Using Knowledge of Expected Paralegal Job Competencies to Succeed

Any paralegal in the information age needs to have a portfolio of job competencies that makes him/her stand out, be regarded as essential, or be perceived as a better candidate for retention or promotion. Paralegals are no exception, and they need to continually hone and develop skills, which make them stand out as better candidates than others. This article deals with a positive strategy to do that.

While one might say that sticking to a paralegal’s present competencies is sufficient for future security, it is not so. Also the term paralegal, or the **job of a paralegal**, despite textbook definitions provided by different associations, continues to be viewed differently in different workplaces. So, what one workplace may expect as the set of job competencies from a paralegal may not exactly match the expectations in another workplace, though the core competencies would remain the same.

In a salary survey published in *Legal Assistant Today*, 21(4), 56-68, titled “Half empty or half full? (2004, March/April) Hughes, R. observes:

“It's not just the attorneys who are confused about the role of paralegals. Those in the profession still grapple with the definition and distinction between the terms ‘paralegal’ and ‘legal assistant’. . . . Those both inside and outside the profession have moved toward the terms that make the most sense to them. As a result, some firms use their own definition of paralegal and legal assistant …”

Though the situation is slightly better in in-house legal departments, where paralegals would rarely be asked to do payroll work, in a small law firm, paralegals are often required to do the job of legal secretaries and the lines between the two professions are quite blurred. While with greater awareness, almost everyone seems to recognize that job competencies of paralegals include legal research or writing skills, only one in three attorneys ever utilize those skills from paralegals, but almost everyone expect a paralegal to be a legal secretary.

In face of such a situation, trying to assert any kinds of rights or boundaries in job competencies and expectations is a futile exercise, and for better or for worse, paralegals must improve those job competencies which they themselves may not see as part of their portfolios, but others may see them as such.

**Job competencies held by paralegals as of highest importance**

In a recent research done on relevant issues by Lois Inez Cox under the blessings of Auburn University, the following job competencies were marked to be essential and of highest importance in the given order of
importance by paralegals:

Possessing high ethical standards; possessing effective grammar, spelling and punctuation skills; upgrading skills with technology changes; composing letters and memoranda; working well as a team member; keyboarding with accuracy; organizing and maintain a filing system; possessing a comprehensive legal vocabulary; possessing effective speaking skills; using word processing software; maintaining a professional appearance; keyboarding documents.

In a law firm environment, the findings do seem surprising, as many would believe that “maintaining a professional appearance might be of highest importance, and certainly not less important than “working well as a team member.” The point I want to make here is by knowing how paralegals generally view common job competencies in their order of priority, you can stand out by tweaking that order of priority in your personal workflow.

Since, ordinarily, paralegals view maintaining a professional appearance or keyboarding documents as to be job competencies of lower priority, a paralegal who maintains professional appearance at all times, or is extremely competent in keyboarding documents, would be easily able to differentiate himself from competitors.

Job competencies paralegals view as insignificant, but recognize they may fall in their line of work

Further, it is important to know what paralegals generally view as job competencies, which are of little significance to their career, or something they can do without. Working to strengthen such competencies can allow you to become a more reliable part of a team than other paralegals mired in traditional attitudes.

So, from the same survey that I quoted before, job competencies that paralegals are aware might help them, but they view as of little or no significance include in the given order of priority:

Possessing a comprehensive medical vocabulary; using financial/accounting software; ability to select office equipment (not computers); ability to select software or hardware for purchase; using desktop publishing software; installing computer software; prepare payroll records; possess bilingual skills; design or maintain a web site; using voice recognition software.

Gaining those competencies, which often fall in the line of work, and which, in different environments, people can expect paralegals to perform, can increase the chances of success and greater career resilience. A paralegal, who besides being competent in core job competencies (which the next paralegal is also expected to be equally versed in), would stand out, if he/she also has high competencies in unwatched areas like using voice recognition software.