Paralegal Job Interview Guide: Paralegal Job Interview Questions and Answers

This article goes into detail on the dos and don’ts of paralegal job interviews. By following this guide, you will increase your chances of landing a paralegal job.

That leads us to the basic negotiation going on in the interview. The question is, from the interviewer, “Why should I hire you?” And the answer from the interviewee must be, “Because I am the best person for the job.”

If you keep this basic question in mind, then all of your answers to questions during the interview will be geared to support your contention that you are the best person for the job.

Keeping that basic point in mind, let’s now examine the steps you can take in developing successful interviewing strategies.

Let’s reiterate what we’ve already said because it bears repeating. For most people, a great part of the fear of being interviewed comes from the fear of the unknown—what is going to happen. And the key to success in interviewing for jobs is the same key you have used for every previous part of your job campaign: preparation.

You may think that an interview may last only thirty minutes to an hour, and so much preparation time could not possibly be warranted. After all, don’t they know everything about you? Not quite. They do not know you. Those interview minutes, from their perspective, are crucial. For this reason, these minutes will be the most important time in your job campaign.

Your interview preparation, therefore, should consist of what you need to find out about the organization, the job for which you are applying, and, if possible, the person who will be interviewing you.

Interview Preparation

The word interview stems from the French word entrevoir, which means to “see each other.” If we take that meaning one step further, we see in a current English dictionary that the word interview literally means “to see each other mutually.” In other words, the scope and purpose of the interview is to find out if the job candidate and potential employer are “right” for each other. On both sides, it’s a risk. So, basically, the
The interviewing process enables both parties to find out about each other, to “see” each other. It’s important to understand this basic point because it emphasizes how and why an applicant should prepare thoroughly for this final step of the job search.

Of all the job search stages, the interview is the single most important step: its goal is the final selling job you must do. And you must learn to do it well. Part of the problem, however, is that many people feel that they have no idea of what they will be asked, and they don’t feel that they can do any preparation.

This article not only dispels that myth; it shows you the steps to take in preparation for a successful interview.

First of all, it is important to recognize that the interview is an anxiety-producing, stress-filled situation. Of course it is. You have put in long hours, hard work, and a great deal of money preparing for the big job interview. And who likes to be rejected?

You must also remember that the interview is often an irrational, subjective process. A partial reason for this is that people don’t realize that although they may seem competent and qualified on paper (the resume and the cover letter), in person they may come across in quite a different way. After all, it’s the person who gets hired. And that is what this article is all about: showing you how to present yourself, or “sell” yourself, if you will, as the best person for the job.

Information on the Organization

Gain as much information as you can on the company or firm. Who are the key executives? How large is the organization? How many employees are there? What is the volume of sales?

Is it a product or a service organization? What is the specialty or specialties? Does the firm hire paralegals? If so, how many? And how long have they been there?

The more you know about your company, the better prepared you will be to see how you fit in. You will also save valuable time during the interview. If you have taken the time and effort to do your homework, you will impress your interviewer as being someone who is truly interested in the job. If you are skillful, you can work this knowledge into a conversation in a very casual way, with appropriate timing. For example, if you are talking about your background or interests, you can make a transition to a comment such as, “I was particularly interested in the position your firm took on the West Chicago case that I read about in The Law Review.” Making such references or transitions from a topic to your own interests or back-ground shows that you have well-developed listening skills, so that you are ready to make connections.

Later in this article we will discuss the importance of listening skills and how to develop them. All this is part of the preparation you must do. And for those who complain that they have no time for such preparation, just think of the return you will get on your investment! The impression you make will enable you to stand out from your competition.

But where will you find this information? There are a number of resources available:

Annual reports

Articles in business and professional journals is Bar Association magazines and newsletters a Dunn and Bradstreet directories a Lexis/Nexis or WESTLAW Moody’s directories

Newspapers (including regional trade papers and local newspapers) and magazines

Placement agencies, if they have arranged the interview B Standard and Poor’s directories

Finally, remember your personal contacts. Do you know anyone who works for the organization or knows someone who does? Professional associations are also a good source of information on companies.

Information on the Job for Which You is Applying

Find out as much as you can about paralegal positions within the organization, using the same resources mentioned above. In addition, the more you can discuss your role as a paralegal and how you can be an asset to the company, the more you will impress your interviewer.

It is also acceptable for you to have questions about the job and the role of the paralegal within the
organization. Would it be possible for you to meet and talk to other paralegals who work there? Intelligent and thoughtful questions will demonstrate your professional interest in the field, as well as the position.

Information on the Interviewer

Find out the exact name of the interviewer, if at all possible, either over the phone when the interview is scheduled or from the receptionist when you come in to the interview. Make certain that you have the correct name and pronunciation. There are instances in which interviewers who have been otherwise impressed by a candidate have ruled out that person because he or she made an error in pronouncing the interviewer’s name.

Any other relevant information about the interviewer may prove very useful to you, if it is available, such as what the interviewer does within the company, or the interviewer’s background. Is the interviewer the person for whom you would be working? Will the interviewer be the person making the final decision concerning the job? The purpose of such information is not to enable you to offer contrived statements but rather, to illustrate that you are sufficiently interested in the position to find out as much as you can about the company and its staff. Listen carefully to what the interviewer is saying so that you can make connections to your own qualifications for the job. Doing so will confirm in the interviewer’s mind that you are person with similar goals and interests who would be compatible, if you do share these interests. In other words, you are getting the interviewer to see you as a person and to like you.

Two final suggestions: Students should not hesitate to ask their teachers or members of the paralegal training staff if they know anything about a firm. Also, when you are called for an interview with a firm that you have not heard of, ask a few questions: What kind of law does this firm practice? How large is it? You needn’t spend an extraordinary amount of time over the phone asking these questions before the interview, but a few basic questions will reveal your interest in the firm and will also give you some idea of the kind of work paralegals do on the job.

Preparing Yourself for the Interview

In preparing yourself for the interview, try to put yourself in the place of the person who will be interviewing you. He or she is interested in finding an employee who can make a contribution to the company, get along with other employees, and promote the image that the company wants to project. In other words, your professional appearance and behavior may single you out and rate you higher than other applicants whose credentials may be as good as yours or even better.

Remember that your qualifications have already been submitted and have been recognized as appropriate for the position, along with those of other applicants. The purpose of the interview is for a potential employer to assess you: to measure your professional attitude about your work, to evaluate your experience and accomplishments as they relate to this particular job, and to determine how effectively you handle yourself in a stressful situation—your interpersonal and verbal communication skills. If these were not essential characteristics to an employer, the resume itself would have gotten you the job!

How to Make a Good First Impression

According to a recent survey, employers are looking for a person with strong organizational skills, competence, reliability, flexibility, and the ability to become part of the team. They want to know how you will fit in.

The fact of the matter is that personal chemistry often sells a candidate. You would do well to focus on some of the following intangible areas in order to make that important first impression as positive as possible.

It is impossible for you to change your personality radically, nor would you want to. You might consider, however, ways in which you can tailor your image to suit a company’s needs. If you feel that your individuality is being threatened by conforming to a company’s dress code, for example, remember that the choice is yours in whether or not to apply for a position within a particular company. Generally speaking, certain traits are desirable in a job applicant. They are part of the packaging that will enable the interviewer to size you up in the first minute or two—the time in which it takes us to form our first impressions. These impressions which, incidentally, are very hard to overcome. Think of your own personal experiences with negative impressions you have formed of certain people, impressions that later proved to be erroneous. This important first impression, therefore, influences all the subsequent impressions—and frequently determines whether or not you are offered the job. What goes into creating this favorable first impression, and how can you work on creating the impression you want to convey?
First of all, let’s eliminate the notion that this discussion is about superficialities or mere externals. That is often the argument for those who disagree with the “first impression” theory. We are talking about presenting a professional package that gives an interviewer an immediate idea of who you are, based on what he or she sees. The interview itself will either support or invalidate this first impression, but why take the chance of having an impression work against you?

**Wardrobe and Grooming**

The first clue to your professionalism is your personal grooming. An interviewer will try to see you in the job. What should you wear? When in doubt, err on the side of being conservative. High-quality clothes rather than trendy outfits are a good investment. You are entering a conservative profession that respects understatement in dress. As a guideline, dress in the style you expect to wear when meeting a client or accompanying an attorney to court.

A suit is recommended garb for women and men. Dark colors are appropriate. For women, neutral colors such as beige, taupe or navy are suggested. This is true for coordinates such as blouses, as well. Colors may be fine as accents, but avoid large flowers or prints that may be distracting. Women should also pay attention to the materials they choose. While cotton and linen may be appropriate on the job, they will become wrinkled after a very short time. On the other hand, polyester does not offer a professional look.

These may seem like such inconsequential details, but they are all related to the impression you give as you walk through the door for that interview. Let your wardrobe be your first introduction before you even open your mouth. If you are still hesitant about what to wear, talk to a friend whose professional taste in clothes you admire. Or you might consult with someone in the professional or career women’s section in a local department store. These consultants have become very popular and can be very helpful. One young woman who was apprehensive about what to wear to an interview stood outside an office and waited until the employees came out for lunch, so she could see what they were wearing!

Whatever you decide, remember that your clothes should not distract from you in any way. Also remember that good grooming entails more than clothes. Women should avoid heavy makeup, perfume, sunglasses, dangling jewelry, bulky handbags, and hats (that you don’t remove). For men, shirts without jackets or ties, and unshined shoes all can build up a negative impression. Do not chew gum during an interview.

**Personal Attributes**

Below is a discussion of the major personal and professional traits that interviewers have identified as positive qualities. Effective listening skills and appropriate body language are important and are therefore the main topics of the discussion. Other important traits are also listed.

**Effective Listening Skills**

1. Make eye contact with the interviewer, but do not stare. Pay attention to what is being said.
2. Avoid interrupting, even if what you have to say is directly related to a comment being made. Do not dominate the conversation in an effort to impress the interviewer with your knowledge.
3. Do not jump in immediately with your comments, particularly if the interviewer is not yet finished speaking. Do not override the interviewer’s comments.
4. Answer the question being asked. If you do not know the answer, don’t try to impress the interviewer by bluffing. On the other hand, do not answer a question that has not been asked. If you are not certain about the best way to answer a question, rather than give a rambling answer, ask that the question be qualified. For example, if the interviewer says “Tell me something about yourself,” respond with “Would you like to hear something about my personal background or work history?”
5. Avoid making confrontational remarks if you do not agree with a statement made by the interviewer.
6. Do not try to fill up short silences with needless talking. On the other hand, learn to use silence as a transition to saying something you would like the interviewer to know about you.
7. If you are not certain what the question was, rephrase what you think you have heard, to make certain that your perception is accurate. This is an important skill to develop, particularly if you feel that a comment or question has put you on the defensive.

**Positive Body Language**

Without opening your mouth, you convey messages and attitudes by how you sit, stand, use your hands. Be sure the message is a positive one and works for you. Here are some tips for doing this:
1. Remain standing as long as the interviewer is standing.
2. When you sit down, avoid slouching.
3. Do not put your arms on the interviewer’s desk. On the other hand, leaning slightly forward in your chair indicates interest.

1. Avoid crossing your arms or assuming any confrontational poses. Crossed arms, fidgeting, and crossed legs create a “closed” appearance, despite your positive verbal communication.
2. Do not gesture during the conversation or make emphatic hand movements.
3. Do not cover your mouth when you speak.

1. Avoid gazing off when you answer a question. While you may think this reflects serious thought, it can seem very artificial or even condescending. And although you should not stare, it is appropriate for you to make frequent eye contact with your interviewer.
2. Men should keep their hands out of their pockets when speaking.
3. Women should avoid twisting their hair or making any other distracting movements.

Other Important Personal Traits

Here are some other positive traits that interviewers have identified:

- Verbal communication with: good diction, proper grammar, and no slang
- Enthusiasm and energy
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Imagination, creativity, and resourcefulness
- Positive attitude
- Honesty
- Sincerity
- Persuasiveness
- Poise
- Logical and well-organized thinking

As you review this list, you will notice that a person’s professional competence is not included. What that indicates is that it is a given that you are a good worker and that you are qualified. Your resume should attest to this, and you should be able to convince the interviewer of it. The traits listed above are those personal and professional characteristics that will determine whether you fit in, whether you are the right person for the job, and therefore, whether you should be offered the job. These are traits that all employers value highly. Some of them you will develop with experience; if you identify any of these areas as your own personal weaknesses, you can take steps to turn them into positive qualities. But you must begin with an honest self-evaluation and then move into directions you can take to improve yourself. Once you develop these qualities your level of self-confidence will soar—and employers can spot that quality immediately.

One interviewer summed it up by saying that he looks for “presence” in a job candidate, an indication that the applicant understands what the job entails and is confident that he or she is the best person to do it.

You might say that during an interview lasting one-half to an hour, no one could possibly detect all of the above qualities and others as well. But you would be surprised at how many of these qualities quickly come to the surface in a brief interchange of ideas. And remember that an interviewer is looking for those particular qualities. How you look and what you say may not be the only index to your personality and your qualifications, but this is the only opportunity your interviewer has to find out about you.

The intangible qualities of sincerity, poise, alertness, and thoughtfulness cannot easily be analyzed. It is usually a combination of elements such as posture, reaction, and attitude in general that creates a personal dynamic or chemistry that will sell you as an applicant.

No one wants to hire a negative, pessimistic person, no matter how impressive his or her credentials. On the other hand, you harm yourself if you try to develop an unnatural or flamboyant personality. What you must do is recognize your own style, try to eliminate your personal weaknesses, and develop your unique strengths. It all comes down to learning how to be confident in yourself and developing the skills to convey this confidence.

Here are some tips for a successful interview:

1. Develop a good, firm handshake.
2. Avoid stammering. It is far better to indicate that you would like to think about the answer to a question if
you do not know it.
3. Observe your interviewer’s interests and background. You may want to use some of this information in your follow-up letter.
4. Listen. Try to find out what happened to the last person in this position; this can be an indication of how rapid the turnover is, unless it is a new position. Find out about the company’s method of handling finances, budgetary policies, and any other details that pertain to the job you want.
5. Have questions prepared to fill in gaps of long silence. Later in this article is a list of questions you could have on hand. It is perfectly acceptable to come prepared with a small notebook in which you have written your questions or in which you might jot down questions during the interview. Use good judgment, and avoid being conspicuous if you do this.
6. Interest and enthusiasm are important, but no matter how much you may want the job, it is usually unwise to accept any offer, no matter how attractive it looks, on the spur of the moment. An employer will not rescind the offer if you request some time (a few days or a week, at the most) to think about it. That will give you time to come up with any questions you may have.
7. On the other hand, do not hesitate to ask, at the end of the interview, what time limit they have set on making their decision for hiring.

1. Finally, it is a good idea to scout out the location of the interview, including where to park, and travel time, if you are not familiar with the area. Do this before the day of the interview. Doing so will lower your stress level before the actual interview.

Here are some things you will want to take with you when you go to an interview:

1. Take a leather portfolio or briefcase, similar to one you will actually be using on the job. Make certain it is leather, even if you have to borrow it from a friend.
2. Take a professional-quality pen that works. Try it before the interview.
3. Take a notepad for jotting down notes during the interview. You may also have a list of your own questions on this pad.
4. Take extra copies of your resume that are printed, not photocopied. Five or six copies are sufficient.
5. Take a list of your references, with addresses and telephone numbers. The paper should match your resume.
6. Take a sheet with all the dates of employment, with specific salaries. You may not need this sheet, but it could be useful in negotiating your salary.
7. Take writing samples, articles you have written or co-written (or articles that mention you). Sample briefs from your paralegal training courses are also useful.
8. Take money for parking and change for phone calls.
9. Some women have carried extra pantyhose, to avoid embarrassment if they snag or run their hosiery. While such precautions may seem excessive, remember that the more you prepare for your interview, in ways that you can prepare, the less anxiety you will have.

Here are some things to avoid in an interview:

1. Do not arrive late. Even if the location is a new one to you, if you plan your route and schedule your time beforehand, you should not have a problem. If the interview is around rush hour and you are driving, you can plan accordingly if you know where you are going. If you are using public transportation, keep in mind that trains and buses are frequently late. That should not be an excuse for you to be late. Give yourself enough time. Plan to be ten to fifteen minutes early. Arriving any earlier can make you appear overly anxious. You can always walk around the block or wait in a building lobby if you are too early.

Leave your outerwear in the outer office. There is usually a closet or coat rack for this purpose.

1. Never apologize for your lack of experience or credentials, or anything you may perceive as a liability. Remember that someone thought you were qualified for this position; otherwise, you would not have been called in for an interview.
2. Do not chew gum or eat mints. Do not bring in coffee, juice, or any other type of container.
3. Do not smoke.
4. Avoid negative comments about a past employer, colleague, or organization. Avoid discussions of a personal or potentially volatile nature, such as those regarding race, politics, religion, or feminist issues.
5. Do not lose your temper. If you do not agree with the interviewer’s point of view, and even if you are asked an illegal question, remain calm. Remember that you are under no obligation to accept the job or work for this organization. You want to leave the interviewer with the best impression of you by being professional in your demeanor.
6. Do not sermonize or overpower the conversation in an effort to sell yourself. The line between being
confident and arrogant is frequently a fine one. If you oversell yourself in an effort to appear confident, you may lose the job. This is where practicing before the interview can be useful. A friend’s appraisal of your performance may help you to set the right tone in answering questions, particularly difficult ones.

7. Although you want to project self-confidence, be careful about sounding too cocky. Be realistic about your talents and qualifications, but remember that a touch of modesty helps.

8. Be courteous but not effusive or insincere.

9. Do not call the interviewer by his or her first name, no matter how friendly he or she may appear. On the other hand, avoid using “sir” or “ma’am,” because such forms of address make you sound inappropriately subordinate to the interviewer.

10. Do not wear sunglasses. Make eye contact with your interviewer.

11. Do not tap on the desk, jingle change, or display any other nervous mannerisms. If you are unaware of your nervous gestures, ask a friend to alert you to them. Once you are aware of them try to avoid them.

12. Do not look at your watch. Let the interviewer set the pace of the interview. Be alert to the interviewer’s actions. When he or she gets up, that is a cue that the interview is over.

13. Do not ask, “Will I get the job?” or “Can I have the job?” Rather, state, “I hope that you will consider me for this position. I really am interested.”

Now that you have some idea of what employers are looking for, let’s examine the actual interview and what goes on.

The Interview

Arriving for the Interview

You should arrive approximately fifteen minutes early. The receptionist may hand you an application form to complete. In some firms, the interviewer may be notified of your arrival immediately. This means that you are being observed, in terms of your efficiency in handling a routine form. Therefore, you will be at an advantage if you simply complete the basic items: name, address, telephone number, social security number, date, and position for which you are applying. In the section entitled work experience or work history, attach a copy of your resume that you have brought and write, “See Resume.” You do not need to complete the section requesting your salary requirements. Print all information legibly with a professional pen that you have already used and know works properly. Do not use a pencil.

If you are asked to wait, use the time to observe your surroundings rather than become engrossed in reading materials. You may also want to review another copy of your resume that you have brought along.

If you are detained for any length of time, it is reasonable for you to ask the receptionist if you understood correctly the time you were scheduled to come, particularly if you have scheduled another interview for the same day. This can be a courteous request; the manner of your question should assure this.

Beginning the Interview

The interviewer ushers you into his or her office, and you both try to establish some rapport. Sometimes this can be as casual as commenting on a recent major event such as the weather, sports or other areas of small talk. Some cautions: Do not use this opening phase as a time to criticize or complain about anything such as faulty directions given you, the difficult commute, heavy traffic, or anything else that would mark you as a complainer. Use caution also in any compliments you may feel obligated to offer. Avoid personal comments on photographs, unless they arise naturally from the conversation (for example, you are discussing a sporting event and the interviewer has a photograph displaying a trophy). Anything personal may be totally inappropriate, so follow the lead of the interviewer in this opening phase.

Questions You May Be Asked during the Interview

Remember that you have already begun the interview, so let the interviewer set the pace and begin the serious questioning. Below is a list of questions you may be asked, so be prepared to answer them. As you review this list, you will notice that some of these questions are broad and general. It is your job to answer them as specifically as you can, relating your answers to the position for which you are being interviewed.
The questions may be asked in any order. Usually, an interviewer will want to get some background information first. That may not be the case in your situation, however. It is also important to recognize that not all interviewers are good interviewers. Some may be prepared, and others may not be. You may have an interviewer who knows the job and is eager to get the very best person. The questions may be incisive or thought-provoking. Other interviewers may not be interested or even competent. So it’s important for you to assess the situation as soon as you can. Doing so may help you to understand how and why certain questions are being asked and help you to understand the role of the interviewer.

Later on in this article, a list of illegal or discriminatory questions is included. If you are asked these questions, try to give a general reply that will reveal your professionalism. If you confront the interviewer with the illegality of the question, the situation may become unpleasant. Remember that you do not need to accept this position; however, it is important for you to be graceful and professional in your behavior. If you know how you will handle any illegal questions before the interview, your anxiety level will be minimized.

You will also be wise to prepare answers (although that does not mean formula answers) to typical questions that are often asked. Below is a list of such questions.

**Questions You May Be Asked during an Interview**

- Tell me something about yourself.
- Why did you decide to become a paralegal?
- What made you change fields?
- Why do you think you would like to work for us?
- What is important to you in a job?
- What do you think determines a person’s progress in a company?
- How do you feel about traveling on the job?
- What about working overtime and on weekends?
- What are your own special abilities and skills?
- What is your major strength?
- What is your major weakness?
- Can you take instructions and criticism without getting upset?
- Do you prefer to work individually or with others?
- What type of boss do you prefer?
- Have you ever had difficulties getting along with your bosses?
- How do you like routine work?
- Are you a detailed person?
- What motivates you in a job?
- What was the best part of your last job?
- The worst part?
- Where do you think you’d like to be five years from now?
- Are you interested in going to law school?
- You seem overqualified. Do you think you would be happy in this job?

**Questions You May Ask during an Interview**

Do not hesitate to ask questions you may have about the job. You might prepare a brief list. It will impress the interviewer that you have thought about the job and the company before coming in. While you may want to jot down a question or two during the interview, make certain that you do so discretely. Pulling out a memo pad at the beginning of the interview to take notes will not impress the interviewer.

Below is a list of questions you may ask. Add your own questions to the list, or modify it to fit the situation and the position.

**Questions You May Ask during an Interview**

- Is this a new position?
- If so, why is this position needed?
- To whom would I report?
- Will I be working for more than one attorney?
- What are the minimum billable hours for paralegals?
- How many hours do the paralegals work, on average?
- Is traveling involved?
- Are paralegals considered part of the support staff or the professional staff?
Is clerical help available?

What are the major responsibilities of the job?

Will I have an opportunity to meet with other paralegals currently working in your firm?

Is there any kind of paralegal orientation for newcomers?

What access will I have to a library for LEXIS/NEXIS or WESTLAW?

Does your firm encourage continuing education and professional development?

What major problems would I encounter on this job?

When do you think you will be making your hiring decision?

List your own special interests, concerns, or questions you may have about the job:

Difficult Questions You May Be Asked during an Interview and How to Handle Them

Federal regulations prohibit an interviewer from asking questions that indicate discrimination in the hiring process. This does not mean that these questions will not crop up in some form. Be prepared, therefore, to answer these questions in a way that will serve you best.

For example, if an interviewer asks you about your family responsibilities and care of your small children, if you have any, make certain that you convey that you have already prepared for their care should any problem arise. The same holds true if you are asked about your marital status or plans for having a family. Make your answer brief, but focus on the importance of your professional commitment at this point.

If questions arise about your willingness or availability to travel or work overtime (if that is a part of the job), again stress how you (and your spouse and family) have thought about this possibility and have agreed that it would be possible for you to handle such situations, provided you have time to make any arrangements that would be necessary.

Any questions about your spouse’s profession, salary, interests, or career goals should be answered in a way that divulges the minimum amount of information.

Legally, you are not required to answer any questions that are not directly related to the job and that may demonstrate some form of discrimination, such as questions relating to age, race, politics, or any issues concerning your family or personal life.

The more you can anticipate difficult questions and prepare for them, the more your anxieties will be alleviated before going into the interview.

What would be the most difficult question for you to answer? One that you hope will not be asked? Plan on how you would answer such a question. If you are not asked, the issue becomes irrelevant. If you are asked, at least you will have considered an appropriate response.

For example, are you concerned about long gaps in your employment history? If so, think about how you have kept yourself abreast of current issues; have developed skills in various volunteer positions; and attended workshops, lectures, and continuing education programs.

Do you feel that age is a factor for you? Think of all the positive characteristics that you can bring to a job such as maturity, reliability, decisiveness, good judgment, an awareness of people, and the ability to handle conflicts. In other words, once you convince yourself you could be an asset to a firm, you can convince an employer with much greater ease.

Responses to Difficult Questions

The previous information summarizes how to prepare yourself for handling difficult questions. Below are some specific ways in which you can protect yourself without alienating the interviewer who poses questions that are illegal or border on illegality.

It can be a touchy, uncomfortable situation, particularly if the job looks attractive. So you may want to ask yourself if this person reflects the attitudes of the organization or is simply uninformed or inexperienced as an interviewer. At any rate, if you are confronted with such questions, try to respond in a way that will work to your advantage.

Below are some typical questions and answers that may offer you some clues on how to handle such questions if they are posed in your interview. One technique is to rephrase the question. Another is to provide as brief an answer as possible and then make a transition to another topic that is directly job-
1. Family issues

Q. Do you plan to have a family? (Men are usually not asked this question.)
A. At this stage in my career, I am committed to spending my time and energy on a full-time job.

Q. What will you do if your family becomes ill? (If it has been established that you already have a family.)
A. Although my children (son or daughter) have a history of good health and regular checkups, if they require medical attention, I have made arrangements with (spouse, friend, neighbor, relative) to be on call. In an emergency, of course, I would have to make contingent plans, but I have established a reliable support system.

2. Working overtime

Q. How does your spouse feel about you working overtime?
A. We’ve discussed these possibilities and have agreed that our schedules are flexible enough to handle what the job requires. Of course, it’s always easier to have advance notice, whenever possible, to make any necessary arrangements or reschedule something.

3. Availability for travel

Q. Would you be available for traveling?
A. Depending upon the amount of time involved, I don’t have any problem with traveling, if I can plan ahead. (Remember, you must decide if you want to travel. This is a good time for you to ask how much travel will be involved and then make your decision accordingly.)

4. Age issues

(Note: The age issue may come up in many forms. The basic question being asked here is, “Are you too old to handle this job?”)

Q. How do you feel about working for younger people?
A. (Depending upon the context of the question): I’ve been around young people for most of my life, particularly my own children, and I’ve not only learned from them, but I’ve developed respect for them. I know I can bring that ability to this job, whatever the age of my supervisor or boss. Age is never a barrier, as far as I’m concerned. It’s the person’s attitude toward age and how well he or she gets along with people that’s important.

These are just some examples of how to approach difficult questions. Now list the toughest questions you think you might be asked, and prepare the answers. In doing so, you will be readying yourself for a successful interview.

1. I hope they never ask: Questions that would be difficult for me to answer in an interview, with answers I could give:

Discriminating Questions

Federal Laws and Regulations Concerning Discrimination in Employment

1. Executive Order 11246, amended by 11375, prohibits discrimination in employment practices (hiring, promotions, benefits, training, salaries) on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, or sex for all the employers with federal contracts over ten thousand dollars. Report violations to Office of Federal Contract Compliance of the Department of Labor, Washington, D.C. 20210.

2. Age Discrimination in Employment Act prohibits discrimination in employment practices (hiring, salaries, discharge). Report violations to the Wage and Hour Division of the Employment Standards Administration of the Department of Labor,
1. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination in employment practices on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, or religion for all employers with fifteen or more employees. Report violations to Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1800 G Street NE, Washington, D.C. 20506.

2. Equal Pay Act prohibits discrimination in salaries, including most fringe benefits, on the basis of sex. Report violations to Wage and Hour Division of the Employment Standards Administration, Department of Labor, Washington, D.C. 20210.

Discriminatory Questions That May Not Be Asked on Application Forms or during an Interview

1. Questions cannot be asked concerning the applicant’s race, religious affiliation, birthplace, or the birthplace of the applicant’s parents.
2. An applicant cannot be required to submit a birth certificate, naturalization certificate or baptismal record. (Note: It is no longer discriminatory to require such records once an applicant is hired since recent federal immigration laws require employers to document United States citizenship for employment eligibility.)
3. An applicant cannot be required to submit a personal photograph with a job application. After a person is hired, a photograph may be required for identification purposes.
4. Questions cannot be asked concerning an applicant’s date of birth or age unless such information is needed to ascertain that the applicant meets minimum age requirements.
5. Questions cannot be asked concerning an applicant’s native language or the language the applicant commonly uses at home.
6. Inquiries cannot be made about an applicant’s military experience in forces other than the United States Armed Forces.
7. Inquiries cannot be made about an applicant’s draft status, although it is legal to ask whether an applicant has received any notice to report for duty in the Armed Forces.
8. Questions cannot be asked about an applicant’s memberships in any organizations other than professional, trade, or service organizations.
9. Questions cannot be asked about an applicant’s arrest record (although a conviction record may be requested.)
10. Inquiries cannot be made about an applicant’s relatives, except for who should be notified in emergencies.
11. Inquiries cannot be made about an applicant’s marital status, the number of children, or plans for having a family.

Salary Negotiations

The question of salary is undoubtedly one of the most delicate points that you have to negotiate, but inevitably it will come up, and you must be prepared to bargain for what you feel you are worth and you can get. If at all possible, the discussion of salary and other employee benefits should be delayed until a job offer has been made, or at least until it has been made clear to you that you are being considered very seriously for the position. Obviously, this can happen only after the interviewer has had an opportunity to talk with you or even call you in for a second interview.

If the question comes up early in the interview (such as, “What is the minimum salary you will accept?”), your best strategy is to use some kind of delaying tactic. For example, you could reply, “That’s difficult to answer right now. It would depend on the job and its responsibilities, and I’d like to know more before I can answer.”

The purpose of postponing salary discussion is so that you can impress the interviewer with your presentation of yourself. Eventually, however, if both of you establish a mutual interest, you will have to confront the salary issue. And the more you know about salary ranges for paralegals in the area, the better prepared you are to discuss this topic.

Before the interview is the time to do your salary investigation, not during the interview. You cannot negotiate until you have some idea of what the general range is in the field. You must also know your own minimum requirements. Otherwise, you waste your time if the company cannot pay you what you need to earn. Salary scales are not usually available, but you can find information on salary ranges from a paralegal association in the area in which you want to work.

If there is a range within a company, bargain for the top of the range; the company will want you, of course, to agree on the lower part of the range. With persuasion on your part of what you have to offer the
organization, the idea is for you to agree on what is mutually acceptable. If the salary is fixed, however (and ask if the salary offered you is a firm one), then ask what other benefits are available and when you can have a salary review. Doing so demonstrates your ambition as well as your initiative. Finally, only you can decide on what salary is fair and what is acceptable to you. Again, doing your homework is essential before you can make a decision.

Closing the Interview and Planning Your Follow-up Strategy

You will probably have some clues as to when the interview is over. The interviewer will either stand or ask if you have any questions about the job.

That is your chance to ask questions you did not have an opportunity to ask earlier, but even more important, it is the time for you to appraise how well you did if you are interested in the job.

The interviewer may offer definite feedback by the type of comments or questions he or she asks. That may take the form of planning the next step. If that does not happen, try to get some indication of your possible chances for the job. You can do this easily without appearing brash. For example, if you have no clue from the interviewer, you may simply ask, “Is there anything more about my background or experience you would like to know, as it relates to this job?” Or, “Do I seem to have the kind of experience that you’re looking for?” These kinds of questions can elicit favorable comments, negative ones, or non-committal ones. If there is no definite interest exhibited at this point, you can support your case in the follow-up letter.

Whatever the outcome of the interview, your follow-up letter marks you as a professional who is also courteous. Try to remember the interests and needs of the employer and refer to them in the letter, stressing again how you feel qualified for the job and would enjoy working for the organization now that you have had an opportunity to find out more about it. Keep the letter brief, but be sure to end it on the note that you look forward to hearing from the interviewer concerning the position. Be certain to tailor the specific details to your own situation.

You will hear, one way or the other. If the interviewer is interested, you may be called in for a second interview, particularly if salary negotiations were not finalized. A phone call from the company is always a good sign, although it may not necessarily mean that the job is definite. It may be a call for a second interview. Regrets and rejections always come in the form of a letter, sometimes weeks after the job is filled.

If you are interested in the job, however, and send your follow-up letter after the interview, it is perfectly acceptable to call the company within a week or so to see if they made their decision or when they expect to make it. If you are turned down, you may politely ask why. Sometimes you will get a direct, specific answer that will help you later on. You may also get a general response that stresses the number of qualified candidates who had applied for the position. All you can do at this point is review the steps you have taken and analyze your interview.

To help you evaluate your interview performance, keep a log and record your reactions as soon after the interview as possible. The following model provides a format for this record keeping and self-evaluation. Recognizing what you did right and what you could have done better will help you to improve your interviewing skills.

Most of us have had the experience of wishing we had said something or not said something during an interview. Such regrets may hamper our chance for success at subsequent interviews. In order to avoid this trap, try to make an honest self-evaluation and learn from each of your interviewing experiences. Practicing with another person may also help you; ask your teachers or members of your local paralegal association whether they would be willing to do a mock interview with you.

A Note on Informational Interviews

Informational interviews are exactly what the title implies. They are not interviews for a specific job opening, but are valuable opportunities for you to learn specific information about a firm or organization – such as how the firm operates, the role of paralegals, the employer’s view of the job market, the employer’s advice regarding your specific background and experience, and types of paralegal positions for which you would be best suited. The goal of this type of interview is for you to develop interviewing skills, without the stress or anxiety that accompanies an actual job interview. But just as important, the interview enables you to find out what a certain job is really like.

If you impress someone at an informational interview, that person will very likely keep you in mind if a job opening occurs. For that reason, you should follow the same process in sending a follow-up thank you letter.
and enclose a current resume for that company’s future reference. It is also important for you to keep a log of these interviews.

Review the resources and reference materials in this book to help you identify the most appropriate information sources, including directories, guides, and association encyclopedias. Do not overlook your networking contacts in setting up your informational interviews.

Some points you may wish to include are given below. Add your own points to the list.

Positive Points:

- Good chemistry with interviewer
- Congenial atmosphere.
- Answered questions confidently and directly.
- The interviewer seemed to focus on my strengths.
- Job described clearly.

Other:

Negative Points:

- Interviewer not interested
- Forgot to bring up important information
- Felt uncomfortable and nervous
- Felt rushed in answering
- Did not feel comfortable about appearance
- Was late for appointment
- Did not understand questions asked
- Lacked confidence

Other:

The purpose of this self-evaluation is so that you can recognize your weaknesses and overcome them as you continue the interviewing process. Make extra sheets for each interview.

Following Up on the Interview

It is very important for you to write a brief follow-up letter a day or so after your interview, whatever your self-evaluation. These letters should never be handwritten, inasmuch as they will be placed in your file. Remember that this will be another opportunity for you to highlight what you can bring to the company. It will provide a chance for you to include anything you may have forgotten to mention during the interview itself. And it will also be an appropriate place for you to address any concerns the interviewer may have had about your qualifications for the job.

Review your self-evaluation chart to help you write this letter.

Read the following articles for more information:

- The Questions to Expect During a Paralegal Job Interview
- Protocol For Following Up After a Paralegal Job Interview
- Acquiring Work as a Paralegal: The Job Interview
- Proper Responses to a Final Answer Regarding a Paralegal Job Interview
- A Paralegal’s Guide to Forming Client Interview Questionnaires
- A Paralegal’s Guide to Back-office Work
- The HUSTLE Principles for Getting a Paralegal Job Interview
- A Paralegal’s Guide to Resume Writing
- A Paralegal’s Guide to Building Contacts like a Private Investigator
- A Paralegal’s Guide to Editing and Proofreading