



LEVERAGING WITH PARALEGAL SERVICES

By Denise M. Annunciata

The practice of law involves a level of work that is not what you necessarily imagined you'd be doing when you were in law school or what you necessarily always enjoy doing today. With proper supervision that level of work – the paralegal level - can be efficiently and cost-effectively performed by qualified non-lawyers.

So, paralegals can be a great resource. That being said, lawyers may have a few problems establishing an effective paralegal relationship. The first problem is that all paralegals are not equal. "Paralegal" is a title that, as of yet, has little to no regulation. Anyone may deem themselves a paralegal and any lawyer may entitle their assistant a paralegal – whether that assistant is primarily doing secretarial work or substantive paralegal work. So, it's no wonder that lawyers may have difficulty recognizing and establishing a productive working relationship with a "qualified non-lawyer".

"It's one of the most important skills in practicing law: building an effective work team to serve clients in the best possible manner and generate profits. Paralegals can be a key element in that team, especially in fostering cost efficiency." [*ABA Model Guidelines for the Utilization of Paralegal Services*](#), ABA Standing Committee on Paralegals, © 2004 American Bar Association.

Value Added

If you've ever experienced working with a professional paralegal, you know first-hand the benefits of such a resource. A lawyer may concentrate on the substantive legal work lawyers should be doing. They don't waste time researching things that a seasoned paralegal already knows. They don't make mistakes that a seasoned paralegal can help them avoid. They don't do the mundane work for which they are simply overtrained. Instead the lawyer's time is more productively spent performing and *billing* for substantive legal work; or marketing and building a law practice rather than preparing documents and determining the filing mechanics of a specific state, for instance.

Competitive Edge

It is no secret in the legal industry that clients are increasingly cost-conscious and demanding. They want top-notch legal service for a minimum cost. So, have *you* ever spent way too much on practical procedures for a matter and then cut your bill accordingly? It's the cost of plain inefficiency. As a solo practitioner or small firm, paralegals can increase your competitive edge while enhancing your bottom line. Your competitive edge is sharpened because paralegals enable to you to compete on pricing and meet workload demands at a more reasonable cost. Profits are increased because a seasoned paralegal is efficient and his or her overhead is significantly less than that of an associate. (See [VPS Cost Analysis](#).)

Finding the Right Paralegal

So, how do you find the right paralegal for your practice? As with any hire, compatible personality and dynamics are as important a component as skill level. Certainly there's nothing that this article can offer that can assist you with evaluating personality and dynamics. But when it comes to skill level there are certain things you can consider:

- **Education:** A four-year college degree is helpful, particularly when the degree is in pre-law, paralegal studies, legal studies or the like. Paralegals holding degrees in paralegal studies tend to have a



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solid understanding of legal theory which makes for a great foundation for any paralegal to understand general legal concept, whether their practice area is litigation, corporate law, real estate, bankruptcy or any other practice area.

- **Work Experience:** There is a huge difference between working for a solo practitioner and working for a national law firm with hundreds, if not thousands, of lawyers. There's a world of difference between working in a legal department versus a law firm. Experiences in different legal settings often make a paralegal more flexible and astute in the workplace. Various experiences lend a perception that can be used to better understand the perspective of the lawyer the paralegal is currently supporting.
- **Career Goals:** Career paralegals are paralegals who understand their function within the legal industry. They understand that without attending law school and passing a state bar examination they are not lawyers. They understand their role is supportive and they understand the value of the services they offer. Career paralegals are defining the paralegal profession and helping lawyers understand the value-added role paralegals can play in rendering efficient and cost-effective legal services.
- **Experienced vs. Entry Level:** If you're looking for an experienced paralegal, it is best to look for at least five years solid practical experience in the area(s) of law in which you practice.

How Does a Solo Practitioner or Small Firm Find Such a Paralegal?

Solo practitioners and small firm lawyers may completely understand the value of a great paralegal. But experienced paralegals can warrant significant salaries of at least \$50k, not including benefits. You may feel your workload is not steady enough to justify hiring a full-time paralegal – or maybe you just want to avoid being an employer entirely. So, what are your alternatives? On-Demand Paralegal Services™.

On-demand paralegal services offered by [Virtual Paralegal Services, Inc.](#), offer lawyers quick research, help on a specific project or on-going assistance as you need it. VPS strengthens your legal team and secures your competitive edge as an experienced, affordable and fast-responding team member without expensive overhead. Using on-demand paralegal services you can build an effective work team to serve clients in the best possible manner and generate profits without incurring overhead. To learn more about Virtual Paralegal Services and how it may strengthen your practice, contact Denise Annunciata at denise@virtualparalegalservices.com or phone her at 888-600-4992.

About Denise M. Annunciata

Denise Annunciata has been a paralegal for 21 years working in law firms and in-house legal departments. Denise is the founder and coordinating paralegal for Virtual Paralegal Services, LLC (www.virtualparalegalservices.com), which offers on-demand paralegal services™ to in-house legal departments and solo or small firm practitioners. Prior to founding Virtual Paralegal Services and LeapLaw (www.leaplaw.com), Denise was the Corporate Paralegal Coordinator at Ropes & Gray LLP, Boston, Massachusetts.