

A Typical Day for a Legal Assistant

If you were to ask twenty professional paralegals what a “typical” workday is like, you’d likely receive twenty different answers. Indeed, the position of a legal assistant encompasses a wide and ever-changing variety of tasks. That said, there are many common duties and responsibilities that are characteristic to the role.

In the face of these tough economic times, the paralegal profession is one of the few fields that are still experiencing rapid growth and consistent stability. Why? With the goal of reducing overhead expenses, many of the country’s law firms are transitioning everyday legal activities to assistants instead of lawyers. Since paralegals have a lower billable rate than their bosses, this allows the attorneys to focus on more revenue-producing tasks.

Although salaries range widely depending on location, type of practice, and level of experience, the U.S. Department of Labor estimated in 2006 that legal assistants earned an average of \$43,040 per year. Many employers also offer periodic bonuses to their paralegals to reward them for overtime hours worked.

Considered a busy lawyer’s “right hand,” a paralegal performs many of the same activities as an attorney. Of course, there are certain duties that a paralegal is not permitted to execute, such as arguing trials in courts of law, dispensing legal advice, and determining legal costs for clients. While a paralegal will most commonly hold a job at a law practice, they are also utilized by governmental facilities and within large corporations that have their own internal legal departments. Like an attorney, a legal assistant can select a specific legal specialty, such as corporate law, family law, personal injury law, litigation, or other areas of expertise.

Depending on the size of the practice or business where the paralegal works, the scope of his or her workload can fluctuate from very broad to highly specialized. On any given day, a legal assistant may perform any of the following tasks:

- Helping to prepare a wide array of legal documents, including contracts, divorce and separation agreements, wills and trusts, mortgage agreements, and more
- Preparing pleadings and briefs, and locating supportive statistics for any given matter
- Using the Internet and other methods of research to look up legal precedents, legislative actions, and specific laws to help support a case

- Helping attorneys prepare for all components of a trial, from depositions to hearings to pre-trial meetings to closing arguments
- Monitoring the attorneys' upcoming deadlines, meetings, and appointments and making sure they're met
- Meeting with clients to discuss the details of an upcoming case
- Performing filing, organizing, making copies, and other administrative tasks
- Following up with clients on unpaid invoices
- Assisting in preparing tax documents for annual filing
- Filing financial reports
- Staying up-to-date on new and updated laws and guidelines

Throughout the workday, an efficient and effective paralegal should strive to maintain the following attributes:

- **Flexibility:** A legal assistant's job description can vary drastically from one moment to the next. In the morning, they might be tasked with researching important legal precedents and prepping a witness for an important testimony, only to be asked to pick up lunch for a client an hour later. Remember, not all responsibilities will be glamorous and challenging—as with most any job, there will be periods of time when you'll be tasked with more tedious duties, such as filing or organizing documents. As a paralegal, adaptability will be one of your most appreciated and marketable traits. Approach each task with a positive attitude and an air of adventure. Even the tasks that seem the most mundane can wind up teaching you something of value. Flexibility also comes into play in regard to work schedules. Depending on the current caseload, paralegals often have to put in many of the same long hours as attorneys, staying late to meet important trial deadlines.
- **Critical Thinking:** Most attorneys want paralegals who aren't just "yes men" or "yes women". They want assistants who are confident and knowledgeable enough to speak up and second-guess them when necessary, and who can offer their own informed opinions on a range of topics, legal-related and otherwise. Paralegals also need an inherent sense of curiosity to help them research case details.
- **Initiative:** Most attorneys are very busy—often too busy to micro-manage and provide constant direction to their staff. A paralegal should be able to work as autonomously as possible, recognizing that there might be days or

even weeks when they won't receive direct feedback or communication from direct supervisor. If you need constant reinforcement and direction from your boss, the paralegal field might not be ideal for you. As a legal assistant, you'll be expected to self-prioritize and go after new tasks if they aren't handed to you.

- **Organization:** Legal assistants work with large amounts of important documents, reports, and other paperwork, and are expected to easily pull up files as the attorney needs them. The ability to almost magically produce the right document at just the right moment is one of the marks of a great paralegal. You'll be responsible for keeping all of the attorney's files in order, fielding and filtering dozens of emails each day, and maintaining an orderly legal library. Attention to detail and excellent organization skills are critical.
- **Technology:** In today's computer-driven age, a legal assistant must be comfortable working with the latest technology. Using word processing documents, spreadsheets, email programs, document management systems, online search engines, and special legal software is an integral part of a paralegal's daily work.

With the wide variety of tasks on their plate, one thing is certain: a professional paralegal is unlikely to ever be bored on the job. As many legal assistants have attested, the position is in most cases challenging, intellectually stimulating, and highly rewarding.