What Is a Legal Assistant? Their Role and How It Helps Lawyers

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If you've ever asked yourself, "What is a legal assistant?", you're not alone. While the term may seem self-explanatory, legal assistants are not the same as paralegals.

While paralegals certainly have much to offer law firms, they fill a different role at a legal practice. Paralegals are focused on tackling substantive legal work on behalf of supervising attorneys. Conversely, though legal assistants also work on behalf of attorneys, they focus more on administrative support tasks. This distinction is more important than it may seem at first glance. Law firms who fail to recognize legal assistants' unique roles may miss out on the value legal assistants can bring to a law firm.

From the types of tasks legal assistants typically take on to tips for hiring and working with legal assistants, this blog post will cover the key benefits lawyers can gain from working with legal assistants. Armed with more knowledge about what a legal assistant really can offer, you can make more informed decisions when considering bringing a legal assistant onto your team.

What is a legal assistant?

Legal assistants, also known as paralegals, support lawyers by organizing legal documents, conducting research, and assisting during trials and hearings. They help gather case information and ensure the thorough organization of facts and paperwork, aiding lawyers in trial preparation.

Part of the value of a legal assistant is that their exact role and responsibilities can vary depending on a law firm's specific needs. However, the Association of Legal Administrators (ALA) categorizes legal assistants as individuals whose work output includes some administrative and secretarial tasks to assist an attorney, with some tasks overlapping with that of a paralegal. These paralegal tasks include legal research if the individual has sufficient training and experience.

Legal assistants work closely with attorneys to take care of some of the time-consuming administrative work that reduces lawyer efficiency and productivity. The latest *Legal Trends Report* research highlighted how much of an issue this is for many attorneys.

Specifically, the report found that lawyers only spend an average of 2.9 hours each day on billable work. It's clear that many firms could benefit from the help of a legal assistant.

What is a legal assistant job description?

A legal assistant completes necessary routine tasks on behalf of a lawyer. The job often includes elements of administration, customer service, and coordination.

What does a legal assistant do?

As we've established, legal assistants support law firms by working with others on the team—from paralegals to attorneys—on behalf of lawyers. But what exactly does a legal assistant do?

Typical legal assistant tasks include:

- Managing client communications and customer service. From answering calls and emails to responding to a live chat to greeting clients, legal assistants can help make a law firm's communications more responsive. With legal assistants, firms can deliver a better client-centered experience.
- Calendar coordination. Legal assistants can schedule meetings and interviews and make appointments for lawyers and clients.
- Legal research and writing. On behalf of an attorney, a legal assistant may be able to conduct legal research and help with drafting or proofreading legal documents and correspondence.
- Client billing and accounting. Legal assistants can help lawyers send out and process invoices, as well assist with resolving billing issues with clients.
- Document organization and management. This could include tasks like gathering documents that a lawyer needs for a case or filing and organizing documents.

What is a legal assistant vs. a paralegal?

We've explored the answer to the question of "What is a legal assistant" earlier in this blog post. While the terms "legal assistant" and "paralegal" are often used interchangeably, the roles of today's legal assistants and paralegals are different. In fact, the American Bar Association (ABA) only revised its definition of a paralegal to remove the term "legal assistant" in 2020.

Legal assistants and paralegals are legal professionals who support the work of attorneys —they both add value to a law firm. But they are not the same.

Legal assistants focus on administrative tasks

As outlined in the previous section, legal assistants take on routine tasks on behalf of lawyers. For law firms where lawyers spend lots of time on administrative work, hiring a legal assistant can improve law firm efficiency. A legal assistant can take these administrative tasks off of an attorney's to-do list. Lawyers can then spend more time on billable work.

Do you need a degree to become a legal assistant?

Legal assistants don't typically require formal education beyond a high school diploma or GED. However, in a competitive job market, law firms often seek candidates with additional credentials or experience that make them stand out. As a result, many legal assistants complete additional legal studies (such as a two-year associate's degree or legal assistant certificate) or gain legal training on the job to boost their qualifications.

How can you become a certified legal assistant?

While not necessarily required, legal assistants can become certified by completing formal paralegal studies and passing a certification exam via recognized professional organizations such as the National Association of Legal Assistants, Inc. (NALA) or the National Federation of Paralegal Associations (NFPA).

Paralegals complete substantive legal work on behalf of (and under the supervision of) attorneys

What can paralegals do? Though paralegals cannot practice law or give legal advice, they can take on more legal-specific tasks for lawyers. Examples include interacting with legal clients, preparing legal documents, conducting interviews, assisting at trials, and more.

Hiring a paralegal can be an effective solution for law firms that need assistance with substantive legal work. A paralegal is also more cost-effective than another lawyer. If your firm is struggling with lawyers who are overloaded with substantive legal tasks, low billable hours, or unhappy clients and customer service complaints, you could benefit from working with a paralegal.

Additionally, because many paralegals focus on a practice area, firms can find a paralegal with experience working with lawyers in their specific area of law.

Because paralegals take on higher-level legal work on behalf of lawyers, they often acquire more formal education or certification. However, many states don't require formal paralegal education or training. The ABA outlines educational opportunities and certifications for paralegals.

What is the average salary for a legal assistant?

The typical salary of a legal assistant in the United States ranges from $35,000 to $75,000, with the national average salary for a legal assistant currently coming in at $51,468, according to data from Indeed. This data suggests that legal assistants tend to make less per year than paralegals, who make an average of $58,379 annually.

Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) supports this salary range. According to the BLS, the 2022 median pay for paralegals and legal assistants was $59,200 per year or $28.46 per hour. While these statistics provide a general idea of what the average salary of a legal assistant is, it's important to note that the BLS does not differentiate between the two roles. The average pay for legal assistants varies—as it does for lawyers—depending on factors like practice area, experience, and location. For example, legal assistants working in metropolitan cities (where there is a higher cost of living) and certain states typically garner higher pay.

Working with a freelance legal assistant

Now that we understand "what is a legal assistant," we understand that most lawyers and law firms can benefit from a legal assistant's support. But hiring a full-time, in-house legal assistant isn't always the best solution—particularly for smaller firms. In these cases, turning to a freelance or virtual legal assistant is an effective solution that allows firms to delegate routine, time-consuming support tasks to a legal assistant as needed.

Both working with an outsourced paralegal to take on substantive work and a freelance legal assistant can lighten a lawyer's workload. Lawyers can get back many billable hours that would have been lost to administrative tasks. Also, lawyers can spend more time focusing on substantive legal work, growing their business, or taking care of clients. The best part about working with a freelance legal assistant is that you don't have the overhead of hiring a full-time staff member.

How to hire a freelance legal assistant

If you're considering hiring a freelance legal assistant, there are two general paths you can take:

- Find a candidate directly. One strategy is to find and hire a legal assistant on a freelance basis. This method takes more work at the outset (as you have to go through a full hiring process to vet candidates). But this method could lead to having an ongoing relationship with one trusted freelancer that you turn to when you need administrative assistance.
- Work with a freelance legal outsourcing company. Alternatively, you can also seek out the services of a company that specializes in outsourced legal professionals. For example, Hire an Esquire, screens candidates looking for on-demand freelance legal work (including freelance lawyers, paralegals, and legal admins).

Regardless of how you find a freelancer, it's also important to ensure you have a good process in place to make it simple for a legal assistant to work with your firm. Having effective law firm processes is especially important if your legal assistant is working remotely. Adding legal assistants to your cloud-based practice management system makes it easy to work with legal assistants—whether they're in the office or working remotely.

Cloud-based legal practice management systems make working with legal assistants easier

If your firm uses Clio Manage, adding additional users like legal assistants to your practice management workflows (here's a simple step-by-step guide) makes collaborating on administrative tasks like billing, scheduling, and document management seamless and efficient. Clio Manage allows you to add users as Non-Attorneys, and you can customize their permissions as well.

To learn more about how law firms can leverage legal freelancers—such as freelance legal assistants—to become more efficient and cost-effective, watch the recording of our webinar on Embracing the Freelance Legal Professional.

Rules and ethics to know when working with a legal assistant

Though legal assistants can take on many support and administrative tasks on behalf of a lawyer, legal assistants are limited in what they can do.

The American Bar Association (ABA) recently revised their definition of a paralegal to separate the role from that of a legal assistant. But non-lawyer legal staff like legal assistants should still not overstep the general guidance of the ABA Model Guidelines for the Utilization of Paralegal Services. Legal assistants cannot under any circumstances practice law, give clients legal advice, or present themselves as lawyers.

Moreover, attorneys should be aware of their responsibilities when working with non-lawyer staff. For example, as outlined by the ABA's Model Rules of Professional Conduct Rule 5.3 on responsibilities regarding non-lawyer assistance, supervising lawyers must make reasonable efforts to ensure non-lawyers that they employ conduct themselves in ways that align with the lawyer's professional obligations.

While these rules make good general guidelines, specific codes and rules for working with legal assistants may vary depending on your jurisdiction. With this in mind, it's important to check and abide by your state's rules and regulations for how lawyers may work with (and what duties they can assign to) legal assistants.

What to consider when hiring a legal assistant

Before hiring a legal assistant, ask yourself these questions

Now that you've understood "what is a legal assistant," you may decide to hire a legal assistant. If you're hiring a legal assistant for your law firm, there are several factors to consider to ensure you're making the best business decision for your firm. Start the process by asking yourself questions like:

- Is a legal assistant what you need? As discussed previously, there are instances where a paralegal may be a better fit for a firm's needs. Take the time to assess your firm's pain points. Then, decide on which type of legal professional can bring the most value.
- Full-time or freelance? Depending on factors like your firm's size, staffing budget, and administrative needs, you may want to hire a full-time legal assistant. Or, you may want to look for a freelancer that can help more on-demand.
- What kind of experience is most valuable to your firm? Just as individual lawyers have different areas of expertise, legal assistants also often specialize in a particular area of law. Moreover, because the role of legal assistant can vary depending on the firm, certain legal assistants may be skilled in certain areas (such as client communication) but not in others (such as legal research). Look for a legal assistant that has experience in your practice area and that has experience with the types of tasks you'll find most valuable.

Your legal assistant hiring process

Once you've determined the type of candidate you're looking for, consider your firm's hiring process. If you haven't already, make sure you have a clear hiring process before you start (these tips for creating an effective hiring process can help).

Part of this process may be looking for a legal assistant with certain skills and attributes. These skills and attributes may be slightly different from what you look for when hiring another attorney. Consider the following key qualities when hiring a legal assistant:

- Personality and communication skills. If your legal assistant will be dealing with client communication, this is key.
- Adaptability. Legal assistants often juggle a wide variety of tasks and thrive with exceptional flexibility and willingness to learn.
- Writing skills. Legal assistants who help with drafting or proofreading documents need to have a good command of language and writing.
- Organization. Whether filing, managing documents, or maintaining a lawyer's schedule, being organized is key for many legal assistant tasks.
- Tech-savviness. Today's most successful law firms use technology and automation to make their practices more efficient. That's why a candidate who's familiar with and comfortable with legal technology is an asset.

Final thoughts on the role of legal assistants

More than just a name, there is a difference between a legal assistant and a paralegal. Law firms need to understand "what is a legal assistant." By understanding the different roles (and the responsibilities that come with each), lawyers can make a more informed decision when building their teams to grow their law firm.

With this in mind, if you're a lawyer who frequently loses time to time-consuming administrative work, working with a legal assistant can take essential but non-billable tasks off of your plate.

When considering a legal assistant, be sure to look for a candidate who has experience in areas that are particularly valuable to your specific firm. The goal is to find a legal assistant who can take care of tasks that are either not sustainable, not efficient, or not possible for a lawyer to complete. The right legal assistant should help make your practice stronger, more efficient, and more profitable.

Beyond hiring a strong legal assistant, the right legal technology can help hugely with more efficient firm administration. See Clio in action now.

Frequently asked questions

How much does a legal assistant make?

Legal assistant compensation varies based on factors such as practice area, experience, and location, with legal assistants working in metropolitan areas or certain states garnering higher pay. According to Indeed, the average annual salary for U.S. legal assistants is $44,229.

How to become a legal assistant?

You can become a legal assistant by applying to firms and acquiring on-the-job training, or you may complete additional studies such as obtaining legal assistant certification. Beyond a high school diploma or GED, no formal college or post-graduate education is required.

About Clio

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