How to Find A Way Out of Paralegal Burnout

Written by Josh Kern

Being a paralegal *is* stressful, and paralegal burnout is real. Paralegals work notoriously long hours, and their tasks include everything from office management to doing case research and preparing and editing legal contracts and documents. Paralegal's tasks have a direct impact on the outcomes of matters and cases. In addition, paralegals often work on critical documents that are presented in court.

Because of this, paralegals' bosses—who are often stressed-out attorneys—can be demanding perfectionists who require an extremely high standard of work from their legal support staff.

A mistake or omission can be incredibly costly—to the firm and attorney. These can be monetary costs or a negative impact on the law firm's reputation. Also, clients may lose trust in their lawyer, because their case or matter heavily depends on the accuracy of the paralegal's work.

In short, paralegals do difficult, challenging, and high-stakes work—with stress as the inherent outcome. But that doesn't mean it needs to become debilitating. It's important to recognize the signs of stress and burnout, and address them before they threaten your mental and physical health.

Check out our resource hub for Paralegals.

What is paralegal burnout?

"Paralegal burnout" isn't a medical diagnosis in the traditional sense. Burnout generally describes how multiple stress-related factors contribute to a feeling of overwhelming exhaustion. A snowball effect typically occurs when the stress means you can no longer effectively do your job. As a result, you become more stressed and anxious about your ability to do your job.

Factors that contribute to stress and eventual burnout include:

- Unclear or constantly changing expectations
- Lack of control or ability to make decisions
- Negativity or "playing politics" among co-workers

- Heavy workload
- An imbalance between “busy” and “slow” periods
- Lack of support

Symptoms of paralegal burnout can include

- Feeling constantly tired or drained
- Regular illness, headaches, and stomach aches
- Muscle pain
- Feelings of self-doubt and helplessness
- Loss of motivation and detachment, both at work and home

Why you need to address paralegal burnout right away

During busy periods at a law firm, or if you’re already feeling drained, it may seem easier to ignore the issue of paralegal burnout. But if you’re experiencing any signs of burnout, you need to take action right away. The negative impacts of paralegal burnout can be far-reaching and include:

- High blood pressure and/or heart disease
- Decreased immune response
- Dependence on vices such as drugs or alcohol as coping mechanisms
- Insomnia
- Depression

It’s essential to address paralegal burnout—before its harmful effects become long-term or chronic.

How to address and mitigate paralegal burnout

To make sure stress doesn’t transform into burnout, make a plan to keep burnout at bay before it becomes a long-term problem. Use the following steps as a starting point:

Create a goal

Having goals to work towards can help you avoid feelings of hopelessness or being “stuck” during stressful periods. These goals can be personal and professional.

Personal development goals might include becoming a better communicator or developing more repeatable, reliable routines.

Professional goals might include helping your law firm achieve specific results (such as generating more revenue), joining professional associations, or taking additional training in specific practice areas.

These goals will help give you a clear sense of direction as you navigate through the day-to-day of being a paralegal.

Set a timeline

Remember that your personal goals—especially your professional goals—should be SMART goals: That is, specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-based.

The last one is critical to keeping you on track and preventing you from becoming overwhelmed. Having a clear timeline in mind with key dates for milestones and specific end goals can keep you better motivated. A timeline also helps ensure you're focusing on the things that help you achieve your goals.

Develop boundaries in the workplace

Setting boundaries is difficult at most jobs. It's even more difficult for paralegals in the demanding legal profession, where lawyers routinely work long hours themselves.

Communicating early and often is the best strategy for setting boundaries. When you begin working with a firm or an attorney, be clear on what your working hours are and the types of work you are comfortable doing. Just as importantly, ask your manager or the attorney you're working with to state their expectations clearly.

If your boundaries are stretched or ignored, bring it up right away. If you can, frame these conversations in ways that make it clear to your manager or attorney how their asks will affect them. Saying "I'm tired" or "I'm stressed" may not garner much sympathy. Instead, outline how the ask will impact the firm. For example, if an attorney asks you to take on more work than expected, explain how this new task will impact the previously assigned tasks: "If I spend more time on this work, the client's case might suffer because I don't have sufficient time to complete the previous task."

Take time off

Vacation or paid time off (PTO) is typically negotiated upon hiring. But many professionals, including paralegals, do not take advantage of their time off. Be sure to book time off. Taking a day or even a half-day off can help clear your mind. If possible, booking a vacation or even a staycation to rest at home can alleviate stress by giving you something to look forward to.

Speak to a therapist or career counselor

Talking to a third party can give you a different perspective on what you're experiencing at work. You may not even realize how much stress you are dealing with at your law firm. Or, you may not have noticed that your boundaries are being pushed.

Many employers are providing increased access to mental health support for their employees. If yours isn't one of them, that might indicate that it's time to consider a career change.

Alternative careers for paralegals within legal

Making a career change is not an easy decision. But if you feel you are underappreciated in your current role or if your current position is hurting your health, a change can be the best decision you make.

And the great news is, as a paralegal, you have plenty of options available to you.

First, note that "career change" doesn't necessarily mean getting out of the legal space. Often, it's not the paralegal profession that is the issue, but rather the practice area or type of law firm.

If you're experiencing paralegal burnout but would still like to stay in the legal industry, consider an alternative career within legal. Here are some potential paths forward for paralegals who are unhappy in their current roles:

Move to another department within your current firm

If you work at a larger law firm with different departments, switching to another department can have a transformative effect on your work life. The opportunity to do different work with different people, without the stress of changing firms, can re-energize you.

You'll need to speak to your manager or your human resources representative about your desire to move. Have a clear explanation of your reasons for wanting to change departments and your transferable skillsets.

Join a smaller, boutique law firm

Boutique law firms are typically smaller firms of up to 20 attorneys that offer specialized services in specific or niche practice areas. A boutique firm will often have fewer clients and a smaller staff.

Such a role might initially seem like more work for a paralegal. But it's also an opportunity: To have more responsibility, do more hands-on legal work, and work more closely with clients. A smaller firm with fewer people will see you as a valuable part of the team, rather than just one of many assistants at a big firm. A smaller firm will also more likely view your professional growth as an investment and take the time to nurture it.

Also, newer boutique firms tend to have a more modern outlook on work-life balance and mental health.

Switch to a different practice area

Different practice areas require different skill sets, and some will be a better fit for different personalities. For example, if you like working directly with people, family law might be a good fit for you. On the other hand, if people stress you out, but you love working with numbers, you may feel more comfortable in a corporate law environment.

You'll face questions from hiring managers about your desire to switch practice areas and how well you fit those new practice areas. Focus on your transferable skills, such as communication or attention to detail, and how they'll benefit you in the new role.

If your firm is not supportive of your move, you might need to look at options at other firms.

Establish a career in legal technology

Technology like cloud computing and software-as-a-service is transforming the practice of law. These tools are helping firms manage cases more easily, track and bill clients more efficiently, and intake and communicate with clients more effectively.

For firms that are hesitant or slow to change, that technology needs a champion. By establishing yourself as a subject matter expert in legal technology and leading the charge to implement new solutions, you may be able to carve out a new role for yourself in the

field. Alternatively, legal technology vendors are also looking for talent with legal experience, in sales, support, marketing, and more.

Join a not-for-profit organization

Many legal-adjacent not-for-profit organizations require the expertise and experience of paralegals, including those helping everyday people defend their rights. Organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union or the National Immigration Law Center employ lawyers and paralegals. While the work itself may not be any less stressful, you may find additional job satisfaction when your efforts are contributing to a greater cause.

Move to an in-house legal department

Outside of non-profits, many businesses have in-house legal departments. These in-house legal departments may be responsible for defending the company against lawsuits or doing due diligence for mergers and acquisitions. Working for an in-house legal department is different from working at a firm. This is because the department serves only one "client"—the company. This reduces the stress of meeting the needs of multiple clients to maintain the firm's overall business health. It also reduces the focus on billable hours.

Alternative careers for paralegals outside of legal

If you're experiencing paralegal burnout but none of the above career paths sound appealing to you, or if you want to leave the legal industry, you still have options. Paralegals have strong transferable skills that are an asset to many industries and types of businesses.

Transferable and in-demand paralegal skills include:

- Planning, organization, and time management
- Client service
- Written and verbal communication
- Negotiation
- Computer and digital literacy
- Problem-solving
- Attention to detail
- Compliance
- Teamwork and collaboration

The above skills will serve paralegals well in any of the following careers (and more):

- **Real estate**: Realtors have to deal with people in the important, often life-changing situation of buying (or selling) a home. They also have to deal with contracts and paperwork. These require an intricate understanding of the multiple moving parts inherent in the buying and selling of property.
- **Insurance broker**: Insurance brokers need fine analytical skills to help find their clients the best provider and coverage. They work with people and handle extensive paperwork.
- **Administrator or executive assistant**: Regardless of industry, any role that requires attention to detail and managing big personalities will be a good fit for a former paralegal.
- **Project management**: Managing projects—including the people involved—makes use of all of the transferable skills that paralegals have to offer, including project management, negotiating timelines, solving problems, and communicating often.

Don’t become trapped with paralegal burnout

It’s important to remember that paralegal burnout is real and can have severe consequences for your physical and mental health. Pay attention to the signs, and make changes to your working life as needed to keep your level of stress within a manageable range.

One way to do that is to remember that you don’t have to remain in your current role. As a paralegal, you’re learning and mastering valuable transferable skills every day that will serve you well, either in the legal industry or in another field.

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