Paralegal: Stepping Stone to Other Careers

As you begin your career as a paralegal, you will probably not be interested in seeing how your training can prepare you for jobs and careers outside the legal field. Sometime later, however, you might find such information useful. It is very helpful therefore, to consider these options as your career progresses, even from the beginning. For you will realize that your education and training as a paralegal may well serve as a stepping stone to other areas that may be of interest to you.

We will discuss what it takes to become a successful paralegal. Many of the qualifications listed are the same ones necessary for success in several other fields or professions. With the professional training of a paralegal, you may wish to explore some of these fields once you gain some experience.

Many of you may have trained in other fields before becoming a paralegal. In fact, one of the problems many people face as they begin this career is how to explain what might be a radical career change to a potential employer. If you can learn how to build on your skills developed in another field and relate these skills to your paralegal training, then you will benefit from the broad range of your talents and experiences, rather than be at a disadvantage.

Eventually, you may find that you can use this combination of skills and training if you wish to move on to another field. Consider the following examples:

1. Depending upon your specific interests and talents, you can make many moves within the paralegal profession, as well as outside of it.
2. Management skills could enable you to become a paralegal coordinator, one who trains and supervises other paralegals within an organization. The best route to this position is to demonstrate your capabilities, and you can do this only within the organization itself.
3. Office management is another area in which you can use your management supervisory skills, if you have them. This could be within a legal firm, or once you have gained experience, you may find that many offices need good management, outside as well as inside the legal profession.
4. Administration within a legal firm is also based on strong skills in working with personnel of many departments. An administrative director of a law firm is usually responsible for every non-legal aspect of the firm’s operation, including accounting, personnel, and purchasing. Remember that such a position is not a paralegal position, although your paralegal background will be helpful. It is a step onto a different career track, however.

This person usually reports to a senior officer. It is a highly responsible and demanding position. The combination of paralegal skills and other administrative skills could lead to a rewarding and challenging position.

Within large and small, nonprofit and corporate environments, paralegals have many opportunities open to them. Even if you decide that you do not wish to pursue any of these options at this stage of your career, knowing about them will help you to focus on where you might want to be five or ten years in the future. By
thinking of your long-term goals, you can develop skills along the way that will enable you to achieve your goals.

Here are some opportunities you might want to consider:

1. Computer center specialist or manager: Computer literacy training, in addition to specialized or generalist paralegal training could make you a suitable candidate for a position as a computer center manager. While duties may vary, they would include working with information systems, electronic data banks, and word processing. In today's job market, you will need computer skills to work as a paralegal. This could be a very satisfying career alternative for anyone interested in working in the computer field.

2. Law librarian: Law firms usually hire law librarians to handle their periodical collections, as well as law books and manuals. Although those with library training fill many of these law positions, frequently a paralegal with a good academic background can be trained to fill this position. Complete training is provided to occupy this position as law librarian for various activities.

3. Social service agent: This area is extremely appropriate for anyone interested in the social welfare system, the criminal justice system, or immigration services, just to name a few. Many positions offered are not listed as paralegal positions, but a review of the job description and responsibilities reveals that employees are essentially doing paralegal work, in addition to other duties. For example, a position within a social service organization that assists immigrants may be listed as "Immigrant Specialist." That person may serve as an advocate for immigrants in court and may have great deal of interaction with clients but, for the most part, the skills required for this position are those required to be a paralegal. Many social service agencies have such positions. It is important, therefore, to read the job description and qualifications necessary, if you are interested in moving into this field.

4. Educator: Teacher, program administrator, consultant, education coordinator for continuing legal education are examples of areas open to paralegals in the field of education. Check with local universities, colleges, and community colleges for requirements. Many schools are interested in hiring part-time faculty to teach an occasional course. This could be an opportunity for you to see if you would like to work in the academic world.

5. Banking specialist: In addition to work as a paralegal in a bank, other opportunities exist, particularly with the new and changing regulations for foreign as well as domestic banking. If you are interested in working in this environment, your best path would be to begin working as a paralegal to discover options that exist and develop a network to help you find out about openings as they occur.