Types of Paralegals and the Work They Do

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Just as there's more than one type of lawyer, there are also many different types of paralegals—and there are many paths a paralegal's career can take.

While the American Bar Association (ABA) offers a fairly basic definition of a paralegal, there really is no way to create a singular job description for a paralegal. Specifically, the ABA states that a paralegal is a qualified person who performs substantive legal work on behalf of a lawyer. It's a misconception that paralegals all do the same type of work, as the roles, responsibilities, and areas of expertise can vary greatly from paralegal to paralegal.

With this in mind, if you're a paralegal—or if you're a lawyer looking to hire a paralegal—you'll find it useful to understand the various fields and work duties that different types of paralegals can take on.

Read on to learn more about the different types of paralegals and the factors that influence the average pay of paralegals. We'll also cover alternative careers for paralegals—within and outside of the legal industry. To begin, however, let's start with the basics.

What does a paralegal do?

Simply put, paralegals can do many of the legal tasks that a lawyer would do so long as attorneys supervise them. The only exceptions are tasks proscribed by law.

While paralegals *cannot* practice law, give legal advice, accept or reject a case, set fees, or appear in court or at depositions, paralegals *can* complete a wide array of substantive legal work on behalf of supervising attorneys, including:

- Managing client communication and keeping clients up-to-date on their cases.
- Reviewing and organizing client files.
- Conducting legal research.
- Preparing and drafting certain legal documents.
- Conducting interviews with clients or witnesses.
- Assisting at closings and trials.

For more detail on what paralegals can and cannot do at a law firm, read our guide to what paralegals can do.

Education requirements for becoming a paralegal

As mentioned earlier, the ABA defines a paralegal as someone "qualified by education, training or work experience." This qualification can come through a variety of avenues and doesn't always require formal education or certification. However, some states qualify paralegals differently or require paralegals to be certified, so be sure to check the specific rules for your jurisdiction.

Beyond minimum requirements, many law firms look for paralegals with some formal education (such as an associate's or bachelor's degree) or paralegal certification. This often means earning either a certificate of completion, which means that you've completed a paralegal education program. Or, law firms could also look for a paralegal certification—which refers to having completed a certification exam or meeting specified certification requirements.

To learn more about paralegal education and certification, you can look at these available resources:

- ABA Standing Committee on Paralegals.
- The National Association of Legal Assistants (NALA).
- The National Federation of Paralegal Associations (NFPA).
- You can also seek more state-specific information by finding paralegal associations by state online.

Additionally, there are also many less-formal opportunities for paralegals to gain knowledge, education, and training through avenues like paralegal networking, CLE courses, and even legal conferences.

Learn more about becoming a paralegal in a specific state.

What are the different levels of paralegals?

There are many different levels and types of paralegals—depending on an individual paralegal's experience and area of interest. Generalist paralegals might work at a smaller firm on a wide array of general paralegal tasks. There are also practice area-specific paralegals who focus on the ins and outs of a particular practice area. There are also paralegal specialists who may support lawyers and judges.

Average pay for paralegals

Different types of paralegals can be paid varying salaries. The average pay for paralegals can vary depending on multiple factors like law firm seniority and geographical location. Paralegals (and legal assistants) in Connecticut, California, and Washington had the highest average salaries in 2020.

As a starting point, we can look to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), which shows the median pay in 2020 for paralegals and legal assistants as $52,920 (note: the BLS combines paralegals and legal assistants, which impacts this figure).

However, the most dramatic impact on paralegal salary is often the field of law that you work in. In addition, paralegals can earn extra income by taking on freelance paralegal work. Stay up to date about the latest paralegal news by subscribing to paralegal newsletters.

The different fields for paralegals to work in

There are many different types of paralegals you could choose to become—below are just a few areas different types of paralegals may focus on.

Government

Whether employed by local, state, or federal government law offices, government paralegals are the types of paralegals who assist government legal counsel. Paralegal roles in this field may focus on research (for example, of regulations), drafting communications, and processing contracts and legal documents.

Working as a government paralegal is ideal for a paralegal that works well under pressure and enjoys working with legal documents. However, some roles may include opportunities to assist with community outreach (depending on the branch of government and the specific role). Additionally, because government paralegals are government employees, these roles often call for more formal education than other paralegal fields.

The average salary for a U.S. government paralegal is $77,359 per year according to Indeed.

Family practice

Paralegals working in family law assist lawyers who are representing clients in family law matters. These matters could include custody disputes, child adoption, and divorce cases. In family law, paralegals will often spend time drafting court documents, organizing financial documents and files, and drafting correspondence.

Family law deals with issues that are often highly emotional and stressful for clients. That's why paralegals in this area will be most successful if they have excellent communication skills, patience, and client service skills.

The average salary for a family law paralegal is $69,530 per year according to Indeed.

Criminal Law

Paralegals working in criminal law assist criminal defence attorneys or lawyers at prosecutors' offices. In this field, paralegals may be tasked to help draft paperwork, conduct interviews, gather discovery information, draft motions, and conduct research to help build the legal case.

In terms of earning potential, criminal law paralegals tend to earn salaries on the lower end of the range for paralegals according to our research.

The average salary for a criminal law paralegal is $47,496 per year according to ZipRecruiter.

Divorce

When it comes to divorce law, paralegals often play an important role in assisting a lawyer. Paralegals can assist divorce lawyers in gathering essential paperwork, preparing court filings and legal documents (such as separation and divorce documents), helping to conduct interviews and legal research, and scheduling.

In this area of law, it's essential for paralegals to stay organized to ensure they handle all documents properly and schedule all appointments and court dates. In addition to a high attention to detail and aptitude for documentation, divorce paralegals also require a high level of client service, as divorce clients are often in the midst of a stressful and emotional time.

Falling under the field of family law, the average salary for divorce paralegal is $69,530 per year.

Litigation

Paralegals with an interest in trial law are often drawn to the field of litigation. Litigation paralegals support lawyers who are taking a case to trial—which means that litigation paralegals work in a fast-paced environment.

Litigation paralegals are often assigned tasks required to prepare for trial—such as interviewing witnesses and overseeing discovery. Similarly, litigation paralegals may assist their supervising attorney in court at trials. Spending a lot of time in court can be exciting for some, and stressful for others—where a paralegal falls on this spectrum may determine if they choose to focus on this area of law. Personal injury paralegals may follow extensive checklists that cover everything they can help with for a case!

The average salary for a litigation paralegal is $56,159 per year.

Intellectual property

Working in the world of intellectual property litigation, patents, copyright, and trademarks, intellectual property paralegals support their supervising attorneys in creating or maintaining intellectual property (such as a patent) or litigating intellectual property matters. Intellectual property paralegals complete tasks like communicating with clients, conducting research, and drafting applications.

Aside from the types of task and business-oriented subject matter that come with being an intellectual property paralegal, paralegals in this field also benefit from having a wide range of employers to choose from. When it comes to intellectual property law, paralegals aren't limited to working for a law firm. They may also find employment at a large corporation or the government—which means plenty of opportunity. Intellectual property paralegals also have high income potential, as paralegals in this field tend to make above the national average for paralegals and legal assistants ($52,920).

The average salary for an intellectual property law paralegal is $84,259 per year.

Real estate

Dealing with the intricacies of real estate law, real estate paralegals assist attorneys with matters related to property—from construction to purchasing to sales.

Working as a paralegal in this area of law requires exceptional attention to detail and multi-tasking skills, as typical paralegal tasks (such as filing documents or drafting lease agreements) are often focused on important legal paperwork and contracts. With this in

mind, being a real estate paralegal will be a good fit for individuals that thrive on working with documents.

The average salary for a real estate law paralegal is $53,145 per year.

Alternative careers for paralegals

Working as a paralegal is rewarding in many ways. But it can also be stressful to maintain a challenging workload within an already tough, high-stakes legal profession. It's also not uncommon for paralegals to feel varying degrees of paralegal burnout.

If you're currently a paralegal, but you're considering taking a break or making a career pivot, the good news is that your hard-earned paralegal skills can also transfer into many other jobs. You could transfer to a different department, joining a different law firm, or finding a new, non-paralegal role.

Here are a few alternative careers for different types of paralegals—within and outside of the legal industry—that match well with a paralegal's existing skill set:

Project manager in the legal industry

Project managers strategize, plan, execute, and revise projects on behalf of businesses. Legal project managers take skills and tools of project management—including planning projects, managing risk, and allocating budget and resources—and apply them to the needs of law firms. This is where someone with paralegal skills comes in.

Many of the key skills that a paralegal needs (like multitasking to manage complex projects and teams, communication, problem solving, and organization) are foundational to the success of a project manager. And, when project managers work in the legal industry, they do best with a healthy amount of legal-specific knowledge and experience—which is exactly what a paralegal already possesses.

Legal marketer

These are professionals who create and manage marketing strategies for law firms, attorneys, and legal clients. Legal marketers tap into an understanding of what potential legal clients want and need, and find ways to connect a law firm to those clients through marketing and brand awareness.

Paralegals who are skilled at client communication and experienced in working with the law likely already have a firm grasp of what clients look for when seeking legal advice, and can use that audience knowledge to guide marketing efforts like branding initiatives or

content marketing.

Contracts administrator

As the name implies, a contracts administrator deals with contracts of all kinds (for example, contracts for the purchase of services). This could mean taking care of everything from preparing contracts, negotiating them, and reviewing contract documents.

Successful contracts administrators must be excellent communicators, possess exceptional attention to detail, and be very organized—which are all also qualities of a successful paralegal.

Compliance specialist

A compliance specialist (or compliance officer) helps their company to stay within their industry's applicable regulatory framework. This means compliance specialists must stay on top of and interpret regulations, and create policies to ensure the company or organization stays within these regulations. Then, they have to implement those policies to ensure compliance is met. When issues arise, compliance specialists may investigate potential violations. Compliance specialists are increasingly common in industries like healthcare and pharmaceuticals.

There are many overlapping skills between paralegals and compliance specialists. Due to the nature of the role, compliance specialists must maintain high ethical standards, in addition to an ability to clearly communicate with a variety of individuals and teams within a company. Compliance specialists must also be comfortable conducting research and problem solving.

Legal staffing recruiter

If you've worked as a paralegal, you already understand the importance of hiring the right staff for a law firm. Legal staffing recruiters use recruitment strategies, networking, and other talent management tools to help connect law firms with qualified employees, which could include finding lawyers, legal assistants, and paralegals.

With any type of recruiting, communication, relationship-building, and critical-thinking skills are key to finding great candidates. When working within the legal industry, however, legal recruiters with industry knowledge and a familiarity with networking within the legal profession have an advantage.

These are just a few examples of alternative career paths that different types of paralegals can take. The key takeaway here is that paralegals learn many skills throughout their journey as a paralegal. That toolkit of skills can be applied to many types of paralegal careers. But those skills can also help you succeed in many roles outside of being a paralegal.

A paralegal has infinite paths

The opportunities for different types of paralegals as legal professionals are seemingly endless. Whether that means as a generalist paralegal, as a paralegal focused on a specific practice area, or as a professional using paralegal skills to thrive in an alternative career.

If you're currently a paralegal (or you're hoping to become one), taking the time to investigate your options can help ensure you're on the best path for your particular professional background and interests. Now is also the time to look to the future, as paralegals can drive innovation at law firms. From embracing the possibilities of paralegal automation to using your firm's legal practice management software to make your paralegal work more efficient and effective. For example, Clio Manage's case management features make it easy for paralegals to organize and review client files on behalf of their supervising lawyer.

Paralegals are an integral part of the legal profession and they aren't all the same. By understanding the different avenues available, you can play up your strengths, become invaluable to the right legal team, and grow your career.

About Clio

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