Difference Between a Paralegal and Lawyer

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A career in the legal industry can be incredibly rewarding. However, the optimal role or area within the landscape of the legal profession might take some time to find. If you're trying to decide between pursuing a career as a paralegal or as a lawyer, you may be wondering what's the difference between a paralegal and a lawyer. You also need to consider many factors—the "right" choice will depend on your unique skills, career and personal goals, and situation.

To help inform your decision-making process, the following guide will outline some of the similarities and differences between a career as a paralegal and a lawyer. Read on to learn more about the different duties, education requirements, and potential salary expectations between the two roles.

Difference between a lawyer and a paralegal

To better understand the difference between a paralegal and an attorney, let's start by clarifying what a paralegal can do. Paralegals may complete many of the same legal tasks that a lawyer does (except those proscribed by law). But paralegals canonly do so **on behalf of and under the supervision of a licensed attorney.**

So, while they're both legal professionals who complete substantive legal work, there are a few broad—but important—areas of difference between lawyers and paralegals:

- **The ability to practice law.** Put simply—licensed lawyers can practice law. Conversely, there are far fewer formal requirements (we'll touch on this more later in this post).
- **Tasks and responsibilities.** While most legal careers come with a certain amount of stress, lawyers shoulder a greater degree of responsibility for legal work. This is because a supervising attorney is ultimately responsible for their paralegal's work.
- **Qualification**. Lawyers must meet a specific set of educational, training, and licensing requirements to practice law. Conversely, to work as a paralegal, there are far less formal requirements (we'll touch on this more later in this post).
- **Salary and compensation.** While becoming a lawyer requires more education, there is a higher potential return on investment. As we will discuss later, the earning potential of lawyers is generally much higher than that of paralegals.

Are non-lawyers, such as paralegals, allowed to own law firms? Learn here: Are Non-Lawyers Allowed to Own a Law Firm?

Difference between a lawyer and an attorney

In the United States, the terms “lawyer” and “attorney” are used interchangeably. In fact, according to the American Bar Association (ABA), “attorney” is another name for a lawyer. However, there is a technical distinction to be aware of.

A person who has earned their law degree—also known as a Juris Doctor (JD) degree—by graduating from an ABA-accredited law school is considered a lawyer. But a law degree alone doesn’t qualify you to represent clients in court. An attorney (or “attorney at law”) is a person who has graduated from an accredited law school *and* who has also passed the bar exam and been licensed to practice law in a state. An attorney is licensed to represent a client in court.

So, while people often mean the same thing referring to attorneys and lawyers, an attorney is always a lawyer. But it’s possible that a lawyer may not be an attorney.

You can read more about attorney vs. lawyer and their differences here: Is There a Difference Between a Lawyer and an Attorney?

Can paralegals become a lawyer?

With the proper education and training, a paralegal can absolutely become a lawyer.

Paralegals gain the legal knowledge and experience to know if pursuing a career as a lawyer is a good match for their skills and personality. Also, paralegals’ understanding of the law and experience may make it easier to get through their legal education. However, even experienced paralegals will need to complete the same educational and licensing requirements as all other attorneys in order to practice law.

What’s the difference between a paralegal and a lawyer in terms of job responsibilities?

It’s important to stress that the roles of both paralegals and lawyers vary greatly depending on factors like practice area, level of experience, and type of law firm. However, we can compare the general job duties and responsibilities of lawyers and paralegals.

It can sometimes be confusing to differentiate between the job responsibilities of paralegals and lawyers because paralegals take on legal tasks on behalf of a supervising attorney. Also, a paralegal’s job responsibilities are quite similar to those of a lawyer (this is the key benefit of hiring a paralegal).

For example, paralegals often take on the following tasks on behalf of their supervising attorney:

- Managing client communication and updating clients on their case status.
- Reviewing and organizing client files.
- Conducting factual and legal research.
- Preparing legal documents like drafting discovery notices and pleading and preparing documents for transactions.
- Case preparation.
- Document management and drafting legal documents.
- Interviewing clients and witnesses.
- Assisting their supervising attorney at closings and trials (for example, by gathering case information).

However, while attorneys may do any of the above tasks, they have the additional job responsibilities that paralegals are not allowed to take on, including:

- Giving clients legal advice.
- Accepting or rejecting client cases.
- Representing clients in court.
- Setting their attorney fees.

Additionally, lawyers are bound by many ethical responsibilities that come with being a lawyer—including when it comes to working with paralegals.

Ethical rules for lawyers working with paralegals

As outlined by ABA Model Rule 5.3 in regards to nonlawyer assistance, lawyers must make reasonable efforts to ensure that their nonlawyer employees (including paralegals) conduct themselves in a way that is consistent with the professional conduct rules and obligations that the lawyer is bound to. These rules are also reiterated by Guideline 1 of the *ABA Model Guidelines for the Utilization of Paralegal Services*.

What's the difference between a paralegal and a lawyer in terms of salary?

One key advantage that lawyers have over paralegals is earning potential.

Factors like practice area, firm size, experience, and geographical location impact the salary ranges of lawyers and paralegals. But on the whole, lawyers garner significantly higher incomes than paralegals. Bearing these factors in mind, we can use national averages as a general comparison.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) cites the median 2020 pay for paralegals and legal assistants as $52,920 per year. Note that the BLS combines paralegals and legal assistants here, though there is variance between the roles. By comparison, the BLS median 2020 salary for lawyers was $126,930 per year—more than double the median salary of paralegals and legal assistants.

What are the job prospects for a paralegal vs. a lawyer?

Wondering what the difference between a paralegal and a lawyer is in terms of job prospects? Pursuing a career in the legal industry—whether as a paralegal or an attorney—is a sound bet, with the BLS showing growth in the job outlooks of both types of roles.

However, with a projected growth rate of 12% between 2020 and 2030 (which is faster than average), the employment outlook for paralegals and legal assistants looks to be slightly better than that for lawyers, which is projected at 9% (or as fast as average) for the same 10-year future period.

According to the BLS, the heightened job prospects for paralegals stems from law firms looking to become more streamlined and efficient. Paralegals can assist lawyers with legal tasks at a lower cost while also driving efficiencies and innovation at law firms. It makes sense that paralegals will become increasingly in demand in the coming years.

What's the difference between education and training required for a paralegal vs. a lawyer?

There is a significant difference when it comes to education and training requirements for paralegals and lawyers.

Paralegals: Experience, education, and certification

According to the ABA, paralegals can be qualified by education, training, or work experience (or, more commonly, a combination of the three). This means that technically, there are no national formal education requirements for paralegals. However, some states

do require paralegals to be certified and complete continuing legal education (CLE) training hours. So, be sure to check your state's requirements if you're considering a career as a paralegal.

In practice, most paralegals have some combination of formal education and paralegal-specific training and certification. This education includes an Associate's or Bachelor's degree in paralegal studies, criminal justice, or a similar field.

While certification is not currently a requirement for paralegals, it is a common way for paralegals to improve their career prospects. In terms of certification, there are many paralegal certification options available. However, the quality and reputation of these certifications can vary. If you're looking to be certified as a paralegal, the NALA (National Association of Legal Assistants (NALA) and the National Federation of Paralegal Associations (NFPA) offer reputable certification programs—as well as resources on paralegal education and training.

Lawyers: Minimum 7 years of post-secondary education, plus additional requirements

This is a key answer to the "what's the difference between a paralegal and a lawyer" question. For lawyers, the minimum education and training requirements are standardized. While individual states may have specific standards, according to the ABA's professional requirements, before you can become a licensed lawyer (aka, an attorney) and practice law, you must at a minimum:

- **Earn a bachelor's degree or equivalent.** A four-year degree is a prerequisite to be admitted into an ABA-accredited law school.
- **Graduate from law school.** You must attend and successfully complete three years at an ABA-accredited law school.
- **Pass a state bar exam.** You must study for and successfully pass a state bar exam, which tests your knowledge of the law. The exam will also test you on professional ethics and responsibilities—which you will have to uphold once you practice law.
- **Pass your jurisdiction's character and fitness evaluation**. This evaluation means completing an in-depth questionnaire where you need to disclose details about your past (such as past convictions, misconduct, or substance abuse issues). Upon review, you must then be approved.
- **Take an attorney's oath.** While the exact oath varies by state, you must swear to support the laws, as well as state and federal constitutions.
- **Be granted a license**. Once you've completed your state bar's admission requirements, you must be granted a license from the highest court in the state (which is usually the state supreme court).

We recommend researching your jurisdiction's rules before beginning a journey to become a lawyer.

After becoming a licensed lawyer

After you become a lawyer, there are ongoing fees and training requirements to maintain your license to practice law. Most states require an annual renewal fee to remain part of the state bar. Lawyers must also complete a certain number of CLE hours annually.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a paralegal vs. a lawyer?

Ultimately, the advantages and disadvantages of choosing a career as a paralegal or a lawyer will depend largely on your personal goals, passions, and background. However, there are a few general pros and cons of each career path.

Pros of being a paralegal

- **You need less formal education and training.** This means that it costs less (in time and tuition costs) to become a paralegal than it does to become a lawyer.
- **You have ample job opportunities**. With the employment outlook on the rise for paralegals, there will be more and more jobs available for trained paralegals in the years to come.
- **You can find interesting, challenging work**. As a paralegal, your day-to-day tasks can be varied to meet the needs of supervising lawyers and the firm. If you focus in one area of law or in a unique area (for example, in legal research), you can create a more specialized career as well.
- **You may have less responsibility.** While paralegals are a key part of a legal team, the responsibility for a matter's outcome ultimately falls more to the supervising attorney. This may lead to lower work stress levels and better work-life balance when compared to attorneys.

Cons of being a paralegal

- **You have less income potential.** As previously discussed, the average paralegal salary is significantly lower than a lawyer's.
- **You have less control over your work**. Because paralegals work on behalf of a supervising lawyer, they have less autonomy over their professional decision making and workload (which can sometimes lead to paralegal burnout).

- **You can't practice law.** If you want a career in the legal industry because you want to practice law and argue in court on behalf of clients, you can't do this as a paralegal.

Pros of being a lawyer

- **You have greater income potential.** The average salary of a lawyer is higher than that of a paralegal, which makes becoming a lawyer your best bet if you're looking to maximize your earning potential as a legal professional.
- **You gain more prestige.** Being a lawyer carries a lot of responsibility, but it is also a high-prestige, high-respect career path.
- **You're able to practice law.** From arguing cases in court to giving legal advice, you are only allowed to practice law if you're a licensed attorney.

Cons of being a lawyer

- **You need more education and training.** In addition to taking more years, more formal education could mean more student debt—which may offset the higher earning potential for lawyers early in their careers.
- **You have to pass the bar.** Passing the bar exam is no easy feat and may not be the best choice for everyone—but it is a requirement to become a practicing attorney.
- **You will take on more responsibility—and potentially more stress**. Whether it's due to challenging clients, long hours, keeping up with ongoing lawyer training requirements, or dealing with law school debt, being a lawyer can be incredibly stressful and can lead to lawyer burnout.

Paralegals and lawyers are great career options

If you're considering a career in the legal industry, it's important to research the different options that are available to you, so that you can find the best fit for you. Of course, you'll need to understand "what's the difference between a paralegal and a lawyer" as well.

While there are many similar tasks completed by paralegals and lawyers, there are also many big differences between the two career paths. You may become a paralegal faster and require less education, but you may not be able to earn as much as a lawyer—and you cannot practice law. Alternatively, attorneys can practice law and are compensated well financially for their work. But it takes more years of expensive and challenging legal education to become a lawyer, and the work can be more stressful once you are one.

Whether you decide to become a paralegal or a lawyer, a legal career is a rewarding way to work with clients, use your skills, and earn a living.

Frequently asked questions

What is the difference between a lawyer and a paralegal?

Lawyers are licensed to practice law and represent clients, whereas paralegals are not. This means that lawyers are typically more highly trained and better compensated than paralegals. Paralegals support lawyers by assisting with legal research, document preparation, and client communications.

Why be a paralegal and not a lawyer?

Becoming a paralegal is a great option if you're interested in the field of law, enjoy research-heavy tasks, and don't want to pursue the same rigorous training and education as a lawyer. Additionally, paralegals often have better work-life balance than lawyers.

Is it harder to be a lawyer or paralegal?

Lawyers require more training and education than paralegals. They're under higher ethical and professional standards, and face pressure to perform for their clients. However, there's no definitive answer to this question—being a paralegal for a top-tier, high-performance firm may be harder than being a lawyer in certain practice areas.

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