

An Essential Guide to Become a Paralegal

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Paralegals are the backbone of the legal industry. By supporting lawyers and managing their day-to-day tasks, paralegals ensure that the law firm runs smoothly and efficiently.

If you're interested in becoming a paralegal or want to strengthen your skills, continue reading to learn more about this growing field, the job responsibilities, and what you can do to position yourself for success.

What Is a Paralegal?

A paralegal is a professional in the legal field who performs tasks that require knowledge of the law and legal concepts but not to the full extent of a lawyer licensed to practice law. As part of the support staff, a paralegal is working to enhance a lawyer's work, and the lawyer takes full responsibility for that work produced.

What Do Paralegals Do?

Paralegals assist lawyers with legal cases by researching and preparing reports for lawyers to use in their work. They're not permitted to work alone and must be under the supervision of a licensed attorney. Paralegals may work in many legal settings, including law firms, nonprofits, and government agencies, but their duties may include:

- Investigating information about a case
- Researching information about a case
- Interviewing witnesses
- Researching and learning about regulations and laws
- Writing reports
- Maintaining a database of records related to each case

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- Drafting letters, documents, and emails
 - Acquiring affidavits for court
 - Helping to draft legal arguments
 - Corresponding with clients
 - Preparing wills, real estate contracts, divorce decrees, and other civil documents

The duties of a paralegal can vary according to the environment in which they work. They can work within an area of practice, just like lawyers do, with different duties. For example, they may work in probate, immigration, litigation, intellectual property, or corporate law.

Is Paralegal Work Difficult?

The legal field is high pressure, high stakes, and [driven by deadlines](#), and not just for lawyers. Working as a paralegal has its perks, but it can be stressful and demanding. Clients trust in the lawyer to protect their best interests, and that lawyer is depending on the paralegal to make that possible.

What Skills Should a Paralegal Have?

Paralegals have a variety of hard and soft skills, including:

- **Communication:** Paralegals must communicate with lawyers, clients, court officials, witnesses, government officials, and insurance companies in both verbal and written correspondence.
- **Investigative Skills:** A lot of paralegal work involves researching, analyzing, and seeking out information to assist lawyers. Paralegals must have attention to detail and a good eye for discerning relevant facts.
- **Teamwork:** Paralegals don't work alone. They must interact with other paralegals, legal assistants, secretaries, and lawyers throughout the day, so teamwork is essential.
- **Time Management:** Much of the legal field revolves around good time management, and not just for lawyers. Paralegals have to adhere to deadlines and complete tasks in a timely manner, knowing how to prioritize appropriately.
- **Technology Skills:** Paralegals use technology to complete their work, often using word processors, spreadsheets, and presentation software. Many law firms use law practice management software, which paralegals must also learn to use effectively.

How Do You Become a Paralegal?

Paralegals are not licensed on the national level, so there are no federal standards for the profession.

Only a few states regulate the profession on the state level. Instead, the employers establish the hiring standards and require some formal education.

The options for paralegal education or training include:

Associate Degree

An associate degree takes about two years to complete and requires a high school diploma. Some schools may have additional admissions requirements.

Bachelor's Degree

A bachelor's degree in legal studies, paralegal studies, or similar fields is appropriate for paralegal education. Typically, bachelor's degrees take four years to complete. According to the [National Federation of Paralegal Associations \(NFPA\)](#), more employers are placing an emphasis on earning a bachelor's degree.

Master's Degree

If you have a bachelor's degree, a master's degree in legal studies (MLS) is a good choice to increase your knowledge in skills like negotiation, employment law, legal writing, and intellectual property law. This not only deepens the skill set for a paralegal, but it offers a broader scope of work as a legal professional.

Paralegal certification is another option to either replace a degree program or enhance it. The [NFPA](#) recommends achieving a paralegal certification to enhance employment prospects. There are several options available from the National Association of Legal Assistants (NALA), including a Certified Paralegal, an Advanced Certified Paralegal, and a Professional Paralegal certification.

Several schools also offer certification programs for paralegal work, though it's important to research carefully to ensure you're getting a certification that will benefit you professionally.

Are There Different Requirements in Each State to Become a Paralegal?

Generally, paralegals don't have to meet any state licensing requirements, according to the [United States Bureau of Labor Statistics \(BLS\)](#). Professional certification or degrees at the national and regional level is voluntary.

That said, state governments have no restrictions from establishing their own rules, and a few states have chosen to regulate the paralegal profession closely.

According to the [American Bar Association](#), California has restrictions for workers using the title "paralegal," as well as "freelance paralegal," "contract paralegal," "independent paralegal," "legal assistant," and "attorney assistant." These rules prohibit paralegals from engaging in certain activities, including representing clients in court or giving legal advice. They also have minimum education and experience requirements, as well as continuing education requirements.

In addition, both Washington and Utah require licensing for paralegals and non-attorney roles in the legal field. This doesn't mean these paralegals must be licensed to work, but that highly educated and experienced paralegals can become credentialed to perform a broader scope of legal work.

Outlook of Paralegals

According to the [BLS](#), the median annual wage for paralegals and legal assistants was \$56,230 as of May 2021. Employment of paralegals and legal assistants is projected to grow 14% from 2021 to 2031, which is a faster rate than all occupations. About 45,800 openings for these roles are projected each year, on average, over the next decades.

Since the recession, law firms have been making changes to become more efficient and competitive, which may include expanding the scope of work for paralegals. Other institutions also recognize the benefits of workers with legal training, such as government agencies and banks.

Since then, there's been a rising demand for paralegals — particularly ones with technology skills. Paralegals that can navigate technology tools, such as law practice management software, digital forensics, and electronic evidence discovery and preservation, are highly sought.

Paralegals often handle billing and invoicing, which is simplified with legal billing software.

Pro Tip: To gain a competitive edge, paralegals should consider receiving a certificate in law practice management software. PracticePanther offers the certification for free and can be completed on your own time.

Become a Skilled Paralegal

The role of paralegals is growing in demand and constantly evolving. Though it's not required, the more educated and technologically sophisticated paralegals are, the more career opportunities they have in the legal field – and that includes experience and skills with law practice management software.

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