

Paralegal Career Options Are Diverse



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Have you heard the comment: “being a paralegal is a dead-end job?” The people who I have heard make that comment were focused on having a paralegal titled job at a law firm, corporation, or attorney based government agency, as that was generally their interest and intent when they decided to become a paralegal. Recently, I read a post stating that the paralegal profession is doomed by technology (I wholeheartedly disagree). If concern about having a dead-job or doom and gloom is not causing you trepidation, are there other factors that are making you feel well beyond the need for a significant change in your paralegal career?

I have participated in numerous discussions in the office, at organization meetings, and at happy hour about the negative characteristics of the paralegal profession: high stress, underappreciated, over worked/under paid; not respected; crazy hours; expected to meet impossible deadlines; inadequate communications; etc. Those issues as well as feeling burned out, frustrated, stagnant, in a rut and cultural dissatisfaction are all drivers for paralegals seeking diverse career options. And there are actually some paralegals who just have a curiosity as to what else is “out there” that they are qualified to do and could pursue if so inclined.

It has been my privilege and pleasure to be a member of the adjunct faculty of an ABA approved Paralegal Program (my alma mater) since 2001. I spent over a decade as their Paralegal Internship Coordinator, helping students prepare for their entry into the paralegal career field. From 2014 - 2016 I took over the Job Bank Coordinator position to provide an electronic newsletter of local job postings (Phoenix Arizona Metropolitan Area) to students and graduates of the program. So I am very familiar with a large metropolitan area job market and the skills, knowledge, abilities and education that employers seek. The Program Director asked me to expand the job postings beyond the traditional paralegal jobs to include career opportunities for paralegals desiring more diverse career options. I was amazed and inspired by what I found.

So how did I determine which jobs could be possible career options for paralegals? I compiled a database from over a thousand paralegal/legal assistant/legal support job postings to determine the most commonly required skills/knowledge/education in the job postings. Some of the most frequently listed were: detail oriented, excellent oral/written communications, organized, effective time management, multi-tasking, excellent interpersonal skills, analytical, legal/general research, work with limited supervision, and problem solver (sound familiar?). The vast majority of those jobs required at least an associate degree. Then, I started searching for the *Required* and *Preferred* qualifications for a wide range of job titles and found many job opportunities that require those same skills, knowledge, abilities and education.

Job opportunities are definitely out there for those with these skills and abilities; some without additional education or training required, and some require additional skills, knowledge and/or education to meet the job qualifications (i.e., advanced degree or certifications). Since many paralegals embrace continuing legal education and lifelong learning, they would not find it difficult to embrace pursuing more education or skills development to expand their career opportunities. I have found Paralegals, as a group, to be highly competent and career focused individuals.

One of the key events that created a number of career opportunities for paralegals is the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, a federal law that set new or expanded requirements for all U.S. public company boards, management and public accounting firms. The law was enacted as a reaction to a number of major corporate and accounting scandals, including Enron and WorldCom. The growing maze of laws, regulations, licensing and permits increased the need for compliance positions to make sure companies and governing bodies stay in line with internal policies and regulatory requirements. For example, here is a portion of a job posting for a Compliance Specialist: advanced understanding of litigation and federal and state agency proceedings; ability to analyze and understand legal and business concepts related to compliance issues; excellent communications; excellent analytical skills; detail oriented; well organized; effectively manage high volume workload; high level of professionalism; confidence; integrity; ability to build relationships (sound familiar?).

We can likely all agree that change is hard (easier to complain than change), but change can also be stimulating and rewarding. Whether you are burned out, bored, or just curious, maybe it is time to get inspired and focused to develop a strategy for your next career move. If you are ready for a change and a challenge, here are just a few of the job titles I found that listed requirements that many paralegals can meet from entry to senior level. Some of the jobs requiring senior level experience are more relevant depending on the experience obtained working in a specialty area of law (i.e., real estate, criminal law, trusts/wills/estate planning, immigration, etc.). None of the following jobs were listed by law firms; they are from the private and government sectors. Very few of the job postings contained salary information as that was a factor that I also considered whenever possible. Remember that changing jobs always has multiple factors and aspects to consider well beyond just salary. So if a new job is something you are contemplating, hopefully this information will help you expand your search for options:

Senior Experience: Health Plan Compliance Specialist; Contract Compliance & Training Officer; Mitigation Specialist; Medicaid Compliance Officer; Contract Administrator;

Medical Marijuana Program Legal Liaison; Contract Management Specialist; Code Compliance Officer; U.S. Pretrial Services Officer; Compliance Supervisor; Contracts Administrator; Legal Support Supervisor; Controls & Compliance Analyst; Immigration Services Officer; Subrogation Team Leader; Real Estate Lease Administrator; Fiduciary Investigator; Environmental Compliance Specialist; Risk Management Administrator.

Entry Level (0 -2 Years) Experience: Operations Legal Specialist; Legal Coordinator; Legal Administrative Specialist; Operations Legal Clerk; Legal Staff Assistant; Fraud Support Representative; Credentialing Assistant; Case Processing Specialist; Initial Services Assistant; Justice Systems Clerk; Legal Support Assistant; Victim Notification Clerk; Assets Researcher, FOIA Information Specialist; Custodian of Records Assistant, Legal Social Media Specialist.

Bert Binder started her legal career in 1988 and has been employed as a Paralegal in both the government and private sectors. She has been a member of the adjunct faculty of an ABA approved Paralegal Program since 2001. Her career has evolved from traditional paralegal jobs, to Legal Technology Consultant, Director of Courtroom Technology for the fourth largest court system in the country, and currently, Paralegal Career Coach. Check out www.ParalegalCareerCoach.com for services and career information. Contact Bert if you would like to receive her e-Newsletter job postings.