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Paralegals: A Positive Bottom Line

By Linda S. Jevahirian

Paralegal utilization has become a necessity to many law firms and corporations. Their use has revolutionized the way law is practiced, and the way clients expect to be serviced. Bottom line? They make economic and practical sense.

Legal assistants are not licensed, certified or regulated by the government. The firms and companies that hire them set the requirements for employment. Some paralegals have been grand fathered into the profession through experience. Others have two and four year degrees. The evolution of education, the growth of the profession, and the increase in client demand has resulted in many organizations requiring specific thresholds of education and experience.

The concept of a paralegal is ultimately one of economy. Clients simply pay less per paralegal hour than they do for a lawyer with the same level of experience. This should not be construed a 'cheap labor.' Lawyers who delegate their work to the lowest billing, but qualified member of the staff do provide more affordable services. They also provide a better product.

If their lawyer is using a paralegal, clients should understand what they do and how what it costs. Paralegal rates vary from specialty to specialty, and from firm to firm. They reflect level expertise, years of experience, and level of education. Just like attorney fees, they have become a critical point in the competition to sign on clients.

There is a large range of possibilities when it comes to paralegal assignments. Among other things, paralegals draft legal documents; organize files and documents; research legal and factual matters; draft legal memos; schedule and track deadlines; prepare for trials and hearings; respond to discovery requests; gather, summarize and manage information; investigate cases; supervise vendors; answer to outside counsel; prepare for closings, and other work that is specialty driven.

One client benefit is that through specialization, paralegals provide consistent information, and develop consistent relationships. One paralegal at a big three automotive company is dedicated to product defect cases. She is familiar with all the trends in defects; has developed an expertise in defects; knows outside counsel; and, has developed resources for resolving claims. Her knowledge and experience is a great savings to the corporation that does not have to hire an expensive attorney for the same function.

Despite their knowledge and expertise, there are limits to what a paralegal can do. They cannot contract with or accept client fees. They cannot render legal advice, take a deposition or try a case. They can, however, attend trials, depositions and hearings in the absence of a lawyer if the purpose is for gathering and reporting

information. Some administrative law judges allow paralegals to argue on behalf of a client.

Some corporations hire paralegals to attend to in-house legal matters that do not immediately require an attorney. One telecommunications firm hired a paralegal they titled Legal Coordinator to deal with regulations, respond to attorney and executive requests, maintain contracts, and take care of due diligence and corporate governance. She ultimately became a great asset to the attorney who was hired once the corporation grew big enough to need one.

The bottom-line, although economic, is that paralegals make sense in every way. From inside the law firm or the corporate legal department they provide support and assistance to attorneys and customized service to clients. On the corporate level they are a great alternative to hiring an in-house attorney if the organization is not ready to make that commitment.

Biline:

Linda S. Jevahirian is the Founder and President of Legal Search & Management, Inc., a specialty firm that provides temporary and permanent recruiting to firms and corporations interested in improving their practice through the use of legal assistants.

Linda is a noted speaker, trainer and author. Her articles have appeared in numerous legal publications, including, the Michigan Bar Journal, Michigan Lawyers Weekly, The National Law Journal and Legal Assistant Today.

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