

HOW TO ADVANCE IN THE PARALEGAL PROFESSION

By Linda Jevahirian

At a recent meeting, a paralegal manager and two recruiters (a paralegal and an attorney) were asked to talk about ways to advance in the paralegal profession. Ten separate categories emerged as being important.

Start with a plan

Knowing where you want to be and when you want to get there is half the battle. Goal setting should be a habit and it should be revised at regular intervals. Without a destination and a critical path, you are likely to stagnate or end up in a position that is leading you nowhere.

Be creative

Don't be afraid to think outside the box. People who succeed at reinventing themselves look outside their role and initiate ideas that will impact profit and potential. Paralegals that innovate keep themselves interested and interesting, and they increase their worth.

Be courageous

Everybody's risk tolerance level is different. Trying something new requires courage. Don't be afraid to take on tasks that you have not done before. If you want to gain something, you have to be willing to get out on a limb. Keep in mind that risk can be mediated by preparation.

Develop expertise

Find out what needs to be done that no one else is doing and become an expert at it. Exercise your knowledge by writing an article or teaching a class.

Get educated

Minimum education requirements are a good start, but they can also be limiting. Larger firms and bigger markets are becoming more specific about certification and

four-year degrees. Continuing education is equally as important and is often overlooked as a way to cross train.

Update your technology

Know how to use Microsoft Office, including Access, Excel, and PowerPoint. Hot-Docs and other expert assembly programs are important. Learn how to use Summation, Sanction, Trial Director, and Lotus Notes. E-filing has become almost required in many courts. Use creativity in using the software so it works to your advantage.

Volunteer

Volunteerism always looks good on a resume, but don't stop just because you have a job. Devoting time to charitable organizations is good for the soul and it's also good social exposure. If you do volunteer, use it as an opportunity to develop skills by becoming an officer, chairing a special project, or doing pro bono work.

Specialize

It is not uncommon for paralegals to develop specialized knowledge that attorneys lack. Many lawyers are having a difficult time learning how to use technology because of the time involved. Find a niche that will dovetail the attorneys and become really good at it. Always teach others what you know so you won't get bogged down by projects that keep you from experiencing new opportunities.

Assess your personality

Advancement is skill based, but it is also dependent on having the right personality. Being a giver and a team player, demonstrating professionalism, showing leadership, adapting easily, letting others train you, abstaining from gossip, having a willingness to learn, stepping outside the box, making yourself 'available,' being

assertive, entrusting people to you, being independent, and learning how to be cost effective are all traits that will help you work into higher level positions.

Work habits

Learn how to delegate. Otherwise, you will never be given the chance to improve. Build incentives into your work and establish clear parameters for identifying accomplishment and reward. Increase your billable rate by getting better at what you do. Update your job description and your resume regularly.

Career-minded paralegals put a number of tools to work in their quest to advance, reinvent their position, avoid burn out, and side-step stagnation. Luck is the intersection of preparation and timing. If you are going to work hard at learning it, then you should also be bold enough to recognize it when opportunity knocks.

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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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