

Career Positioning for Paralegals

By Linda S. Jevahirian

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The thing I like the best about the paralegal profession is the unknowingness of it all. Have you ever noticed that no matter how well they describe the job to you it never really turns out like they planned? Do you hate it when that happens or do you thrive on the opportunity to create your own unique position?

What if you were a draftsman and an engineer asked you to draw a product to the exact specifications he gave you? No deviations. No color. Nothing but exactly what he told you to do. Could a smart and talented paralegal survive in an environment like this? Probably not. It simply is not creative enough for a paralegal.

Paralegals who talk most enthusiastically about their jobs actively pursue their career. They have a strategy: They accept challenge, master their subject, effect change, *and then they toot their horn and get rewarded*. With one more achievement behind them, the process begins again – maybe on different turf, maybe on the same turf. By practicing this technique on a consistent basis they prepare themselves to meet, embrace and take advantage of new opportunity.

So, is this the elusive ‘career path’ that everyone is talking about? To me career pathing is really career positioning and not at all like the traditional model found in multi-level organizations.

In the traditional model you get a job and through experience you are promoted up the ladder. This is quantifiable. Like school. You are measured and marked, always having the next grade to work toward. The company invests in keeping their employees moving upward. This assures continuity in the company and keeps the employees interested and challenged.

The legal field is a little different. There is no career ladder. The environment is flat. The attorneys remain the ‘real’ managers and getting to that level requires more schooling and a license. Because paralegals are neither ‘promotable’, nor intimately involved with rainmaking and client relationships, the organizations they work for do not seem to be as deeply invested in them.

You may be lucky enough to be in a firm or company where several layers exist, but the one or two layers that are available to you don’t vacate that often. So, waiting around for a position as Legal Assistant Manager may just be a waste of your time.

There are some ‘alternative’ possibilities. The technology, marketing and accounting departments offer new roles for paralegals, provided the organization is

willing to invest in additional on-the-job training. But – keep in mind this a role change. This is not moving ahead as a paralegal.

Some firms have implemented a tiered system for paralegals where they can be promoted based on certain criteria set by the firm. This works, but most paralegals are not working in firms of this size. So, to be practical there must be another way.

What often occurs in a flat environment, is that people fall into a routine and complete tasks that go unrewarded, curious about the outside world, but not doing too much to explore it. In this type of setting paralegals feel bound by the limitations of their education and sentence themselves to a stool instead having the luxury of a ladder. Because there is nowhere to 'promote' them the firms are somewhat powerless when it comes to keeping them.

Yet, on a personal level career positioning is a very important part of being a paralegal. Still – it can be a very invisible and elusive thing. It can be so transparent that you are completely unaware you are working through a series of achievements and silently qualifying yourself for the next position.

On the other hand, I have met and talked with many legal assistants who are totally aware of their career strategy and they prepare and lunge after opportunities on a regular basis, recreating their position all the time. Thus they have their own unique career path: They accept challenge, master the subject, effect change, *and then they toot their own horn and get rewarded.*

What feeds the disillusionment of the flat career ladder is the lack of recognition. Are you aware of your accomplishments and how they impact your organization? Do you communicate your goals and accomplishments on a regular basis? Do the people who evaluate you know how your work impacts them?

Now, I'm not telling you that this is an easy task. I know it takes two to tango. You can get caught in the system just as easily as you can glisten. There are a few tips I can offer if you want to further your career:

(1) Career positioning requires foresight and vision. Career-minded individuals communicate where they are, where they want to be, and then ring the bell when they get there. They use their imagination and they take risk.

(2) Successful people are proactive. They work consistently at finding new opportunities, mastering them, and moving on to the next challenge. They expand their skills by seizing events that require the exploration of new horizons. They know how to replenish their supply.

(3) Being promoted is about anticipating, preparing for and welcoming change. People with career strategy are open minded and flexible. They create and experience options with thrill and excitement.

(4) Paralegals who want to move keep their antennae up. Opportunity finds them because their radar is on.

I strongly believe that you can create your own career path. Next time you start daydreaming about being in a different position, remember how unique and creative the paralegal field is and plan your future. But, most importantly, *don't forget to toot your own horn when you get there.*