

## Entry-level paralegals: Why take the risk?

BY LINDA S. JEVAHIRIAN

One of the most powerful tools a hiring employer has is evidence of how a person performed in prior positions. New graduates, on the other hand, present a unique challenge. Knowing how to evaluate and what to expect from an entry-level paralegal can take the mystery out of the mission. Let's start by answering some basic but necessary questions about their raw material and how it can be molded to fit the position.

### Where do entry-level paralegals receive their education?

Community colleges, four-year colleges, and universities offer two degrees in paralegal studies. Paralegals who earn two-year degrees often complete their four-year degree in a different field. Some of the same schools offer post-degree certificates to people who already have previously completed a two- or four-year degree.

The word "certificate" is used liberally and can be confusing. Certificates are also granted by proprietary programs that may or may not be college accredited. These programs are taken by post-degree students and students who are not necessarily college bound.

The National Association of Legal Assistants, Inc., and the National Federation of Paralegal Associations, Inc., offer voluntary tests for which they award the Certified Legal Assistant or Certified Paralegal titles, respectively. These certificates require intensive learn-

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ing and preparation, but are not related in any way to the certificates that are received from paralegal programs.

College programs distinguish themselves by getting approved by the American Bar Association. They undergo a rigorous qualification process that meets very specific curriculum and graduate placement requirements. The ABA program has proliferated over the past 30 years. Employers sometimes judge the integrity of a program by this approval.

### What do new paralegals know when they graduate?

Paralegal programs teach theory along with practical skills. A well-balanced curriculum includes exercises in organization, manual and electronic legal and non-legal research, legal writing, pertinent computer programs, ethics and critical thinking. Substantive law courses expose students to specialized areas of practice.

Some programs require a structured and supervised legal assis-

tant internship. Students emerge with a taste of what a law practice involves, including some experience doing hands-on work. In some cases, students extend their internship as a paid or volunteer position. The experience can be narrow and unrefined, but the opportunity is indispensable, especially for paralegals who have never worked in an office environment.

### How do you evaluate the skills and abilities of an entry-level paralegal?

Graduates usually have a variety of homework assignments that demonstrate their aptitude in legal research and writing. A smart portfolio includes legal briefs, legal memoranda and other documents that have either been prepared at college or while working.

Paralegals demonstrate leadership through involvement with paralegal clubs and other volunteer activities. The clubs elect officers and host regular meetings that require students to run for office, and contact and engage speakers. Many students also volunteer for other organizations, particularly county and state bar associations.

Starting the person as an intern or as a temporary employee is an excellent way to see how well a paralegal will adapt to the environment, and how quickly they learn. It is optimal to designate a specific period of time and a pool of assignments that will be reviewed by the supervising attorneys and paralegals who are qualified to rate the individual's ability and potential.

References are very helpful. Internship supervisors can describe the paralegal's work habits and professional demeanor. Otherwise, college professors are a good source of information, as are prior employers, even if they are non-legal.

Take into consideration previous careers. The paralegal field is replete with people who are changing fields and have significant employment history. Many of these candidates have knowledge in areas that relate to or complement the law practice, such as engineering, nursing, computer science, real estate, trust administration, banking and insurance.

Moreover, certain personality traits will surface during interviews, such as assertiveness, verbal ability, enthusiasm, goal orientation, flexibility, maturity and social behavior.

Also ask for specific examples of competencies, including planning, organizing, analyzing, interpreting, working independently, exercising discretion, handling difficult situations, solving problems, making decisions, managing time, being resourceful, pursuing challenge, tolerating stress, and paying attention to detail.

#### **What kind of resources will I have to dedicate to training?**

The dedication required to orient and train an inexperienced paralegal

is a worthwhile investment. Assigning less complex work and pairing the entry-level paralegal with a mentor can have a dramatic effect on the rate with which a paralegal will become profitable. New paralegals require guidance until they are able to complete tasks independently, and they always require supervision. It's the law.

Continuing education is an excellent option for training paralegals. This includes seminars, association meetings, and even sessions offered by lawyer affiliated groups. An in-house training team can present classes that are focused on specific areas of the law, as well as procedure.

#### **Why should I hire an entry-level paralegal?**

There are several reasons why inexperienced paralegals are favored. Entry-level tasks top the list. In every specialized area of the law, there are things that need to be done that are time consuming, are not that difficult to do, and are done at lower billable rates. A new paralegal can use this kind of work as a stepping stone.

Entry-level paralegals will do the work the way the lawyer wants it done. The attorney who trains the paralegal does so to his or her own benefit. Once the basics are in place, potentially harder tasks can be added.

Starter salaries are justified with lower fee-based work. This can attract new clients, satisfy old clients, and at the same time create a paralegal that will become more profitable over time.

#### **Conclusion**

Making the investment in an entry-level paralegal is time consuming and risky, but done wisely can be very profitable. Reasonable expectations, dedicated training, and reliable mentoring will minimize the risk while making legal services affordable. As the new paralegal gains more experience higher level tasks can be assigned, a new entry-level can be employed, and the revolution can begin again.

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