

Career Questions

Where do paralegals work?

Wherever you find lawyers, you will likely find paralegals. Career opportunities not only exist in traditional private law firms, but also with the in-house legal departments of banks, hospitals, insurance companies, title companies, airlines, and retail chains. Positions can also be found in state, federal, and local government agencies and courts. Many times, paralegal positions are combined with other job duties. For example, you might find a job as a paralegal/legal secretary or a paralegal/bookkeeper.

What job duties do paralegals perform?

Job duties of a paralegal vary depending on the attorney's needs and the nature of the firm's practice. Paralegals assist attorneys in all legal disciplines, including general civil litigation, business law, criminal law, family law, labor law, real estate, bankruptcy, probate and more. Specific duties might include legal research, investigation of facts, gathering medical and other written data, managing litigation deadlines and case files, writing case status reports, summarizing deposition testimony, and creating legal documents for attorney review. In many firms, paralegals assist the attorney at trial by coordinating witnesses, tracking exhibits, monitoring jury reactions, and quickly accessing pertinent information as the case unfolds.

Can paralegals perform legal tasks directly for the public?

Paralegals are required to work under the supervision of a licensed attorney. Providing legal services to the public by non-attorneys constitutes the unauthorized practice of law for which civil and criminal penalties exist. Paralegals who wish to freelance may contract their services to attorneys or law firms but not to members of the general public.

What educational credentials do legal employers seek?

Individuals wishing to work in the paralegal field need one of the following: a paralegal certificate, a college degree, the CLA credential or experience in the legal field. Some large law firms and corporate legal departments seek job candidates with both a college degree and a paralegal certificate. Others simply require job skills, a good attitude, and the ability to get the job done. Hiring criteria appears to be the most flexible among the small to mid-sized law firms, particularly among solo practitioners.

How can I gain legal experience?

During or immediately following completion of the program, participants should plan on volunteering for an unpaid internship with a private attorney or legal clinic to gain on-the-job legal experience to supplement your classroom training. Even a few hours a week will be beneficial. Internships are voluntary and are not required to obtain the UTSA Paralegal Certificate.

What salary can a paralegal expect to earn?

The paralegal salary depends upon the region, the type of legal setting, the level of experience, and the amount and quality of job skills. In general, our graduates report entry level salaries ranging from \$8.00-\$14.00 an hour, plus overtime, bonuses, and/or medical benefits. Many graduates report that law firms prefer to start new paralegals in case clerk, file clerk, or administrative assistant positions to help them gain experience and learn the ropes of that firm. Often, diligent graduates report that their first pay raise came within the first few months on the job. The paralegal profession is one in which salaries can escalate quickly once you get your foot in the door and prove your ability. Paralegals with 1-3 years of experience averaged \$34,880 with \$2,172 in bonuses statewide in 2001. With eight years experience, the average paralegal salary jumps to \$48,977 with \$4,800 in bonuses. You can find more on salaries for the state of Texas at www.texlaw.com, www.lad.org, and nationwide www.nala.org.

How can I obtain a better starting salary?

Paralegals can obtain a better starting salary by marketing their transferable job skills. More skills and experience result in more money. Start by identifying your job skills gained from other industries that will transfer to a law office. For example, do you have a demonstrated ability to write reports, coordinate projects, organize information, meet deadlines, assure compliance with regulations, summarize information, or interact positively with clients? Are you familiar with medical terminology, skilled on the internet, effective in research, talented with numbers, or able to proofread? Marketing these skills will help you get an increased starting salary.

What job opportunities exist for a paralegal?

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a significant increase in paralegal job growth. It estimates there will be 77,000 new jobs for paralegals by the year 2005, and ranks paralegal among the fastest growing occupations in the economy through the year 2006.

To meet the client's demand for legal services at more affordable rates, attorneys are delegating many traditional "attorney only" legal functions to paralegals working directly under their supervision. Absent the paralegal's assistance, the attorney would have to perform the legal task for the client at the attorney's higher bill rate.

Employing paralegals is efficient and profitable to law firms because fees for paralegal time spent on cases can be billed to clients. Moreover, Texas and the United States Supreme Court case law confirms that fees paid for paralegal time are recoverable in many instances by the winning party from the losing party at trial. Because employing paralegals streamlines the law office, frees attorney time for other legal matters, and makes clients happy through reduced fees, opportunities for paralegal employment will continue to grow.

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For more information contact:

Ms. Michele K. Jura, J.D.

Director, Paralegal Program

The Center for Professional Excellence

University of Texas at San Antonio

Phone: (210) 458-7421

FAX: (210) 458-6575

mjura@utsa.edu • www.cpe.utsa.edu

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