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# Paralegals and Legal Assistants

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## Significant Points

- Most entrants have an associate degree in paralegal studies, or a bachelor's degree coupled with a certificate in paralegal studies.
- About 7 out of 10 work for law firms; others work for corporate legal departments and government agencies.
- Employment is projected to grow much faster than average, as employers try to reduce costs by hiring paralegals to perform tasks once done by lawyers.
- Competition for jobs should continue; experienced, formally trained paralegals should have the best employment opportunities.

## Nature of the Work

While lawyers assume ultimate responsibility for legal work, they often delegate many of their tasks to paralegals. In fact, paralegals—also called legal assistants—are continuing to assume a growing range of tasks in legal offices and perform many of the same tasks as lawyers. Nevertheless, they are explicitly prohibited from carrying out duties considered to be the practice of law, such as setting legal fees, giving legal advice, and presenting cases in court.

One of a paralegal's most important tasks is helping lawyers prepare for closings, hearings, trials, and corporate meetings. Paralegals might investigate the facts of cases and ensure that all relevant information is considered. They also identify appropriate laws, judicial decisions, legal articles, and other materials that are relevant to assigned cases. After they analyze and organize the information, paralegals may prepare written reports that attorneys use in determining how cases should be handled. If attorneys decide to file lawsuits on behalf of clients, paralegals may help prepare the legal arguments, draft pleadings and motions to be filed with the court, obtain affidavits, and assist attorneys during trials. Paralegals also organize and track files of all important case documents and make them available and easily accessible to attorneys.

In addition to this preparatory work, paralegals perform a number of other functions. For example, they help draft contracts, mortgages, and separation agreements. They also may assist in preparing tax returns, establishing trust funds, and planning estates. Some paralegals coordinate the activities of other law office employees and maintain financial office records.

Computer software packages and the Internet are used to search legal literature stored in computer databases and on CD-ROM. In litigation involving many supporting documents, paralegals usually use computer databases to retrieve, organize, and index various materials. Imaging software allows paralegals to scan documents directly into a database, while billing programs help them to track hours billed to cli-

ents. Computer software packages also are used to perform tax computations and explore the consequences of various tax strategies for clients.

Paralegals are found in all types of organizations, but most are employed by law firms, corporate legal departments, and various government offices. In these organizations, they can work in many different areas of the law, including litigation, personal injury, corporate law, criminal law, employee benefits, intellectual property, labor law, bankruptcy, immigration, family law, and real estate. As the law becomes more complex, paralegals become more specialized. Within specialties, functions are often broken down further. For example, paralegals specializing in labor law may concentrate exclusively on employee benefits. In small and medium-size law firms, duties are often more general.

The tasks of paralegals differ widely according to the type of organization for which they work. A corporate paralegal often assists attorneys with employee contracts, shareholder agreements, stock-option plans, and employee benefit plans. They also may help prepare and file annual financial reports, maintain corporate minutes' record resolutions, and prepare forms to secure loans for the corporation. Corporate paralegals often monitor and review government regulations to ensure that the corporation is aware of new requirements and is operating within the law. Increasingly, experienced corporate paralegals or paralegal managers are assuming additional supervisory responsibilities such as overseeing team projects.

The duties of paralegals who work in the public sector usually vary by agency. In general, litigation paralegals analyze legal material for internal use, maintain reference files, conduct research for attorneys, and collect and analyze evidence for agency hearings. They may prepare informative or explanatory material on laws, agency regulations, and agency policy for general use by the agency and the public. Paralegals employed in community legal-service projects help the poor, the aged, and others who are in need of legal assistance. They file forms, conduct research, prepare documents, and, when authorized by law, may represent clients at administrative hearings.

**Work environment.** Paralegals handle many routine assignments, particularly when they are inexperienced. As they gain experience, paralegals usually assume more varied tasks with



*In addition to investigating the facts of cases, paralegals identify relevant laws, judicial decisions, legal articles, and other materials.*

additional responsibility. Paralegals do most of their work in offices and law libraries. Occasionally, they travel to gather information and perform other duties.

Paralegals employed by corporations and government usually work a standard 40-hour week. Although most paralegals work year round, some are temporarily employed during busy times of the year and then released. Paralegals who work for law firms sometimes work very long hours when under pressure to meet deadlines.

### **Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement**

Most entrants have an associate degree in paralegal studies, or a bachelor's degree coupled with a certificate in paralegal studies. Some employers train paralegals on the job.

**Education and training.** There are several ways to become a paralegal. The most common is through a community college paralegal program that leads to an associate degree. Another common method of entry, mainly for those who already have a college degree, is earning a certificate in paralegal studies. A small number of schools offer a bachelor's and master's degree in paralegal studies. Finally, some employers train paralegals on the job.

Associate and bachelor's degree programs usually combine paralegal training with courses in other academic subjects. Certificate programs vary significantly, with some only taking a few months to complete. Most certificate programs provide intensive paralegal training for individuals who already hold college degrees.

About 1,000 colleges and universities, law schools, and proprietary schools offer formal paralegal training programs. Approximately 260 paralegal programs are approved by the American Bar Association (ABA). Although many employers do not require such approval, graduation from an ABA-approved program can enhance employment opportunities. Admission requirements vary. Some require certain college courses or a bachelor's degree, while others accept high school graduates or those with legal experience. A few schools require standardized tests and personal interviews.

The quality of paralegal training programs varies; some programs may include job placement services. If possible, prospective students should examine the experiences of recent graduates before enrolling in a paralegal program. Any training program usually includes courses in legal research and the legal applications of computers. Many paralegal training programs also offer an internship in which students gain practical experience by working for several months in a private law firm, the office of a public defender or attorney general, a corporate legal department, a legal aid organization, a bank, or a government agency. Internship experience is an asset when one is seeking a job after graduation.

Some employers train paralegals on the job, hiring college graduates with no legal experience or promoting experienced legal secretaries. Other entrants have experience in a technical field that is useful to law firms, such as a background in tax preparation or criminal justice. Nursing or health administration experience is valuable in personal injury law practices.

**Certification and other qualifications.** Although most employers do not require certification, earning a voluntary certification from a professional society may offer advantages in the labor market. The National Association of Legal Assistants (NALA), for example, has established standards for certification requiring various combinations of education and experience. Paralegals who meet these standards are eligible to take a 2-day examination. Those who pass the exam may use the Certified Legal Assistant (CLA) or Certified Paralegal (CP) credential. The NALA also offers the Advanced Paralegal Certification for experienced paralegals who want to specialize. The Advanced Paralegal Certification program is a curriculum based program offered on the Internet.

The American Alliance of Paralegals, Inc. offers the American Alliance Certified Paralegal (AACP) credential, a voluntary certification program. Paralegals seeking the AACP certification must possess at least five years of paralegal experience and meet one of the three educational criteria. Certification must be renewed every two years, including the completion 18 hours of continuing education.

In addition, the National Federation of Paralegal Association offers the Registered Paralegal (RP) designation to paralegals with a bachelor's degree and at least 2 years of experience who pass an exam. To maintain the credential, workers must complete 12 hours of continuing education every 2 years. The National Association for Legal Professionals offers the Professional Paralegal (PP) certification to those who pass a four-part exam. Recertification requires 75 hours of continuing education.

Paralegals must be able to document and present their findings and opinions to their supervising attorney. They need to understand legal terminology and have good research and investigative skills. Familiarity with the operation and applications of computers in legal research and litigation support also is important. Paralegals should stay informed of new developments in the laws that affect their area of practice. Participation in continuing legal education seminars allows paralegals to maintain and expand their knowledge of the law. In fact, all paralegals in California must complete 4 hours of mandatory continuing education in either general law or in a specialized area of law.

Because paralegals frequently deal with the public, they should be courteous and uphold the ethical standards of the legal profession. The National Association of Legal Assistants, the National Federation of Paralegal Associations, and a few States have established ethical guidelines for paralegals to follow.

**Advancement.** Paralegals usually are given more responsibilities and require less supervision as they gain work experience. Experienced paralegals who work in large law firms, corporate legal departments, or government agencies may supervise and delegate assignments to other paralegals and clerical staff. Advancement opportunities also include promotion to managerial and other law-related positions within the firm or corporate legal department. However, some paralegals find

## Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

| Occupational Title                   | SOC Code | Employment, 2006 | Projected employment, 2016 | Change, 2006-2016 |         |
|--------------------------------------|----------|------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|---------|
|                                      |          |                  |                            | Number            | Percent |
| Paralegals and legal assistants..... | 23-2011  | 238,000          | 291,000                    | 53,000            | 22      |

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

it easier to move to another law firm when seeking increased responsibility or advancement.

### Employment

Paralegals and legal assistants held about 238,000 jobs in 2006. Private law firms employed 7 out of 10 paralegals and legal assistants; most of the remainder worked for corporate legal departments and various levels of government. Within the Federal Government, the U.S. Department of Justice is the largest employer, followed by the Social Security Administration and the U.S. Department of the Treasury. A small number of paralegals own their own businesses and work as freelance legal assistants, contracting their services to attorneys or corporate legal departments.

### Job Outlook

Despite projected rapid employment growth, competition for jobs is expected to continue as many people seek to go into this profession; experienced, formally trained paralegals should have the best employment opportunities.

**Employment change.** Employment of paralegals and legal assistants is projected to grow 22 percent between 2006 and 2016, much faster than the average for all occupations. Employers are trying to reduce costs and increase the availability and efficiency of legal services by hiring paralegals to perform tasks once done by lawyers. Paralegals are performing a wider variety of duties, making them more useful to businesses.

Demand for paralegals also is expected to grow as an expanding population increasingly requires legal services, especially in areas such as intellectual property, health care, international law, elder issues, criminal law, and environmental law. The growth of prepaid legal plans also should contribute to the demand for legal services.

Private law firms will continue to be the largest employers of paralegals, but a growing array of other organizations, such as corporate legal departments, insurance companies, real estate and title insurance firms, and banks also hire paralegals. Corporations in particular are expected to increase their in-house legal departments to cut costs. In part because of the range of tasks they can perform, paralegals are also increasingly employed in small and medium-size establishments of all types.

**Job prospects.** In addition to new jobs created by employment growth, more job openings will arise as people leave the occupation. There will be demand for paralegals who specialize in areas such as real estate, bankruptcy, medical malpractice, and product liability. Community legal service programs, which provide assistance to the poor, elderly, mi-

norities, and middle-income families, will employ additional paralegals to minimize expenses and serve the most people. Job opportunities also are expected in Federal, State, and local government agencies, consumer organizations, and the courts. However, this occupation attracts many applicants, creating competition for jobs. Experienced, formally trained paralegals should have the best job prospects.

To a limited extent, paralegal jobs are affected by the business cycle. During recessions, demand declines for some discretionary legal services, such as planning estates, drafting wills, and handling real estate transactions. Corporations are less inclined to initiate certain types of litigation when falling sales and profits lead to fiscal belt tightening. As a result, full-time paralegals employed in offices adversely affected by a recession may be laid off or have their work hours reduced. However, during recessions, corporations and individuals are more likely to face problems that require legal assistance, such as bankruptcies, foreclosures, and divorces. Paralegals, who provide many of the same legal services as lawyers at a lower cost, tend to fare relatively better in difficult economic conditions.

### Earnings

Earnings of paralegals and legal assistants vary greatly. Salaries depend on education, training, experience, the type and size of employer, and the geographic location of the job. In general, paralegals who work for large law firms or in large metropolitan areas earn more than those who work for smaller firms or in less populated regions. In May 2006, full-time wage-and-salary paralegals and legal assistants had median annual earnings, including bonuses, of \$43,040. The middle 50 percent earned between \$33,920 and \$54,690. The top 10 percent earned more than \$67,540, and the bottom 10 percent earned less than \$27,450. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of paralegals were:

|   |          |
|---|----------|
| Federal Government .....                      | \$56,080 |
| Management of companies and enterprises ..... | 52,220   |
| Local government .....                        | 42,170   |
| Legal services .....                          | 41,460   |
| State government .....                        | 38,020   |

In addition to earning a salary, many paralegals receive bonuses, in part, to compensate them for sometimes having to work long hours. Paralegals also receive vacation, paid sick leave, a 401 savings plan, life insurance, personal paid time off, dental insurance, and reimbursement for continuing legal education.

## Related Occupations

Among the other occupations that call for a specialized understanding of the law but do not require the extensive training of a lawyer, are law clerks; title examiners, abstractors, and searchers; claims adjusters, appraisers, examiners, and investigators; and occupational health and safety specialists and technicians.

## Sources of Additional Information

General information on a career as a paralegal can be obtained from:

► Standing Committee on Paralegals, American Bar Association, 321 North Clark St., Chicago, IL 60610.

Internet: <http://www.abanet.org/legalservices/paralegals>

For information on the Certified Legal Assistant exam, schools that offer training programs in a specific State, and standards and guidelines for paralegals, contact:

► National Association of Legal Assistants, Inc., 1516 South Boston St., Suite 200, Tulsa, OK 74119.

Internet: <http://www.nala.org>

Information on the Paralegal Advanced Competency Exam, paralegal careers, paralegal training programs, job postings, and local associations is available from:

► National Federation of Paralegal Associations, PO Box 2016, Edmonds, WA 98020. Internet: <http://www.paralegals.org>

Information on paralegal training programs, including the pamphlet *How to Choose a Paralegal Education Program*, may be obtained from:

► American Association for Paralegal Education, 19 Mantua Rd., Mt. Royal, NJ 08061. Internet: <http://www.aafpe.org>

Information on paralegal careers, certification, and job postings is available from:

► American Alliance of Paralegals, Inc., 16815 East Shea Boulevard, Suite 110, No. 101, Fountain Hills, Arizona, 85268. Internet: <http://www.aapipara.org>

For information on the Professional Paralegal exam, schools that offer training programs in a specific State, and standards and guidelines for paralegals, contact:

► NALS, 314 E. 3rd St., Suite 210, Tulsa, OK 74120.

Internet: <http://www.nals.org>

Information on obtaining positions as a paralegal or legal assistant with the Federal Government is available from the Office of Personnel Management through USAJOBS, the Federal Government's official employment information system. This resource for locating and applying for job opportunities can be accessed through the Internet at <http://www.usajobs.opm.gov> or through an interactive voice response telephone system at (703) 724-1850 or TDD (978) 461-8404. These numbers are not toll free, and charges may result. For advice on how to find and apply for Federal jobs, see the Occupational Outlook Quarterly article "How to get a job in the Federal Government," online at:

<http://www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2004/summer/art01.pdf>.