finally, some colleges and universities that offer paralegal degree programs at the undergraduate level are also offering a master's degree in the field.



You can have a paralegal anywhere that law is practiced; anywhere that a lawyer works, you can work. You can't be a "solo practitioner," however, as you need to be supervised by an attorney, and it is important that before you start you make sure you decide which area of law is most appealing to you because you need to focus your attention on that area.

A lawyer employs paralegals to make his or her job easier, not harder, so you need to be the kind of person who can get a task done with minimal fuss. In the uncertain economic times that we are going through currently, many law firms are trying to streamline their expenditures, so if anything they are hiring more paralegals than lawyers.

A paralegal job pays very well. The average paralegal in America earns \$47,600 per year, and if you are in the government, that figure is more like \$53,000. If you are lucky enough to get into a larger law firm, then you may even earn up to \$100,000 per year.

The key to a paralegal career is to be sure that you want to do it. If it's something you really want to do, then it's definitely worth getting some form of paralegal education as this will automatically put you ahead of most other people. And again, make sure you decide which area you want to focus on and stick to it, whether it be real estate or criminal law. The legal sector is expected to grow by 33% within the next decade, so there are more opportunities for aspiring paralegals than ever.

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