What Can Paralegals Do: A Guide for Lawyers

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Attorneys are, by nature, busy. So what can paralegals do to help? When supervised by a licensed lawyer, paralegals can take on substantive legal tasks. This ultimately saves you time and money.

The reality is that most lawyers can use the support. As the newest *Legal Trends Report* research outlines, the average lawyer spends just 2.9 hours on billable work per day. By assigning appropriate work to qualified paralegals, you free up time to focus on billable work. This means your firm can run more efficiently and you can give your clients a more client-centered experience.

In the following guide, we'll outline what attorneys need to know about what paralegals can and cannot do. We'll also include how paralegals can help your law firm become more efficient while providing better client-centered service.

What can paralegals do?

In the majority of US states, paralegals can work on many of the legal tasks that an attorney would, except those proscribed by law—as long as they're supervised by a lawyer. By taking on certain tasks (like handling legal paperwork and conducting legal research), paralegals improve law firm efficiency, save lawyers time, and help provide a better overall client-centered service.

It's important to note that several US states have started programs allowing non-lawyers to practice law in specific situations, and some Canadian provinces, including Ontario, have similar provisions.

Here are some of the key services a paralegal can provide to improve your practice:

Manage client communication

Client-centered communication is an art, and paralegals can be an important part of the picture. Clients want to feel informed, listened to, and up-to-date on the status of their case. But it can be difficult for lawyers to manage client communication on their own. This is where paralegals can come in.

Interacting with clients is one of the key responsibilities of a paralegal. Paralegals can help clients feel heard and informed on their case, without taking up the lawyer's time. This can go a long way towards providing a positive, client-centered experience. Not only that, but client interaction is a great way for paralegals to further develop their communication and writing skills.

Review and organize client files

Dealing with client files doesn't have to be time-consuming for lawyers. By using tools like Clio Manage's case management features, law firms can streamline and automate redundant tasks while making it easy for staff members to collaborate on client files. This allows paralegals to seamlessly assist with organizing and reviewing client files on behalf of a supervising attorney.

Conduct legal research

As a lawyer, if you're doing legal research manually, you're likely losing valuable time. Under a lawyer's supervision, paralegals can take the time-consuming task of conducting factual and legal research off of the lawyer's plate.

Tech tools can also help automate and make the legal research process more efficient. Apps to consider include:

- Docket Alarm for docket research and legal analytics
- Logikcull, a cloud-based eDiscovery solution

Consider using these legal technology tools to help your firm and paralegals save time and be more effective with legal research.

Prepare legal documents

When thinking about the question of "what can paralegals do," preparing legal documents is probably an obvious answer. From drafting discovery notices and pleadings to prepping documents for transactions, paralegals can be a great help by preparing legal documents on an attorney's behalf.

To further streamline your law firm's processes with legal documents, Clio Grow's legal document automation and e-signature software makes it simple and secure to create and store legal documents at your firm.

With automation technology advancing rapidly, it is important for paralegals to stay on top of what AI can automate (such as document review, legal research, etc) and where their focus needs to be. Read this post, Will AI Replace Paralegals, to learn more.

Interview clients and witnesses

Conducting interviews of clients and witnesses is an important (and often interesting) task that a paralegal may take on. It's important, as always, that paralegals respect the same client confidentiality rules that a lawyer would. A trained paralegal can also have excellent interview and interpersonal skills to assist with interviews.

Assist at closings and trials

Paralegals can help their supervising lawyers with closings and trials. Paralegals can help by gathering case information, assisting with legal research, or other tasks on behalf of the lawyer.

Help your practice save time and do more billable work

Other than supporting day-to-day work at your legal office, what can paralegals do? Here's the key benefit of paralegals for your law practice: They can help you save time. This means that you have more time to spend on billable work, which increases your profitability.

Did you know lawyers spend a significant portion of their workdays on legal administrative support tasks that don't bring in revenue? Specifically, lawyers only spend an average of 2.9 hours of an 8-hour work day on billable work (according to the most recent *Legal Trends Report* research). By delegating non-billable tasks to a paralegal, your firm can be more productive. This way, you'll also free up more of your time to focus on billable work.

Increase law firm efficiency

By delegating support and non-billable legal tasks to a paralegal, you can boost law firm efficiency in multiple ways. Assigning specific tasks to your paralegal means allowing them to focus and excel in those areas. For example, a skilled paralegal may be excellent at conducting legal research quickly and efficiently, especially if that's one of their primary daily job responsibilities. Additionally, while your paralegal takes support tasks off your plate, you can spend more time on billable work. Overall, the law firm then becomes more productive. With tools like paralegal checklists, this benefit can grow even further.

Additionally, paralegals often communicate regularly with clients and other staff members at your firm. Because of this, paralegals can help drive innovation and growth by helping lawyers identify growth opportunities and ways to increase efficiency through avenues like technology adoption.

Pass on cost savings to clients

Using a paralegal to assist with legal tasks doesn't just make you more efficient—it also saves you (and your clients) money. Because paralegals charge lower rates than you do as an attorney, delegating certain tasks to them means a lower overall cost for your firm's services. When you pass these savings on to clients, you deliver a more positive client experience—it's a win-win.

What is a paralegal not allowed to do?

Now that we've addressed the question of "what can paralegals do" under a lawyer's supervision, let's take a look at what a paralegal is not allowed to do. The *ABA Model Guidelines for the Utilization of Paralegal Services* can be a useful resource. We'll outline the key points below:

Practice law

Can a paralegal practice law? Put simply: No. Paralegals may have significant legal knowledge, but they aren't licensed to work as attorneys—so they cannot practice law. This is true in the vast majority of cases, however, some states have programs allowing non-lawyers to practice law in specific situations, under programs aimed at providing viable alternatives to hiring a lawyer for uncomplicated legal needs when the client cannot afford a lawyer while maintaining professional standards required by each state. Some Canadian provinces including Ontario have similar provisions.

Are paralegals able to own law firms? Learn here: Are Non-Lawyers Allowed to Own a Law Firm?

Give legal advice

While paralegals are knowledgeable and spend time communicating with clients, they are not lawyers. Therefore, generally, paralegals should never give legal advice. In most states, when interacting with clients, they must communicate in a way that is not seen or construed as legal advice. As mentioned above, there *are* a few exceptions to this rule, as

several states allow for non-lawyers who've qualified for limited licenses to provide legal advice in specific situations, and in Ontario, paralegals can advise on some specific Ontario laws.

Accept or reject a case

Similarly, it's not up to a paralegal to establish a lawyer's relationship with a client, so they cannot accept or reject a case.

Appear in court or at depositions

Because paralegals are not lawyers, they are generally not allowed to represent clients in court or take depositions.

It's also important to be careful how you introduce or represent your paralegal with a client or in a court. The paralegal and their supervising lawyer should never allow clients or the court to have the impression that the paralegal is a lawyer.

Set attorney fees

A paralegal is not responsible (or allowed) to set the fees to be charged by a lawyer.

Ethical considerations for hiring paralegals

Remember: Paralegals work under the supervision of lawyers. As valuable as paralegals can be to your firm, it's important to understand the limits of what work they can take on. You must also understand your role and responsibilities as a supervising lawyer. You never want to encounter any potential ethical landmines when it comes to using nonlawyer staff at your firm.

Lawyers are responsible for the work of their paralegals: As ABA Model Rule 5.3 outlines in regards to non lawyer assistance, lawyers must make reasonable efforts to make sure that their nonlawyer employees (like paralegals) conduct themselves in a way that is consistent with the professional conduct rules that lawyers follow. Lawyers are also required to promptly take reasonable remedial action if a non lawyer assistant violates the rules—so it's important to take your supervising role seriously.

Ultimately, it's your responsibility to know the rules for working with paralegals in your jurisdiction, so check your state bar association guidelines and ensure you follow them. Your local paralegal organization can be a helpful resource for further information about hiring paralegals.

Now you know what paralegals can do

Hiring a paralegal or paralegal team can help improve your law firm's efficiency, while also proving a better client-centered service to your clients.

If you've ever found yourself wondering "what can paralegals do?", now you know. On that note, well-qualified paralegals can offer valuable support to a law firm. Paralegals can work on various legal tasks like completing legal paperwork, facilitating communication between the lawyer and client, and conducting legal research. Under the supervision of a licensed lawyer, paralegals can assist with tasks that an attorney would otherwise do.

Note: *This article pertains solely to practices within the United States. Some states and Canadian provinces may permit paralegals to practice law independently in certain circumstances. This post is provided for informational purposes only. It does not constitute legal, business, or accounting advice.*

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