

Getting Your Foot In the Door

Strategies for Landing Your First Paralegal Job

Monica Muehsam

It's the eternal Catch-22: employers won't hire you unless you have experience, but you can't gain experience unless someone hires you. If you are just starting out in the paralegal profession, how do you obtain that elusive first job armed with "only" your education? Employers today have a larger-than-ever pool of qualified paralegal candidates to choose from and getting your foot in the door is harder than ever. Therefore, traditional job search methods are not enough. In today's competitive hiring environment, you must be forward-thinking in your job search by shaping your search while you're in school and forging skills that will set you apart from others.

While In School

Many paralegal students make the mistake of not thinking about the job search process until they are near graduation or have already graduated. After all, who can focus on job-hunting with rules of evidence to learn and contracts tests to study for? But no matter what your workload while you're in school, you need to look ahead and begin planning your future early on. Treat school like a job and begin thinking about your job search the day you start, not the day you receive your diploma. Below are a few strategies you can undertake while you're in school to help you land your first job.

Create a portfolio. Create a portfolio of writing samples and other projects you completed in school to showcase your writing skills, awards and other achievements. It does not matter if your brief or deposi-

tion summary was written for a hypothetical client; employers will recognize good writing and strong analytical skills. You should also take advantage of e-portfolios that many universities offer as part of their degree programs. An e-portfolio enables you to present an online, multi-media portrait of yourself and your achievements. Throughout your school career, you can add writing samples, spreadsheets, Web pages, photographs, video clips and other information to offer employers a three-dimensional view of your skills and capabilities.

Aim for top grades. Top grades can set you apart from other paralegal grads. In addition to intelligence, a solid academic record also demonstrates self-discipline, follow-through, dedication and dependability. Employers know that a solid student will likely be a solid employee, and a

stand-out report card can make finding a job that much easier. Conversely, poor grades in paralegal school may give employers a reason to pass you over in favor of another candidate.

Network with Classmates. According to *Paralegal Today's* 2010 salary survey (page 30), the majority of paralegals found their jobs through networking. While you are in school, take the opportunity to network with your classmates, professors and others. Those contacts may come in handy and open doors for you later in your career.

Christine Baker, a personal injury paralegal with the law offices of David R. Calvert in Greenwood Village, Col., contacted every lawyer she knew when she started paralegal classes. "I informed them I was in paralegal school and needed an internship, and that I would be willing to work for free

for the law firm experience,” Baker says. She asked the attorneys to keep the information in mind and pass it along to any attorneys or law firms that might be looking for assistance. Three months into her schooling, Baker was contacted by a sole practitioner who asked her to work for him, not as an intern, but as a paid paralegal. She also received two internship offers that she turned down because she found employment as a paid paralegal.

Get To Know Your Professors. Professors can assist in your job search in many ways, from advising you of career options and writing recommendations to helping you with referrals and introducing you to others in the legal field. Harold Weaver, a paralegal with Jones and Associates in Atlanta, Georgia, found his first job when one of his teachers contacted her former students about a temporary job opportunity. “Your instructors will know whether you reliably show up to class, how well you write and how intelligently you project yourself. That familiarity can help when their contacts come looking for paralegal candidates,” Weaver says. What Weaver originally

thought would be only a week of paid work became a permanent position. He suggests that paralegal students stay after class and strike up conversations with their professors, which can make an impression over and above a student’s good grades.

Complete an internship. “Take advantage of any and all opportunities organized by your school for internship programs at a local law firm or in-house corporate legal department,” Marybeth Davies, manager of the paralegal program at DuPont in Wilmington, Del., advises. “Most internships aren’t paid positions but hopefully will provide the opportunity to gain valuable experience and give a new paralegal the chance to see firsthand the workings of an active

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legal practice.” If your school does not offer assistance with internships, try contacting government agencies, legal aid organizations or large law firms in your area to inquire about possible internship programs.

After Graduation

Paralegals face new job-hunting challenges after graduation. If your internship does not lead to paid employment and you do not have a job lined up upon graduation, you will need to continue to build your skills and develop contacts to land your first job. Below are several strategies for gaining the contacts and legal experience necessary to snag a great paralegal position.

Volunteer. Depending on your financial needs, you might consider volunteering for a legal aid organization in your area. Volunteering can help you gain valuable legal skills, expand your network base and make a genuine difference by helping others. Non-profit legal aid organizations are a great place to start. For example, the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless (www.legalclinic.org) employs a network of over 200 volunteers from the D.C. legal community. Its volunteers assist with a large volume of individual and family client

matters every year and are responsible for interviewing clients and obtaining entitled benefits.

Your local paralegal and bar associations are another great place to find pro bono opportunities. The American Bar Association

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offers a state-by-state listing of these opportunities across the country (<http://www.abanet.org/legalservices/probono/directory.html#>). The National Legal Aid and Defender Association (www.nlada.org), the oldest and largest national non-profit membership association, also offers a state-by-state listing of positions in civil legal services, defender organizations, pro bono and public interest organizations. Look under the "Jobs" tab to search for volunteer opportunities in your area.

Consider Entry-Level Positions. To get your foot in the door, you must sometimes be willing to take a position below your initial professional expectations. Sueann Hall, president and CEO of Just Legal, Inc., a legal staffing agency in Hockessin, Del., encourages all new paralegals to keep an open mind and be willing to work in any capacity at a law firm. "Many employees start as receptionists, clerks and litigation support and work their way up. Being flexible will pay off in the long run," she says.

Accept Part-Time Employment. If a full-time position is not available, consider

working on a part-time basis. Part-time work is usually better than no work and will help you build your skills and contacts. You never know when a firm's staffing needs might change and they realize they need more help. That part-time position could transition to full-time overnight if a firm snags a new client and receives a large case. Or, you might just impress your supervisors enough to convince them that it is worthwhile to hire you as a full-time staff member.

Consider Contract Employment. In addition to scouring the online job boards and networking with your colleagues, new paralegals entering the job market should consider working as a contract paralegal. "Contact a reputable legal employment placement agency for potential project work where a paralegal could gain valuable on the job training and experience," Davies suggests. "The use of contract attorneys and paralegals by both corporations and law firms on projects like document reviews has been steadily increasing over the years. It is a cost-effective staffing solution, and in this economy it might be one of the most viable options." Hall agrees: "I would encourage new paralegals to apply at legal staffing companies to gain experience. Many law firms do not have as strict criteria when bringing on temporary employees."

Be Creative. In today's competitive job market, you need to think outside the box to land that first job. A unique way to approach potential employers is to use your lack of experience to your advantage. Diane McKean, a senior litigation paralegal with the law office of Michael J. Duncan in Colorado Springs, Col., recalls, "During my first interview, I indicated that I came with no bad habits. I was an open book, eager to learn and would never ask the same question twice." McKean offered to work for less than the position paid for a probationary period, after which time her pay would be raised. She got the job and worked for the firm for many years. Now that she is a senior paralegal, she prefers to hire paralegals with no experience or bad habits.

Leverage Existing Skills. If you are a paralegal student embarking on a second or third career, another tactic to land your first paralegal position is to let the skills and knowledge you already possess shape your job search. "I always told my paralegal students that any life

skills they had from prior careers would be very helpful in selling themselves and that they should find a law firm that specialized in that field," states Stacey Hunt, CLA, CAS, a litigation paralegal for Duggan Smith in San Luis Obispo, California. "I had former nurses who could work on personal injury or medical malpractice cases and they were valuable because of their medical background. A contractor could work for a firm that does construction litigation because of his familiarity with many of the laws and terms. I told them that even if they were tired of their old fields, it would help them get a foot in the door and gain the law firm experience and contacts they needed to help them transition to the field of law that truly interested them."

Target Hot Specialties. You might also target your job search to practice areas that are growing because firms specializing in those areas are more likely to be hiring. For example, the current economic climate has created a boom in the fields of bankruptcy and foreclosure law, so it may be easier to land an entry-level position in those specialties than in a practice area such as entertainment law. Other growing specialties include intellectual property, litigation, labor and employment, environmental or "green" law and e-discovery. Even if these specialties don't coincide with your ultimate career goals, once you get your foot in the door, you can transition to a niche in which you are more interested.

Find a Mentor. Enlisting a mentor is another way to snag that elusive first job. A mentor can connect you to others in the field, open doors for you and provide career advice, guidance and instruction. Your paralegal program or local paralegal association may have a formal mentoring program in place. If not, an attorney acquaintance or favorite professor may be willing to help you locate a mentor. Find someone you admire and respect, and ask for their advice and guidance in career-related matters. A good mentor should have strong listening skills and comfort in giving feedback; avoid people who you feel are too judgmental or controlling.

Network. Continue to network after graduation, whether you are volunteering at your local legal aid organization or working on a two-week document review project through a local placement agency.

Gain a Competitive Edge

Check and double-check your resume and cover letter for typos.

Tailor your cover letter to each job for which you apply.

Polish your Internet presence because potential employers will check it out. Google yourself to see what information is available for public viewing.

Follow up with prospective employers after submitting your online application if you don't receive a confirmation from the company. Call or send an e-mail to verify that your resume was received.

Conduct a dress rehearsal before each interview. Role-play with someone who can ask you the tough questions so that you can be better prepared.

Review the company's Web site before an interview. Research the firm, including its practice areas, key people and achievements, and memorize a few key facts that you can drop into the conversation.

Always send a handwritten personal thank you note via U.S. mail to each person you speak with during an interview.

Ask employees and others with whom you come in contact if they know of any firms that are hiring. Use the resources of your local paralegal association to meet and get to know paralegals that can assist you in your job search. Some of these associations offer mentoring programs, job banks and continuing education, all which can open up opportunities for full-time work.

Use Social Media.

Another important aspect of networking – and another job-hunting avenue – is social media (see “Playing to Win: Mastering the On-line Job Search Game,” *Legal Assistant Today*, July/August 2009). If you haven’t done so already, create profiles on LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. LinkedIn is an online network of more than 40 million professionals from around the world representing 170 industries. Go to the Groups Directory tab and search under “paralegal” to display the results of numerous paralegal networks. Check out the article “Ten Ways to Use LinkedIn” by Guy Kawasaki under the Frequently Asked Questions tab in the LinkedIn

Customer Service Center to get the most out of your membership.

While Facebook is a more personal way to stay connected with friends, you can adjust your profile to make your career goals known. You never know, an old acquaintance from high school may connect you with his brother, the new assistant district attorney in your area,

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who happens to be hiring.

Twitter is another social networking tool that can help you in your job hunt (for more on using Twitter to advance your career, see “The Paralegal’s Guide to Twitter,” *Legal Assistant Today*, September/October 2009).

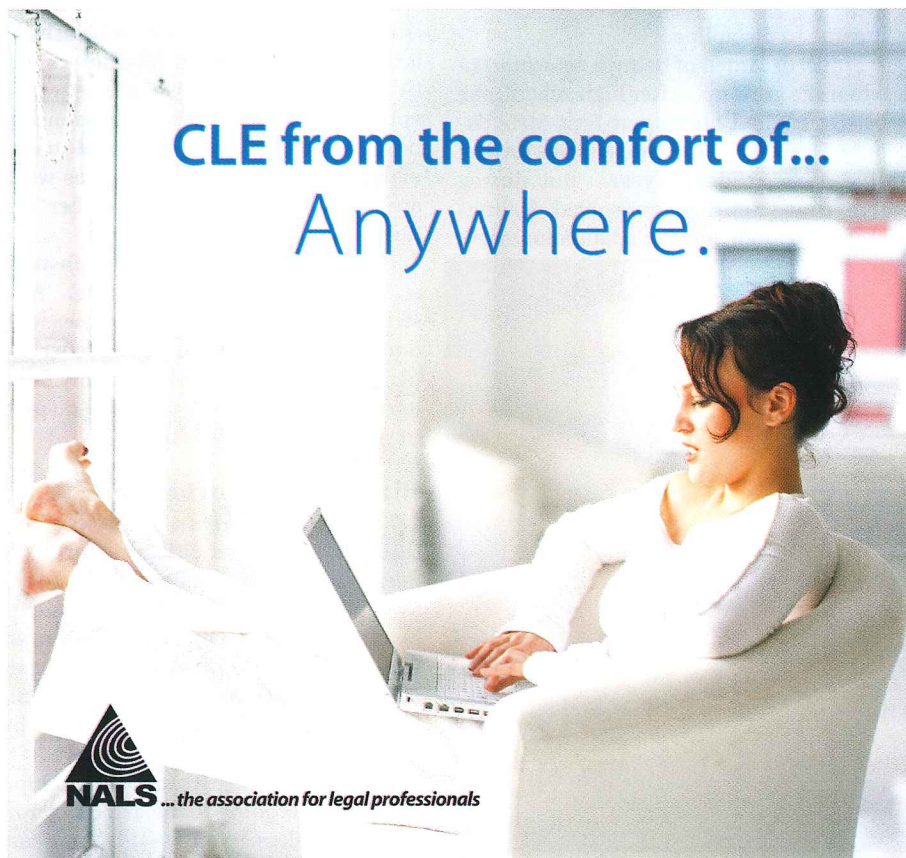
The Internet is a fantastic tool for networking of all varieties. Web sites in all shapes and sizes cater to the legal profession and paralegals. For example, Paralegal Gateway (www.paralegalgateway.com) is a site for paralegals to meet

and network. The career corner offers tips for winning resumes and successful interviews, among other features. Its Yahoo Group boasts over 2,500 members and is a great way to connect with paralegals all over the country. *Paralegal Today’s* free listserv (<http://www.legalassistanttoday.com/lat-forum/default.htm>) is a popular forum for paralegals to share tips, ideas, opinions and profession-related questions.

Step Up Your Game

Given the dearth of jobs these days, employers can be choosier than ever. As legal employees continue to suffer the effects of an ailing economy, it’s clear that your first job won’t be handed to you on a silver platter. However, your job search can be shorter and produce better results with the right attitude, the tips above and a can-do spirit. □

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