

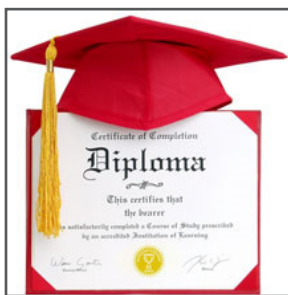


Feature

Legal Staff Smarten Up: The Rising Need for Education Among Paralegals and Legal Assistants

By Ursula Furi-Perry

For paralegals and legal assistants, education is increasingly important. The reason? More than ever, human resources managers and firm business managers scrutinize candidates' education as much as their experience.



Indeed, even the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) acknowledges the trend for more legal education. While in its 2004 National Compensation Survey the BLS cited paralegals as one of the fastest-growing occupations that don't require a high school diploma, in a more recent survey, the Department names paralegals as the 17th

fastest-growing profession that needs an associate's degree or other training. (see *America's Career Infonet, Fastest Growing Occupations Requiring Post-Secondary Training or an Associates Degree*, www.acinet.org)

"Unless I'm looking at someone with 10 to 15 years of experience, I'm looking for a minimum of a two-year paralegal degree and moving even towards a four-year degree," said Mariel Piilola, Human Resources Director at Larkin, Hoffman, Daly & Lindgren, LTD, in Minnesota. "Top-quality law firms, particularly larger ones, are looking for a four-year degree," agreed Cheryl Leone, CEO of Catalyst Group, a national professional practice development company in Raleigh and previously general manager for two large firms. "If two candidates are otherwise equal, the one with the degree will get the job."

The blurring of the lines between paralegals, legal assistants, and legal secretaries contributes to the need for education. "Having additional education is a way to distinguish between positions," said Ms. Piilola. A firm's educational requirements may vary by title, often leading to higher compensation and other perks for better-educated employees. "If you want to move up the ladder, you'll have to have the degree," stated Ms. Leone. "Once in a law firm, the track of progression is faster the more education you have."

"The thing that's also becoming more important, particularly in the law, is needing someone who can hit the ground running," Ms. Piilola said. "Education gives a background in terminology, procedure, and law office management, which is important for someone at [an] entry-level stage." That background can come from paralegal degrees or other law-related programs, but often, a four-year degree in many other courses of study will also do the trick. "College rounds you out and gives you life experiences," stated Ms. Leone, citing more advanced people skills and confidence in professional settings as just some of the benefits to college-educated candidates.

For candidates with liberal arts or other degrees, human resources professionals recommend some actual coursework or training in the law before entering the field. For example, a six-to-twelve-week paralegal certificate program can teach the necessary terms and applications. When coupled with a college degree, these certificates can offer enough background to render the candidate successful in the applications process. They may also help students determine whether the field is right for them. "If you don't know if you want to [enter the field,] take a course and try to get a job in a law firm doing anything. Then turn around and get your education," Ms. Leone recommended. Standing alone, a short certificate course in legal studies may or may not be enough, depending on the candidate's work experience and the firm's preferences.

Besides key terms and procedural considerations, legal staff are increasingly held responsible for their technical knowledge and skills. "The amount of technology used is starting to explode...and people have to learn it," Ms. Piilola said, citing litigation databases as one example of technological boom in the legal field. Technical education courses and refreshers can benefit even the most savvy paralegals and legal assistants.

In fact, education doesn't stop on a paralegal's date of hire. "We encourage people to participate in paralegal associations



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and attend continuing legal education courses," Ms. Piilola said. "Often, these courses may be designed for attorneys, but important for paralegals as well, especially when you get into a specific area of the law." Good law firms continue to

encourage education for all of their employees. "Employers are impressed with people who take the initiative to take classes," said Ms. Leone.

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