

THE BOTTOM LINE

With Continued Growth, Paralegal Industry Remains a

POPULAR PROFESSION

By James Yodice
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Paralegals. They aren't quite attorneys. Nor are they really secretaries.

It's a profession where the responsibilities and working conditions can vary widely. And for every paralegal, their work means something different. "Attorneys treat some paralegals like glorified secretaries, some like equals," says Lynne Stroud, a paralegal in the general counsel's office of the Public Regulation Commission. Vague as that description may be, it's accurate. The type of law firm has something to do with a particular paralegal's duties, as do the lawyers within the practice. But one thing seems certain: paralegals are becoming almost as plentiful as lawyers. The Center for Legal Studies in Golden, Colo., says the paralegal profession has been ranked as one of the top growth professions for 1999 and into the next millennium. The center says this is due to the increased complexity of laws and the rise of lawsuits. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts 74,000 paralegal job openings in the next eight years and an average salary of \$45,000 by 2005. The current national average paralegal salary is \$35,115, according to the Center for Legal Studies.

Complex job description

A paralegal's job duties depend on circumstances. "I don't sit around and deal with documents," says Karen Sortino, a paralegal with Rothstein Donatelli Hughes Dahlstrom Cron & Schoenburg in Santa Fe. "I spend a lot of time with clients." Paralegals are within their boundaries to talk to clients. But there is a definite line not to be crossed, they say. The rules of professional conduct in a law office dictate that paralegals are not permitted to appear in court directly on behalf of a client, nor can they sign a plea agreement. They also cannot offer legal advice, even though they often are asked by an attorney to listen to the stories of sometimes upset clients.

Donna K. Miles, a paralegal for 13 years, the last 2½ with Abrams and Barliant in Santa Fe, says she, like Sortino, has great access to clients.

Her firm handles personal injury cases.

"The attorneys are pretty difficult to get on the phone, so I do a lot of relaying messages, taking down information," Miles says. "Paralegals have more personal contact with clients than the attorneys do."

Miles calls these interactions case screenings.

"Really, the difference between a secretarial job and a paralegal is that paralegals are drafting their own documents, and the legal secretary will do a lot of transcribing of dictation," she says. Miles should know she started as a legal secretary.

She laughs as she recalls what prompted the promotion to paralegal.

"I had a baby," she says. "I didn't want to go back to work full-time after the baby, and they didn't want someone working part-time. So they promoted me to paralegal," she says, which allowed her to arrange her schedule around her children. "It worked out well for me. There's a lot more freedom."

A good paralegal, Miles says, will allow a firm to do a higher volume of work.

"They can pay for (themselves)," she says.

More work means being more dependent on paralegals, and that translates into stronger relationships.

Sortino says she and attorney Dan Cron comprise "a real team," working exclusively in criminal defense and formulating strategies.

Sortino admits her duties are probably more involved than those of most paralegals.

"It doesn't seem to be particularly normal," she says. "A lot of paralegals don't have access to clients. I feel incredibly fortunate. Every day is different, and you never know what is going to happen."

Becoming a paralegal

Paralegals certified through a college program and noncertified paralegals generally command similar salaries.

Sortino is an example of a paralegal who simply graduated within her firm.

"I guess we all figured out I could do more than what I was doing as a secretary," she says. Cron was trying a murder case years ago and dropped some crime scene photographs on her desk.

"He said, 'Can you handle it (meaning the of a case)?' I said, 'Sure.' And that was it," Sortino says. "I was (always) real good at finding people and working the system, knowing how to find the right person to get things done."

Louise Gallegos, a paralegal with Jones Snead Wertheim Wentworth & Jaramillo in Santa Fe, was looking to change careers. A divorce, of all things, lit the bulb over her head.

"What probably sparked my interest was having to go through the legal process myself," she says. "I was ready for a career change."

But she said she was hampered by never having attended college. Whatever trade she learned was in a vocational institution. Her career has included stints as a dental technician and in the Santa Fe Parks & Recreation office.

She acquired a two-year paralegal degree from Santa Fe Community College, where the classes were all taught by local attorneys.

Now Gallegos says she helps complete many tasks in preparing lawyers for litigation, mostly personal injury cases.

Jeff Marquez with Frechette & Associates, which has offices in Albuquerque and Santa Fe, says his duties are fairly mundane.

He says he does research and prepares files. It is not unlike the nurse's relationship to a doctor, he

says.

"You need to have everything prepared for them to go to trial," Marquez says.

What does that entail? Gathering the background on a case, poring over police reports and highlighting the important passages.

"There's a lot of legwork," he says.

Marquez took a two-year course at the University of New Mexico to become a paralegal. There he learned how to properly research cases using law libraries, computers and index files.

Sortino took some courses at Santa Fe Community College but found that on-the-job exposure was the best education she could have.

"You learn by doing," she says.

A promising future

Stroud, who has been a paralegal for 20 years, says larger law firms, especially those in big markets, can pay their paralegals more than firms in a city the size of Santa Fe.

But Stroud says she doesn't work as paralegal to be rich.

"I feel like I'm helping the public, as opposed to making money," she says. "Personally, I don't make that much money in Santa Fe. The state doesn't pay paralegals all that much."

For those interested in becoming a paralegal, there are two ways to go, Stroud says. Gaining experience in a firm at a lower-level position and working up the ladder is one.

The other option is to head to school. Classes are offered in Los Alamos through UNM. The number of class hours is 84 and can be applied as college credits to several universities in the country. Lectures at Los Alamos began last Saturday. Call the Center for Legal Studies at (800) 522-7737 for more information.