

Indiana University South Bend

Frequently Asked Questions

About Becoming a Paralegal

What skills do I need to be a successful paralegal?

According to the 1998 ABA Utilization of Legal Assistants Among Private Practitioners Survey, the top four most important skills for paralegals are:

- ▶ Organization
- ▶ Effective in-person and written communication skills including good grammar and a good vocabulary
- ▶ Effective Interpersonal Skills (ability to communicate, empathize, and interact with individuals with diverse backgrounds and education)
- ▶ Computer Skills

Analytical skills and interviewing and investigating skills are also extremely important.

In addition, the personality traits commonly found among successful paralegals include:

- ▶ common sense and good judgment
- ▶ assertiveness
- ▶ diplomacy
- ▶ patience
- ▶ perseverance
- ▶ self-motivation
- ▶ confidence
- ▶ strong sense of ethics

from Paralegal Careers by Angela Schneeman

What are the standard education requirements necessary to become a paralegal?

There are currently no state wide or national standards set. Paralegal associations in several states are lobbying to have the states establish regulation or licensure requirements which would include an educational component. A minimum of an associate's degree is recommended, especially those without any legal experience. A bachelor's degree and specific paralegal training are becoming a more standard prerequisite for employment in larger firms and in larger metropolitan areas. As with other occupations, opportunities and compensation packages will tend to increase with the level of education achieved.

The American Association for Paralegal Education (AAfPE) states that "paralegal programs must be of sufficient length and quality to prepare students for the challenges of the paralegal profession."

The AAFPE along with four other major law-related associations: the National Federation of Paralegal Associations (NFPA), the National Association of Legal Assistants (NALA), the Legal Assistant Management Association (LAMA), and the Standing Committee on Legal Assistants of the American Bar Association (ABA) agree to the following minimum educational standards:

- Post-secondary coursework in substantive and procedural law, the American legal system, law offices and related environments, the paralegal profession, legal research and writing, ethics, and areas of legal practice;
- No fewer than 18 semester credit hours (or the equivalent) of substantive paralegal courses;
- The completion of a minimum of 60 semester hours (or the equivalent) or total postsecondary study prior to graduation.

The program must be offered by an institution that is:

- An institutional member of the American Association for Paralegal Education **OR**
- Accredited by an agency recognized by the United States Department of Education and offers courses at the postsecondary level **OR**
- Approved by the American Bar Association

NFPA (National Federation of Paralegal Associations) recently established the PACE (paralegal advanced competency exam). Those successfully completing that exam earn the designation of Registered Paralegal. To qualify for PACE registration, you must also have a minimum of a bachelor's degree as well as experience. The NFPA foresees that this test may someday be part of a mandatory regulation program. For further information on this program, you may visit their Web site at www.paralegals.org or call 816.941.4000.

Is there a difference between a legal assistant and a paralegal?

No, those are generally considered to be interchangeable terms to describe someone who has specialized knowledge gained through education and/or several years of experience, who performs substantive legal work that might otherwise be done by an attorney; who works under the supervision of an attorney or within the law through administrative; statutory, or court authority; and who does not practice law.

Aside from working in a law firm, what other opportunities are there for paralegals?

- ▶ Corporate legal departments
- ▶ Federal, state and local government
- ▶ Agencies and lobbying groups, such as the ACLU and the Sierra Club
- ▶ Schools and Universities
- ▶ Working as a freelance paralegal
- ▶ Insurance
- ▶ Real estate and title insurance firms
- ▶ Banks and financial services companies

Paralegals also find job opportunities in non-traditional occupations.

What can I expect to earn as a paralegal?

Paralegal salaries and benefits are impacted by location, level of education, previous legal or related experience, type and size of employer, legal specialty area and billable hours. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics survey, in 2000, the salary range for paralegals in Indiana was \$19,500 - \$43,100 annually with \$30,800 as the median salary. The range in the United States was \$23,300 - \$56,100 annually.

What is the job outlook for paralegals?

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook, demand for paralegals is expected to grow. They attribute this to an increasing population and growth of prepaid legal plans. They also say that organizations currently employing paralegals will assign them a growing range of tasks. In addition, paralegals are increasingly employed in small and medium-sized offices. A growing number are also expected to start their own businesses. They also project that community legal service programs, government agencies at all levels, consumer organizations and the courts should continue to hire paralegals in increasing numbers.

What Does a Paralegal Do?

Under the supervision of an attorney, the paralegal will apply knowledge of law and legal procedures in the rendering direct assistance to lawyers, clients, and organizations. The paralegal may:

- Prepare, interpret, summarize, and revise a variety of legal documents;
- Design, develop and modify procedures;
- Interview client and prepare interrogatories;
- Perform legal research by assessing, compiling, and using information from the law library and other references;
- Investigate, gather, review, and analyze records; and
- Maintain file control and handle other office administration duties and procedural problems that involve independent decisions.