

Making the Jump

The Pros and Cons of Working
in a Corporate Legal Department

By Monica Muehsam



According to a 2012 survey conducted by NALA, the National Association of Legal Assistants, 63% of all paralegals work for law firms, compared to only 21% of paralegals employed by the corporate sector, which includes corporations, banks, medical and insurance entities. Salary ranges for in-house and law firm paralegals are generally similar according to the 2013 Robert Half Legal Salary Guide: a paralegal with four to six years of experience working in a law firm can expect to make in the range of \$49,062 to \$62,000 compared to \$47,250 to \$68,000 for in-house paralegals.

So if salary ranges are relatively equal, are there benefits to working in-house?

Or do law firms offer a more ideal workplace?

Some legal professionals believe that in-house employment offers a cushy environment, where the paralegals stroll in to their luxurious offices sometime after nine a.m. to face a “grueling” day of reviewing monthly reports and haranguing outside counsel. Meanwhile, their law firm counterparts are rushing to get to their windowless cubicles after a few hours’ sleep due to working until the wee hours the previous night to assist in a major document production. In reality, the life of an in-house paralegal, especially in these days of corporate belt-tightening, is a far cry from this elusive fantasy.

Office Space

An obvious difference between working in a law firm and working in-house, at least superficially, is the paralegals’ office space. Many law firm paralegals have their own offices in well-appointed suites complete with plush carpeting, floor to ceiling windows and tasteful art adorning the walls. Compare this setup to a legal department in a corporation, where instead of opulent offices designed to impress clients, the surroundings are more utilitarian. Paralegals and administrative assistants often bump up against each other in a bank of cubicles. One paralegal may know all about her co-worker’s doctor’s appointment or childcare problems because there is no discreet place to make a phone call. Another paralegal may be constantly interrupted by her neighbor’s gossiping with a friend in HR.

“Working for a major player in legal private practice did mean we had a posh address,” says Alethea Wiesner, an in-house paralegal at MNP, a national accounting and consulting firm headquartered in Calgary, Canada. “My office is fine, but it’s not as swanky as a law firm office.” Working in close quarters can wreak havoc on one’s concentration and ability to complete tasks that require critical thought and analysis. This can be frustrating for a paralegal who works more effectively in a quiet environment.

Assignments and Responsibilities

Even though some in-house paralegals’ surroundings may not be as upscale or tranquil as their law firm counterparts, the types of work in-house paralegals have the opportunity to tackle can be more challenging and rewarding. “I enjoy the fact that I get to proactively help the company assess issues and risks before they become problems,” says Tamara Quincannon, a litigation paralegal at Joy Global, Inc., a manufacturer of mining equipment based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. “In my experience, in-house paralegals get to be more involved and are considered team members. I learn more about the big picture than just completing an assignment and moving on to the next client.”

In-house paralegals definitely feel invested in their jobs. Kathryn Gordon, a paralegal at Inland American Business Manager and Advisor, Inc., a consulting firm based in Oak Brook, Illinois, notes, “In-house, the legal department is seen as a business partner to the overall health and growth of the company. Paralegals don’t work on “one off” projects but instead manage processes like contracts administration, corporate governance, securities, and intellectual property. At a law firm, paralegals most frequently work client by client with no real partnership or investment in the client other than billable hours.” Yes, some law firm parale-

gals do spend some of their time working on discrete assignments and they are also involved in their cases from start to finish. On the other hand, many in-house paralegals receive random projects from time to time. Overall, however, in-house paralegals generally have more responsibility for ongoing corporate operations.

Wiesner adds, "We intimately get to know the internal political issues and challenges, business philosophies, value systems and tolerance for risk in a way you don't when you have a multitude of clients. We build relationships within the firm and intrinsically know who to go to for different issues."

Variety of Duties

Corporations with their own legal departments tend to employ thousands of people, but that does not necessarily mean their legal departments are equally as large. In-house paralegals wear many hats and may work in several practice areas. One day a litigation paralegal may be working on gathering documents to produce to the EPA in an environmental matter, the next day she may be interviewing company engineers about their knowledge of groundwater contaminants. In a corporation, Wiesner notes, "There's a lot of work to do, so anyone motivated, curious and enthusiastic about learning can take on better and bigger projects."

The opportunity to perform a wide variety of tasks resonates with in-house paralegals. "I get to wear so many different hats and do research on so many

different subjects," says Patty Gundersen, an in-house paralegal at BR Consulting, Inc., a global educational service company based in Flagstaff, Arizona. Gundersen had worked most of her 30-year paralegal career in law firms and worked for some great attorneys, but would much rather stay in the corporate setting. "I rarely get bored," she adds. It's fairly obvious that working on a variety of matters can keep one's work day challenging, lively and gratifying.

Exposure to a Multitude of Professionals

In-house paralegals have the opportunity to work with a wider cross section of business people as opposed to interacting only with lawyers. "I like the fact I interface with many different facets of the company," Quincannon states. "I may need to speak to one of the officers or directors and then later I will be talking to someone who works directly with the customer. I enjoy being a part of solving problems."

Working for the Team

In-house paralegals are more likely to

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be considered part of a team rather than relegated to the "staff" pool. Wiesner agrees with the notion of the corporate legal department being comprised of team players. "We all work closely together and have built a work family that supports and cares about one another." Compare that to the law firm hierarchy: "I hated the clear line of delineation between the lawyers and the support staff in private practice," states Wiesner. "It was disheartening to watch, more so because it was accepted and even expected. At MNP we may have a specialty, but we're jacks of all trades. You never know what's going to come across your desk on any given day."



No Billable Hours

While we are discussing the benefits of working in-house, we cannot ignore the elephant in the room: the luxury of not having to bill time. How often does a law firm paralegal rush from one project to the next, then at the end of the day realize that she has to go back over every excruciating tenth of an hour to account for her tasks?

"No billable hours - it's a delight," says Wiesner. "I don't miss tracking every minute of my day," adds Quincannon. Some in-house paralegals do have to keep track of their time spent on certain matters, but the record-keeping is usually less arduous than spelling out every specific task performed in six minute increments. If you work in

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a position in which some portion of your day is spent on administrative tasks and therefore not billable, or if your bonus and/or yearly merit raise is based on your billable hours, having a job without this added pressure is a major reason to desire work in-house work.

Fewer Overtime Hours

Related to the billing advantage is the number of hours worked. In-house personnel, be they paralegals or attorneys, generally work fewer hours than their law firm counterparts. Some paralegals may consider fewer hours an advantage, but not everyone likes the predictable nine to five schedule. Younger paralegals fresh out of school with hefty loans to repay may choose law firm work because of the option of unlimited overtime. Some paralegals have doubled their annual salaries by working after hours whenever it is requested of them. Large firms in bigger cities are more likely to offer this option than smaller firms, although when you are the only paralegal at a smaller firm and your largest case is going to trial, the

overtime can be significant. Once a paralegal gets a decade or so of experience under her belt, however, she may opt for the more routine schedule of a corporate position, especially if he or she has family obligations.

Limited Exposure to the Courts

In-house employment has its share of drawbacks, one of which is the limited amount of exposure to motion practice and trial work. If you are a litigation paralegal who thrives on the adrenaline rush of "the big show," you may be better suited to a law firm position that offers more opportunities to go to court. In-house paralegals are more likely to coordinate trial appearances with outside counsel than to actually appear in court themselves.

Greater Benefits

While salaries between law firm and in-house paralegals are fairly comparable, benefits may differ. Charles Volkert,



executive director of Robert Half Legal, a nationwide staffing service based in Menlo Park, CA, sees more corporations than law firms offering additional benefits such as travel, company stock, flex-time and telecommuting. He advises paralegals looking to work in-house to research whether their target companies are progressive enough to offer these options.

Volkert has not seen statistics on how long in-house paralegals stay at their jobs compared to law firm paralegals, but reports higher retention rates related to job satisfaction.

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Six Tips for Breaking in to the Corporate Legal Arena

Network

Join groups on LinkedIn, local paralegal associations and chambers of commerce.

Brand Yourself

Establish your brand and project a consistent online image of who you are and what you represent.

Get Your Foot in the Door

Take an entry level position or offer to work non-traditional hours.

Build Your Skills

If you are already working at a law firm, gain experience in a practice area that would translate to an in-house position, such as patent or contract work.

Make the Jump

Law firm paralegals may want to seek employment with one of their firm's clients.

Target your Dream Companies

Then follow them on social media and network, network, network.



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Breaking In

While in-house paralegal employment can appear to be an ideal career choice for many paralegals, breaking in to the corporate legal department can be tough. According to NALA, only one out of every five paralegals is working in the corporate sector, so it makes sense that the opportunities for these positions are limited. Volkert reports plenty of demand for paralegals in both law firms and corporations, as long as they have at least four years' experience in sought-out areas. "There is a lot of demand for paralegals with strong technical skills and e-discovery tools," Volkert notes. "These skills can somewhat make up for a lack of experience." Paralegals with seven-plus years of experience are even more in demand. Practice area expertise is rated as the number one attribute in the decision to hire a paralegal candidate, according to a survey of over 200 in-house attorneys conducted by Robert Half Legal. Other skills noted in this survey, in order of importance, are corporate/transactional expertise, litigation expertise, contracts/lease administration experience, health care (specifically with regard to regulatory/compliance issues) and technology and patent-related matters.

Volkert does not see entry level paralegals immediately entering in-house positions, but Robert Half does place candidates with one to two years' experience if they have the desired technology skills and a higher educational level. He recommends that paralegals who want to move in-house obtain extra education and training to better position themselves for those coveted job openings. He notes that the Association of Certified E-Discovery Specialists offers the Certified E-Discovery Specialist (CEDS) Certification. Other e-discovery training and certification programs have also cropped up in recent years.

Personality Parade

At the risk of biting the hand that feeds us, we paralegals are all aware that the field of law attracts some difficult personalities. We have all heard or experienced the horror stories of attorneys who scream or threaten as a way of dealing with the pressure of their positions. Without the partnership track found in the law firm setting, in-house attorneys may espouse a "softer" approach and be less intense than their law firm counterparts. Wiesner observes, "There are fewer 'alpha dog' personalities in-house. In private practice there was a lot of posturing and one-upmanship, particularly among the litigation big dogs, which got very tiresome."

Along with the more team-like environment of corporate legal departments, with attorneys and paralegals on a more even playing field, in-house paralegals have the unique advantage of being the client in the attorney/client relationship. In-house paralegals work closely with outside counsel in many areas of law and this alliance



is quite different from the paralegal/attorney relationship in a law firm. Many senior in-house paralegals not only work with outside counsel, they often are the main point of contact with outside attorneys and supervise all phases of their work. And for any paralegal who will never forget the last time she was berated by a first year associate, being treated well by attorneys is truly rewarding.

If your primary objective is to work plenty of hours and earn a substantial salary, law firm employment is probably the place for you. But if you are looking for an environment with a better work/life balance where you have a greater chance of performing a variety of substantive tasks with similarly-minded co-workers, an in-house position may be just what you need. □

Monica Muehsam is litigation paralegal at Arkema Inc., a global chemical company with its U.S. headquarters in King of Prussia, PA. She has been a paralegal for over 14 years and has worked in both the law firm and corporate setting.



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