

## **New Opportunities For Paralegals**

by Kathleen Call

These are dynamic times for the paralegal profession. Figures from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reveal that between now and the year 2006, the number of paralegals will increase 68 percent - nearly five times the average rise for all other professions.

This accelerated demand is being fueled by a significant increase in the scope of responsibilities for paralegals. Historically, these professionals have focused their efforts primarily on such tasks as coding documents, organizing presentation materials and conducting research on a selective basis. But recently, new activities have entered into and enhanced the job descriptions for paralegals. These tasks involve areas such as document preparation for discovery, in-depth legal research and complex case management.

Law firms eager to provide clients with maximum value welcome the growing involvement of paralegals. In a recent survey of attorneys developed by The Affiliates, 61 percent of respondents said that the increased use of paralegals has reduced costs; 96 percent praised this practice for its positive impact on client service.

This expanded role has significantly enhanced a paralegal's career growth possibilities, which is evidenced by the fact that of all the legal support positions filled by legal staffing firms, none have as wide a pay rate range as that of paralegals.

### **Defining Responsibilities**

Ten years ago, there was little or no distinction between paralegals and their respective duties. More recently, however, three clearly defined career levels have emerged.

Entry-level legal assistants often serve as coders and play a critical role in handling many of the details necessary for litigation support and other projects. This covers everything from imaging documents and bates stamping to data entry and organizing exhibits.

As these individuals gain experience and advance to the position of junior or mid-level paralegal, they are likely to become extensively involved in trial preparation. Supervisory skills are important here, as it's often necessary to direct the work of entry-level paralegals, document clerks and others involved with pending litigation. Legal assistants at this level are also called upon to produce interrogatories and discovery requests for an attorney's review. Other activities include assisting in the preparation of trial-related motions. Senior paralegals are involved in the strategic side of legal work. They frequently meet with clients and work closely with attorneys. During trial preparation, these professionals also assume the role of team supervisor, in which they oversee such

important activities as trial preparation, court filings and progress reports to associates and attorneys.

## **Identifying Opportunities**

When considering career directions, paralegals should assess many factors, including geography, business trends and specialized expertise. Senior-level paralegals, for example, are required in many industries, yet demand varies by region. Washington, D.C.-based firms currently seek paralegals familiar with the telecommunications industry and the intricacies of FCC filings. In California's Silicon Valley, the most active practice areas include intellectual property and other technology-related concerns.

Overall, the field with the most opportunities for paralegals continues to be litigation. Demand is particularly strong for professionals who have specialized expertise with complex, large-scale matters. Extensive involvement in the discovery process, the ability to work with automated litigation support systems, familiarity with case management and supervision of trial preparation teams are among the skills that make candidates the most marketable.

## **Getting Started**

For those seeking to enter the paralegal profession, the most important requirement among law firms and legal departments is experience. It is best to have spent at least one year in the legal field this could include work as a legal secretary or office support clerk. A bachelor's degree has become mandatory for entry-level candidates and paralegal certificates are highly beneficial, especially in the absence of practical legal experience.

At first it may seem a daunting task to find work when you have no practical law background. However, many opportunities are available for candidates with advanced computer proficiency and a willingness to work extended hours. Few professions are as information-intensive as law. >From coding and organizing documents on CD-ROM to utilizing the Internet and other online services for research, technology is playing a greater role every day in the practice of law.

Entry and junior-level paralegal candidates with expertise in spreadsheet, word processing and database software packages are welcome additions to a legal team. Those who master applications such as PC Docs, Paradox or Summation are especially valued.

## **Technology Developments and Client Needs Drive Demand for Paralegals**

Developments in technology and increased client demands will continue to create greater opportunities for legal assistants. Possibilities are exceptionally rich in the field of litigation. With attorneys devoting their energies to developing legal arguments and spending time directly with clients, they will be counting on paralegals to direct the increasingly technical side of trial preparation.

In addition, law firm management better appreciates the contributions of paralegals, rewarding them with greater responsibilities which have come to define the new career hierarchy for these professionals. Today's paralegals have the opportunity achieve substantial career growth and long-term success in the legal field.

*Kathleen Call is executive director of The Affiliates®, a leading staffing service specializing in the placement of legal professionals with law firms and corporate legal departments. Based in Menlo Park, Calif., The Affiliates has offices in major cities throughout the United States and Canada.*