In some firms, the problem lies in misunderstanding the role of each employee. “I would think that in many cases, there’s a lack of understanding [of] how a paralegal can be utilized,” explained Gary Melhuish, president of the International Paralegal Management Association. Law schools don’t teach future attorneys how to work with legal staff, and attorneys often aren’t familiar with non-attorney legal staff’s responsibilities. “First of all, they’re not trained to supervise, and they aren’t explained the roles they’re supposed to supervise,” Melhuish said. As a result, legal staff may end up with too much work and feel burned out. Conversely, an attorney may give a paralegal projects that are too undemanding, causing boredom and complaints of under-utilization.

Other conflicts may arise from feelings of alienation and lack of respect. Melhuish speaks of an "us versus them" mentality in many law firms, whereby a firm classifies people as attorneys and non-attorneys. “One of the partners that hired me told me I was like a ‘male nurse,’ being a paralegal, as if there is something inferior about it,” Root said. Depending on the culture and values of the firm, the differences in how various “classes” of employees are treated may be inevitable, said Martha Russell, career counselor at Russell Career Service and president-elect of the National Career Development Association. “If the firm values [the education and job titles of its employees,] no matter what you do, you’ll come across a hurdle if you don’t fall into that value,” Russell said.

Most frequently, though, the issue simply boils down to the obvious. “A lot of it deals with communication and whether the attorney expects that the paralegal already understands more than they may,” said Melhuish. “Communication includes the language being used, listening skills…and the pacing of our communications,” said Russell, explaining that employees not only need to know how to talk with their supervisors, but must also understand when it’s the right time to do so.

Consider the following tips for improving attorney-legal staff relationships:

- **Identify existing and potential problems.** Understand that some people take work-relationship issues to heart, while for others, addressing those issues may not be worth the emotional and physical stress. Russell recommends a method she calls “caring to confront,” “figuring out if you care enough to confront the issue,” she explained.

- **Set your own goals and limits.** “The best way to improve paralegal-attorney relationships is to set and understand boundaries concerning time, money, and personal lives,” Root believes. “This is not to say they have to be restrictive; they just have to be understood.” Figure out reasonable requests for what you aim to get out of your relationship with attorneys, and communicate them.

- **Speak up.** It’s crucial to provide feedback on aspects of your working relationship that are not working. For example, if over-utilization is the problem, “you need to sit down and discuss priorities, so that the attorney sees that you’re interested in doing the work, but that the volume is the problem,” recommended Melhuish. Be sure to communicate with the attorney during non-stressful periods, when conversations are less rushed and less likely to turn hostile.

- **Show aptitude and initiative.** Attorneys respect knowledge and skill from anyone. Melhuish pointed out, “It’s all about showing interest and learning, so that when issues come up, you’re knowledgeable to discuss them.” Also, “share two or three steps you took during a project...so the attorney has a clear understanding of the process you use and what your skills are,” Russell stated.
Feature

- **Aim for mutual respect.** "Sometimes, individuals need to make sure they’re giving the respect they’re asking for," said Russell. "People need to feel valued in their jobs," whether they are attorneys or legal staff, Russell advised. Recognize your role in the link. "In the relationship between paralegal and attorney, there are two players, and both players have an equal amount of responsibility in making that relationship work," said Russell.

- **Know when to change.** When all else fails, "transfer or get a new job," Melhuish advised. For example, if the problem is a severe personality conflict, or if the steps you’ve taken to rectify the issue just aren’t working, a new position may be the best solution. "You can’t change an attorney’s personality," said Melhuish. "If it’s something you can’t work with, then you have to take drastic steps."

---

**EmploymentCrossing is the largest collection of active jobs in the world.**

We continuously monitor the hiring needs of more than 250,000 employers, including virtually every corporation and organization in the United States. We do not charge employers to post their jobs and we aggressively contact and investigate thousands of employers each day to learn of new positions. No one works harder than EmploymentCrossing.

Let EmploymentCrossing go to work for you.