

## How to Become a Paralegal

Even in the face of a struggling economy, the paralegal field remains one of the fastest-growing professions. Also known as a legal assistant, a paralegal serves as a liaison between the attorney and the client. Although they're not qualified to dispense legal advice or argue cases in court, paralegals provide an indispensable host of services to lawyers.

Varying widely from one hour to the next, a legal assistant's duties can include screening potential clients, contacting witnesses, scheduling appointments, performing research, fact-checking, preparing letters and legal documents, and assisting with general office management. Specialized responsibilities can vary according to the type of legal practice.

A career as a paralegal can offer an array of attractive benefits, including job stability, generous compensation, and ample opportunity for professional growth and development. For those who are interested in breaking into the field, there are several key considerations to take into account:

### Education

While formal education is not a hard-and-fast prerequisite to secure a job as a paralegal, those who do have relevant schooling or training will definitely have an advantage when being considered by a prospective employer. There are four basic levels of paralegal education that can be achieved:

- **Associate Degree programs:** The quickest and most economical route, these programs are available at local community colleges.
- **Bachelor Degree programs:** A four-year degree can be obtained at a traditional university. This level of education will take roughly twice as long to complete as the Associate Degree.
- **Master's Degree programs:** The most advanced level of education for a legal assistant, a Master's will allow you to boost your earning power and build your credibility in the eyes of potential employers.
- **Certificate programs:** Usually tailored to a specific legal area, these can serve as a supplement to an Associate, Bachelor's, or Master's Degree, giving you an edge over non-certified candidates.
- **Online schools:** Several reputable online schools allow legal assistants to learn the ropes at their own pace and in the comfort of their own home. Many

web-based training programs offer fast-track curriculums that can be completed in as little as eight weeks.

### **Certification**

In addition to educational degrees, certifications can be obtained to increase a legal assistant's market value:

- The National Association of Legal Assistants (NALA) administers a 2-day exam to paralegals. Those who pass are considered a Certified Legal Assistant (CLA) or Certified Paralegal (CP). Several advanced certifications are also offered by the NALA for legal assistants who specialize in a certain area of law.
- Another voluntary certification, the American Alliance Certified Paralegal (AACP) credential, can be achieved via an online program offered by the Advanced Paralegal Certification Program.
- Paralegals with a minimum of a Bachelor's Degree and two years of field experience can qualify as a Registered Paralegal (RP), a credential issued by the National Federation of Paralegal Association.
- The Professional Paralegal (PP) certification can be achieved by passing a four-part exam administered by the National Association for Legal Professionals.

### **Internships & On-the-Job Training**

Securing an internship or entry-level position at a reputable law firm can be a great way to gain industry experience, either during or in lieu of formal education. You may be able to find a practice that is willing to teach you the ropes on the job, although the compensation will most likely be significantly lower than a candidate who possesses a degree and/or certification.

### **Freelancing**

Another option for strengthening your skills and supplementing your income is to offer part-time remote assistance to law firms. There are several freelancing network websites that allow attorneys and legal assistants to form virtual working relationships. Also known as a "contract paralegal," a freelance paralegal performs the same duties as a full-time legal assistant, but does not report to any one attorney or practice.

Freelance legal assistants are held to the same standards of ethics and confidentiality as traditional paralegals. In most cases, an attorney will require that

a freelance paralegal sign a Non-Disclosure Agreement before any details are released.

Freelancing can provide a convenient and lucrative option for many paralegals. However, if you decide to pursue this angle, keep in mind that you'll be tasked with many of the same challenges that come with running your own business, including determining tax implications, choosing a business structure, setting up a home office, generating clients, and conducting billing and invoicing.

### **Specialties**

Before embarking on the road to becoming a paralegal, take the time to research the various areas of law. If your goal is to join a large, established law firm or to secure a government position, you'll most likely need to choose a specialty, such as criminal law, corporate law, real estate law, or intellectual law.

### **Work Ethic**

As is the case throughout the entire legal field, attorney's assistants are held to a high standard of ethics and accountability. Paralegals communicate frequently with the public, and are expected to maintain a polite, professional demeanor. Because they deal with highly sensitive legal documents, as well as clients' personal information and testimonies, legal assistants are subject to the same strict rules of confidentiality as attorneys. Some specific ethical guidelines have been posted by several paralegal organizations, including the National Association of Legal Assistants and the National Federation of Paralegal Association.

Depending on the volume of cases and their associated workloads, legal assistants are often expected to work long hours and process large amounts of documents and paperwork. Those who are seeking a non-demanding job with fixed hours will most likely not be suited to the paralegal field.

### **Basic Qualifications**

Although specific requirements will vary for different attorneys and practices, all legal assistants are generally expected to demonstrate the ability to:

- Communicate with attorneys and clients using correct legal jargon
- Conduct thorough, relevant research of case details, legal precedents, and the backgrounds of clients and witnesses
- Present all discovered information confidently and concisely
- Use computer technology, online resources, and content management systems to prepare documents and conduct legal research

- Educate themselves on new developments and legislation pertaining to their specialized area of law, usually by attending continuing education seminars
- Stay organized and attend to countless details, often while juggling multiple tasks at once
- Possess excellent verbal and written communication skills

Becoming a paralegal can be an exciting and profitable endeavor for those seeking a position in the legal field. If you have the drive and determination, attention to detail, and a passion for investigative research, you may very well find a great deal of fulfillment as a legal assistant.