

Chapter 2

Career Opportunities

Chapter Outline

1. Introduction
2. Where Paralegals Work
3. Paralegal Specialties
4. Paralegal Compensation
5. Planning Your Career
6. Locating Potential Employers
7. Job-Placement Services
8. Marketing Your Skills
9. Reevaluating Your Career

Chapter Objectives

After completing this chapter, you will know:

- What types of firms and organizations hire paralegals.
- Some areas of law in which paralegals specialize.
- How much paralegals can expect to earn.
- How paralegals are compensated for overtime work.
- How to prepare a career plan and pursue it.
- What is involved in a job search and how to go about it.

Chapter 2 Career Opportunities

Chapter Outline

- I. INTRODUCTION
 - A. Paralegals today enjoy a wide range of employment opportunities.
 - B. Opportunities are in the private and the public sector.

- II. WHERE PARALEGALS WORK
 - A. Law Firms
 - i. Traditionally, paralegals worked for law firms, and most paralegals continue to work in the law-firm environment.
 - ii. Working for a Small Firm
 - 1. Small firms offer opportunities to gain experience in many different areas of the law, generally in a personal and informal environment.
 - 2. Salaries tend to be lower than in larger firms.
 - iii. Working for a Large Firm
 - 1. Large law firms are usually more formal, with responsibilities more limited and well-defined.
 - 2. There are generally greater opportunities for career advancement, higher salaries, and better benefits in the large law firm.
 - B. Corporations and Other Business Organizations
 - i. Increasingly, paralegals are finding employment in corporate legal departments.
 - ii. Most major corporations have an in-house legal staff to handle corporate legal affairs.
 - iii. Advantages in a corporate legal environment include regular hours and less stress than in law firms.
 - C. Government
 - i. A growing number of paralegals work for government agencies at the federal or state level.
 - ii. Administrative Agencies
 - 1. Most paralegals who work for the government work for administrative agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency or the Social Security Administration.
 - 2. Advantages to governmental work are regular working hours, good benefits, and less stress than in law firms.
 - 3. Salaries are on the average lower than in traditional law firms or in the private sector.
 - iii. Legislative Offices

1. Paralegals are sometimes hired as staff members by federal and state legislators to assist with legal research and writing.
- iv. Legal Aid Offices
 1. Paralegals working in legal aid offices generally assume a wider range of responsibilities than in a more traditional setting.
 2. Salaries tend to be lower than in other areas of the law, but the work is very rewarding.
- v. Freelance Paralegals
 1. These paralegals own their own business, which allows them greater flexibility. They perform specified legal work for attorneys on a contract basis.
 2. Freelance paralegals are not the same as “legal technicians” or “independent paralegals.” Independent paralegals do not work under the supervision of an attorney; they sell their services directly to the public.

III. PARALEGAL SPECIALTIES

- A. Litigation Assistance - Litigation paralegals specialize in assisting attorneys in the litigation process. They may work primarily on behalf of plaintiffs or defendants, performing work such as client interviews, drafting documents, preparing exhibits, and assisting at trial.
- B. Personal-Injury Law - Personal-injury paralegals often work for law firms or for insurance companies in investigating claims. They perform work such as obtaining medical reports, employment data, witness statements, and police reports.
- C. Corporate Law - Corporate law paralegals work in a corporation’s legal department or for a law firm specializing in corporate law. They draft articles of incorporation and corporate minutes and assist with corporate mergers.
- D. Criminal Law - Criminal law paralegals work for public prosecutors, public defenders, or criminal-defense attorneys. They may perform tasks such as drafting search or arrest warrants and assisting in posting bail.
- E. Bankruptcy Law - Bankruptcy paralegals work for small and large law firms and for bankruptcy trustees. They may interview the debtor, review creditors’ claims, and attend bankruptcy proceedings.
- F. Employment and Labor Law - Paralegals in this area work for law firms, corporations and other business entities, or government agencies. They usually specialize in one area, such as workers’ compensation, OSHA safety standards, or EEOC discrimination.

- G. Estate Planning and Probate Administration - Estate and probate paralegals usually work for law firms but may also work for banks or the probate court. They perform work such as drafting wills, locating heirs, and assisting in the probate process.
- H. Intellectual-Property Law - Patent, trademark, or copyright paralegals work mostly for large law firms or corporate legal departments. They perform work such as conducting research on prior patent or trademark protection, drafting contracts, and assisting in infringement litigation.
- I. Environmental Law - Employers of environmental paralegals include administrative agencies, large law firms, and corporations. An environmental paralegal obtains permits from environmental agencies, prepares documents relating to hazardous waste, and assists in litigation.
- J. Real Estate Law - Real estate paralegals work for small and large law firms, corporations, banks, title companies, or real estate agencies. They draft sale contracts, conduct title examinations, prepare deeds, and schedule and attend closings.
- K. Family Law - Employers of family law paralegals include large and small law firms, state and local agencies, and the family court. They research state child-custody laws, draft settlement agreements, prepare divorce documents, and assist in the divorce proceedings.
- L. Emerging Specialty Areas - An increasing number of paralegals are finding work in specialty areas of the law, such as elder law or immigration law or as a legal nurse consultant (LNC).

IV. PARALEGAL COMPENSATION

A. Compensation Surveys

- i. Salaries and wage rates for paralegal employees vary substantially.
- ii. Factors affecting compensation include:
 1. Geographical location
 2. Firm size
 3. Years of experience working as a paralegal
 4. Area of practice
 5. Type of employer (law firm, corporation, or government agency).

B. Job Benefits

- i. Job benefits are an important component of compensation.
- ii. Benefits include sick leave, paid holidays, and insurance coverage.
- iii. When evaluating a job offer, consider the benefits you will receive and what these benefits are worth to you.

C. Salaries versus Hourly Wages

- i. Most paralegals are salaried—that is, they are paid a specified amount per year, regardless of the number of hours worked.
- ii. Other paralegals are paid an hourly-wage rate for every hour worked.
- iii. How paralegals are compensated for overtime work usually depends on whether they are salaried or hourly-wage employees.

D. Federal Law and Overtime Pay

- i. Overtime work of salaried employees may be compensated through year-end bonuses or in some other way, such as equivalent time off work.
- ii. Hourly employees receive overtime wages for all hours worked exceeding forty hours per week.
- iii. The Wage-Hour Law exempts “administrative,” “executive,” or “professional” employees from overtime pay.
- iv. There is a split of authority as to whether paralegals are “exempt” or “nonexempt.”
- v. As a result of the *Page & Addison* case, the issue of paralegal exempt status is decided on the basis of the specific facts of a given case.

V. PLANNING YOUR CAREER.

A. Defining Your Long-Term Goals

- i. Long-term goals are those that may take several years or a lifetime to attain.
- ii. Use personal reflection and self-assessment to define long-term goals as clearly as possible.
- iii. Recognize that at the outset of your career, you cannot know what opportunities might lie ahead.
- iv. Recognize also that long-term goals change over time as you gain more experience and your life circumstances change.

B. Short-Term Goals and Job Realities

- i. Short-term goals are the steps that you take to realize your long-term goals.
- ii. The realities of the job market may mean that you may not find the “right” job or “perfect” employer at the outset of your career.
- iii. Remember that you can gain valuable skills and experiences in *any* job environment. These skills and experiences will help to achieve long-term goals in the future.

VI. LOCATING POTENTIAL EMPLOYERS

A. Networking

- i. Career opportunities often go unpublished.

- ii. Many paralegals learn of jobs through networking with other professionals.
 - iii. Students should begin networking while still in school.
- B. Finding Available Jobs
- i. Classified ads, trade journals and similar publications, and online publications are sources that list paralegal job openings.
- C. Identifying Possible Employers
- i. You should begin as a student to compile a list of law firms and organizations that offer the benefits, salary, opportunities for advancement, work environment, and legal specialty of your choice.
 - ii. The Yellow Pages is an excellent source of information for the names of attorneys, law firms, and other organizations that hire paralegals.
 - iii. Legal directories, such as the *Martindale-Hubbell Law Directory*, can be another useful source. They list attorneys and corporate legal departments, their locations and telephone numbers, and their area of practice.
- D. Job-Placement Services
- i. Most paralegal programs provide job-placement services to assist you in finding a job, preparing your resume, and making a list of prospective employers.
 - ii. Contact a local paralegal organization or the county or state bar association to locate other placement services. Many of those organizations have their own placement services, which offer placement free of cost.

Making Your Career Happen

Entering the legal profession and locating a job involve the same skills necessary for studying: time, attention to detail, persistence, and common sense. Use your investigative and analytical skills to draft a cover letter, respond to interview questions and follow up actions to obtain that perfect paralegal position.

VII. MARKETING YOUR SKILLS

A. The Application Process

i. The Resume

1. Your resume is a clear and concise summary of your employment and educational history.
2. A resume should include your name, address, telephone number, e-mail address, and fax number and should contain only information that is relevant to the job you are seeking.
3. Do not include personal data in your resume.
4. Always carefully proofread your resume before you send it out.

- ii. The Cover Letter
 - 1. A carefully written cover letter should accompany your resume.
- iii. List of Professional References
 - 1. Provide a list of three to five professional references.
 - 2. Never list a reference unless you have that person's permission to do so.
- iv. Professional Portfolio
 - 1. You should prepare a portfolio that contains samples of your legal writing, transcripts, and so on.
 - 2. Sample documents should not contain any identifying references to clients.

B. The Interview

- i. Before the Interview
 - 1. Learn as much about the firm as possible.
 - 2. Questions should be anticipated and answers prepared in advance of the job interview.
- ii. At the Interview
 - 1. Interviewers use certain questions and formats, such as closed-questions, open-ended questions, hypothetical questions, and pressure questions, to elicit certain types of responses.
 - 2. Illegal questions need not be answered.
- iii. After the Interview
 - 1. After each interview, jot a few notes to refresh your memory in case you are called back for another interview.

C. The Follow-Up Letter

- i. After the interview, send a follow-up letter to the interviewer.
- ii. The letter should thank the interviewer for her time.
- iii. The letter should also reaffirm the applicant's interest in the position.

D. Job-Hunting Files

- i. Keep copies of job-search letters and any responses to them in your files.
- ii. Keep lists or notes on addresses, telephone numbers, dates of contact, and advantages or disadvantages of employment with various firms.
- iii. These files will provide you with an excellent resource for networking even after you have a permanent position.

E. Salary Negotiations

- i. You should research the salaries of paralegals in similar job situations in your community before discussing salary with a prospective employer.
- ii. The best option in salary negotiations might be to state a salary range that is acceptable to you.

- iii. In addition to salary, remember that benefits and other factors are important to you.

VIII. REEVALUATING YOUR CAREER

A. Career Paths

- i. Career goals change over time, as do job opportunities.
- ii. Paralegals who want to advance in their careers normally have the options of:
 - 1. Being promoted or transferred to another department within the firm
 - 2. Moving to another firm
 - 3. Going back to school for additional education.

B. Creating Opportunities

- i. Advancing in your career can be accomplished by educating your employer so that you can take on other responsibilities.
- ii. Suggest a plan to your employer that shows how you can provide more complex legal services if many of your existing responsibilities are delegated to a new paralegal employee.

C. Other Options

- i. Apply for a position that has become available in a branch office of your firm.
- ii. Broaden your visibility both inside and outside the firm to make new contacts.
- iii. You can learn of new professional opportunities through active participation in paralegal professional organizations.