

## TUITION REIMBURSEMENT GUIDANCE

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More and more employers are willing to help with tuition costs in order to attract and retain more educated employees. Some employers provide full or partial tuition benefits that allow employees to complete eligible coursework with the financial support of the employer. The types of benefits will vary by employer, and in many cases, the coursework or training must be job-related. Though not all employers offer such a benefit, you should inquire with your Human Resources department to see what assistance may be available to you. Be sure to mention that you intend to enroll in a paralegal career-training program that awards a Certificate of Completion, rather than college credit toward a degree plan, and that the program will not require you to miss work.

In exchange for the employer's investment, he or she typically will require the employee to meet certain conditions such as maintaining a minimum grade average or continuing the employment for a specified period of time. When accepting a tuition benefit, be sure to verify the details in writing and to understand clearly what is expected of you. If the conditions of the assistance are not met, the employer may have terms in place to bill you for the cost of your education.

### **What if Your Employer Does Not Offer Tuition Benefits?**

If your employer does not presently offer a tuition benefit, you will have an opportunity to use your negotiation skills to create a win-win situation. If you already work in a law-related job, you can point out the advantages to your employer of assisting with your paralegal education and see if you can reach an agreement. Many legal employers will be delighted to learn that you are pursuing paralegal training because it means you will bring an even greater level of competence to your job, thus benefiting both your boss and his or her clients.

Lawyers tend to be impressed by education (they have a lot of it), so they will likely be pleased to add a certificated paralegal to the staff, once you complete the program, or a certified paralegal, if you meet the requirements to sit for the national CLA exam and choose to do so. If all the employees possess formal educational credentials, this will enhance the image of the workplace, as well as provide an opportunity for your attorney to bill your time to a client at a higher rate. Be aware that law firms and other legal employers often have budgets already in place for professional development to cover the cost of the lawyers' continuing legal education courses and seminars. Money may be available in the budget for paralegal training too, if you just ask. Remember that it can't hurt to ask!

On the other hand, if you do not presently work in the legal field, it may be unrealistic to expect your employer to pay for your paralegal education because your boss might assume that, upon completion of your training, you intend to immediately quit your job to change careers. As an alternative, you may consider seeking a law-related job while you are pursuing your paralegal training (it is always a good idea to get your foot in the door), and see if you can negotiate your new or prospective employer's help with your paralegal education expenses as an employment benefit and a portion of your total compensation package.

## Ten Tips for Negotiating with Employers

Although you will need to adapt your approach to your situation, here are some ideas:

### 1. Be a worthy candidate

Reflect on your particular accomplishments, skills, and contributions to the workplace. If you consistently “go the extra mile” at work, this puts you on high moral ground. It makes it more difficult for your boss to turn down a reasonable request.

### 2. Select a good time to speak with your boss

You want your boss to be receptive, so use good common sense. Do not approach your boss on the day that he or she missed lunch, has other appointments waiting, or is rushing to meet a deadline.

### 3. State your case with confidence

Point out your interest in the law and your desire to take the UTSA Online Paralegal Certificate Program, on your own time, to learn even more. Emphasize that this will not interfere with your job responsibilities at work. On the contrary, the knowledge and skills that you will gain through the program will enhance your understanding and abilities on the job. Print out some written information on the program to show your boss the excellent curriculum and affordable cost that the program provides.

Ask your boss: “This paralegal training will benefit the work we do here, so would you be willing to sponsor the cost, so I can take this program?”

Suggestion: You can role-play with a friend acting as your boss for a trial run.

### 4. Avoid an “all or nothing” attitude

Realize that some help is better than no help. You can start by asking your boss to sponsor the entire cost of the program including books, but be willing to work down from there, if necessary. Listen to your boss, keep negotiating, and seek a solution that both you and your boss will be comfortable with.

For example:

- Boss pays all the tuition and books up front;
- Boss pays half, and employee pays half;
- Employee pays all the tuition, but receives reimbursement from the boss upon completing each course or the entire program;
- Employee pays tuition for the first course to show good faith and satisfactory results, then the boss pays for the remaining two courses;
- Boss pays all the tuition and employee pays all the books;
- Employee pays all the tuition and boss pays all the books.

You can probably think of additional scenarios to provide at least some partial funding to you.

## **5. Do your part**

Realize that life is all about give and take. State what you are willing to do in exchange for your employer's assistance.

For example:

- Maintain good grades
- Assume an additional responsibility at work
- Commit to remain on the job for a specified time period.

## **6. Get it in writing**

Realize that the personnel at your workplace could change while you complete the program, and your boss could leave. Be sure to write down the terms of your agreement and to obtain the appropriate signatures.

## **7. Be professional if the answer is “no”**

Be realistic if your company is going through hard times. Do not pout or threaten to quit if you do not get your way. This will only make you look childish. Instead, realize that employers appreciate workers who are motivated and who take initiative. You have probably earned your boss's respect with your desire to better your education and by coming forward with confidence to ask for his or her support. After all, the knowledge you will gain will benefit your boss too, so it is reasonable to ask for his or her assistance. Ask your boss to let you know if the funds become available and thank him or her for considering your request.

## **8. Work hard if the answer is “yes”**

Thank your boss for the opportunity and then work hard to uphold your end of the bargain. If your boss has requested any documentation or progress reports, provide them in a timely manner. Let your boss know how you are enjoying the training.

## **9. Respect your employer's need to keep the arrangement confidential**

In the workplace, the best policy is to keep your compensation confidential. Avoid discussing your paycheck or benefits with your co-workers. This includes any tuition assistance or reimbursement that your employer may provide to you.

## **10. Dress for success**

Finally, be sure to look your best when approaching your employer for his or her contribution to your professional development. Realize that your success is potentially related to your personal presentation. Be sure to look like the confident paralegal that you want to become!

**Good luck!!**