

How to Land Your First Paralegal Job

By
Andrea
Wagner

Foreword by
Therese A. Cannon

An insider's guide to the
fastest-growing profession
of the nineties.

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Foreword

Since the inception of the paralegal profession just over twenty years ago, about 100,000 aspiring legal assistants have started new careers in this dynamic field. Many of these legal assistants were fortunate enough to have received help from their schools' placement offices, or from one of the growing number of placement counselors who specialize in legal assistants. But many more have struggled along on their own — trying to put together a resumé that shows their background in the most favorable light; trying to locate positions that will offer them the chance to do interesting work for decent pay in a pleasant environment; and trying to interview effectively so that they get the job offer and learn whether it's the job they want.

Finally, here is a book designed to help a new legal assistant to do all those things. This fine publication tells the inside story of how legal assistants can best go about finding their first positions. The author, Andrea Wagner, has gained exceptional insight into this career through ten years in the field, first as a paralegal program placement director, and then as one of the first and most successful paralegal recruiters and placement counselors working with a specialized employment agency. In addition to this hands-on experience, Andrea has a formal paralegal education and experience working in the field.

This book is a complete guide to that first, all-important job search. It tells the reader in the greatest detail how to prepare a resumé that will get the interview—focusing on the legal assistant's strengths and most marketable skills. It prepares the reader for the difficult and sometimes trying experience of the job interview, providing tips on dress and attitude, as well as sample questions and ideas on developing the best responses. It covers, in step-by-step style, all aspects of finding a job, from preparing a cover letter to negotiating

salary. The Buzzwords section and the Hot Tips are especially practical and helpful to the novice legal assistant.

Use this book well, and best of success with your first job search and your career.

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Introduction

The purpose of this handbook is to assist new paralegals in finding satisfying and fulfilling jobs. Whether you are a paralegal student beginning your career, a recent college graduate searching for a career, or a person changing careers, my goal is to give you that extra competitive edge to get the job you want in the paralegal market.

Because paralegals are a relatively new profession, there are still a wide array of entrées into the marketplace. During my eight years as a legal assistant recruiter and placement director, I have placed all kinds of paralegals with all kinds of backgrounds. I have placed people in the largest law firms in the nation and in one-lawyer firms that had never employed a paralegal before. I know which approaches work, and which don't. I've seen the successes and the failures. Over the years I have developed a keen awareness of how successful job searches work and what law firms and corporate employers of paralegals look for in successful applicants—from what kinds of resumés and cover letters work, to how to conduct yourself successfully in an interview.

This book is designed to share what I know with you. It is designed to be a practical handbook to be used again and again. In it you will find step-by-step procedures to follow when you look for a job. Included are samples of cover letters, resumes, and interview questions, as well as a suggested reading list and employment reference sources.

I have also included convenient checklists for your use with each subsequent job hunt. Special "Hot Tips" sections will give you insiders' information about this marketplace. You will find these sections very helpful.

Best of luck in your job hunting. You are entering the most dynamic and fastest growing profession in the nation!

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The Paralegal Field

An Emerging Profession with Great Opportunities

If you are serious about landing a job as a paralegal, this book is a “must” read for you! It is a **simple, clear guidebook** that will tell you what kinds of jobs are available, what kinds of law firms and companies have jobs, and how you can get them. If you use this book conscientiously, you will be **way ahead of your competition** in pursuit of your first paralegal position.

One of the beauties of the paralegal profession is that it's in its infancy. Although many paralegals are doing high-level, fascinating work—in big, important cases—the field still has **enormous entrance flexibility**. Described as the fastest growing profession of the 1990s by the U.S. Department of Labor, the paralegal field is expanding so rapidly that there are as yet no “etched in stone” standards for entering it. While most paralegals have trained at one of the nation's 600+ paralegal schools and programs, others enter fresh out of college with no paralegal training whatsoever. Others get their start in the profession from different fields, and still others jump into the field from their positions inside law firms—particularly legal secretaries whose jobs are being outdated by computerized word processing.

Even though the economic downturn of the early 1990s has caused widespread economic turmoil in the legal industry, there is widespread consensus that the field and **role of paralegals will only continue to expand in the next decade**. If the legal industry as a whole is going to be forced to become more efficient and businesslike, the reasoning goes, paralegals will become more important because they are extremely cost effective—and billable to clients.

Moreover, the paralegal field offers the unique opportunity to do important work on interesting matters without the commitment to years of additional education for a law degree. Many new college graduates are becoming paralegals so they can taste a career in the law before committing themselves to three difficult years of law school. Many other professionals—teachers, for instance—are becoming paralegals because the work seems more interesting and the compensation is comparable or better.

Whatever your present position, whatever your motivations for wanting to enter the profession, **this book can be your ticket inside.** It will not only give you practical, step-by-step guidance about how to seek your first job, it will tell you where the jobs are and what special requirements exist for different specialty areas. It will tell you what kinds of jobs are available for your qualifications and how qualifications for entry-level positions differ from region to region in the United States.

If you are presently a paralegal student, you are learning about the tasks of your chosen profession. But knowing how to do a job and knowing how to land one are two very different skills. This book will help you package yourself and your knowledge so that you can land the entry-level job you want that will take you to the career you envision. It will provide you with invaluable information about how to gather strategic information about potential employers and how to network to get your job, and then how to negotiate for an appropriate salary.

By the time you complete your job search, this book should be worn and dog-eared. But by that time, you also should have begun a career that can fascinate and reward you as few others can. Good hunting!

WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE? THE PARALEGAL DEFINED

Paralegals perform a wide assortment of tasks in a broad range of legal matters. Some are engaged in high-level work that was once the province of associate level lawyers; others are doing work of less sophistication. They are all paralegals, however. Because the concept of the paralegal is new, it is still in the process of being defined. That gives enormous flexibility in the profession—you can start out doing rudimentary work and then quickly migrate into sophisticated, fascinating endeavors. Because of the flexibility of activity and entrance requirements—and the speed with which the profession is growing—

there are **great opportunities available for people with a wide assortment of backgrounds**. In short, the field is wide open; you can make of it almost what you want.

The National Federation of Paralegal Associations (NFPA), an umbrella group of local paralegal associations, defines the position as follows:

A paralegal/legal assistant is a person qualified through education, training or work experience to perform substantive legal work that requires knowledge of legal concepts and is customarily, but not exclusively, performed by a lawyer. This person may be retained or employed by a lawyer, law office, governmental agency or other entity or may be authorized by administrative, statutory or court authority to perform this work.

The terms “paralegal” and “legal assistant” are fairly synonymous. These words will be used interchangeably throughout this handbook, hopefully without confusion. The two terms have essentially the same meaning; they refer to people who assist attorneys with all forms of substantive legal work except those tasks that, by law, require a lawyer. This means that paralegals cannot give legal advice, appear in court, or independently represent a client. Virtually all other forms of legal work are open to paralegals, and some state legislatures are currently revising statutory restrictions on the profession.

BIRTH OF THE PROFESSION

Paralegals first appeared in the mid-1960s as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty.” Federally funded lawyers in poverty law programs used the first paralegals to reduce the cost of helping low-income clients. After that, innovative private attorneys, realizing that legal assistants could help them offer more efficient legal service at a lower cost, began hiring them. In the early 1970s, the use of paralegals spread as more conservative firms realized that they would have to use paralegals to remain competitive.

Many of the early paralegals were trained on the job by attorneys. These attorneys acted as mentors to their legal assistants, who learned only the

procedures of that particular office. These newly minted paraprofessionals were taught the “hows” (legal procedures) of law, but not the “whys” (substantive law). From among this early group, forward-thinking paralegals established the first schools to provide formal legal assistant training. The classes were designed to provide a comprehensive legal foundation and to make the students more proficient in their tasks. In-house training, combined with a thorough educational program, gives the best legal assistant training possible. Some schools, recognizing the value of practical experience, have instituted internship programs.

The paralegal educational system is developing rapidly. Although some law firms hire new paralegals directly out of college and train them in-house, most legal assistants now attend paralegal programs that range in length from several months to several years. A number of colleges and universities throughout the nation now offer four-year legal studies bachelor’s degrees. Many institutions offer students training in legal procedures and the substantive foundation of law.

In the early 1970s, the American Bar Association (ABA) began an approval process for paralegal programs to help standardize the training. Institutions desiring ABA approval must initiate contact and pass ABA scrutiny. Some schools have not sought ABA approval, but still offer quality programs. It is up to each person to decide which program is appropriate. Considerations include cost, location, length of the program, and requirements for acceptance.

HOT TIP: Many employers confuse **certified** with **certificated**. When you see an advertisement requiring a “certified” candidate, the firm may mean, “must have a certificate,” or vice versa. In either case, send your resumé! The law firm may never understand the difference, enabling you to land a good job.

Upon completion of a program, a student has earned a certificate or diploma. The student is **certificated**. The National Association of Legal Assistants (NALA) offers a two and one half day examination program through which a paralegal can become a **certified** legal assistant (CLA). This is the only nationwide test available (at this writing) that enables successful participants to describe