What is a Legal Assistant? Roles, Responsibilities, and Key Skills Explained

Written by Louise Donnery

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 solicitors. Conversely, though legal assistants also work on behalf of solicitors, they focus more on administrative support tasks. This distinction is more important than it may seem at first glance. Law firms who fail to recognise 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 organising legal documents, conducting research, and assisting solicitors. They help gather case information and ensure the thorough organisation of facts and paperwork.

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. The Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) does not explicitly define the term "legal assistant," but it does provide relevant information about non-solicitor roles within legal practices.

A legal assistant is typically viewed as a non-solicitor role that involves delivering legal services under the supervision of a qualified solicitor. For example, a paralegal works in a law firm performing legal work without needing to be a regulated lawyer. The SRA also regulates "non-authorised persons" involved in legal firms, which includes roles like paralegals, accountants, and office juniors, ensuring they act competently and ethically.

Additionally, aspiring solicitors can gain qualifying work experience (QWE) in such roles, as long as they are engaged in legal activities as defined by the Legal Services Act 2007. While "legal assistant" isn't specifically defined, the term generally covers support roles in legal services, which the SRA oversees to maintain high standards.

Legal assistants work closely with solicitors to take care of some of the time-consuming administrative work that reduces lawyer efficiency and productivity. The *2020 Legal Trends Report* highlighted how much of an issue this is for many solicitors. Specifically, the report found that lawyers only spend an average of 2.5 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 solicitors—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-centred experience.
- Legal calendar coordination. Legal assistants can schedule meetings and interviews and make appointments for lawyers and clients.
- Legal research and writing. On behalf of a solicitor, 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 as assist with resolving billing issues with clients.
- Legal document management. This could include tasks like gathering documents that a lawyer needs for a case and organising documents.

What is a legal assistant vs. a paralegal?

While the terms "legal assistant" and "paralegal" are often used interchangeably, the roles of today's legal assistants and paralegals are different.

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

Read more: What's the Difference Between a Paralegal and a Solicitor?

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 a solicitor's to-do list. Lawyers can then spend more time on billable work.

Do you need a degree to become a legal assistant?

A degree isn't strictly required to become a legal assistant in the UK, though it can improve your job prospects. Most law firms expect candidates to have at least A-levels or equivalent qualifications. While some firms may prefer applicants with a degree in law or a related field, others may value relevant experience and skills just as highly.

How can you become a certified legal assistant?

To become a certified legal assistant in the UK, you typically need A-levels or equivalent qualifications, though a law degree can enhance your prospects. Pursue professional qualifications through bodies like the National Association of Licensed Paralegals (NALP) or the Chartered Institute of Legal Executives (CILEx). You can gain these qualifications through courses or apprenticeships, which provide practical experience. Acquiring relevant work experience, typically six months, is crucial, along with developing essential skills like administration and communication. Finally, seek certification from recognised professional bodies to validate your qualifications and skills.

What is the average salary for a legal assistant?

The average salary for a legal assistant in the UK ranges between £21,000 and £39,000 per year. Entry-level positions typically start around £21,000 to £26,500, with the higher end of the salary range usually found in more experienced roles or in locations like London.

Working with a freelance legal assistant

Now that we understand the role of 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 specialises in outsourced legal professionals.

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.

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.

When working with a legal assistant, it's crucial to understand the ethical standards and rules that govern their role in the legal profession. Here are key considerations:

- Confidentiality: Legal assistants must strictly protect client information and case details, maintaining this confidentiality even after leaving a firm.
- Competence: They should work competently within their training and experience, recognising their limits and seeking guidance when needed.
- Integrity: Acting with honesty and integrity is essential, including accurately representing their qualifications and capabilities.
- Regulatory Compliance: Legal assistants must follow regulations set by bodies like the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) and be familiar with the SRA's Code of Conduct.
- Conflict of Interest: They should be vigilant about potential conflicts of interest and disclose any that could compromise impartiality or client interests.

What to consider when hiring a legal assistant

Before hiring an assistant, ask yourself these questions

Now that you've understood legal assistant responsibilities, 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 specialise 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.

Part of this process may be looking for an assistant with certain skills and attributes. These skills and attributes may be slightly different from what you look for when hiring another lawyer. 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.
- Organisation. Whether filing, managing documents, or maintaining a lawyer's schedule, being organised 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. 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 an 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.

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