

This article is intended to be shared with law office staff to help them improve the efficiency and effectiveness of your law practice.

Benefits for Lawyers

By Jane Jacobs

The value of an educated, specifically-trained paralegal is inestimable. Paralegals offer tremendous benefits to lawyers. Good paralegals save valuable time in accomplishing the day-to-day tasks of practicing law. Paralegals not only review records and documents, prepare summaries, perform investigations and research, and keep documents organized, but also can draft contracts, pleadings and even briefs. It is the wise lawyer who hires the most qualified person, and helps to keep that person knowledgeable through continuing legal education. Paralegals, as with lawyers, require continuing education to ensure that they remain the most qualified. The law is, after all, a learned profession.

Typically, the most important element in determining the qualifications of a candidate for any position is education. The qualities of a good paralegal include, among others, the ability to think, to communicate both orally and in writing, and to have a sound working knowledge of the law and legal profession. The foundation for such qualities begins in the classroom. There are a variety of options available to establish a good base on which a paralegal can build. Several colleges and universities offer programs that include emphasis on or certification in paralegal studies. Certification programs may be completed before or after attaining a bachelor's degree. There are two-year programs with emphasis on paralegal studies. Although still rare, there are master-degree

programs in legal studies, for example, those at Webster University. Optimally, a paralegal would possess a bachelor's degree with a paralegal component or one that is paralegal-specific. For recommendations on qualifications, visit the Practicing with Paralegals section of the Missouri Bar's Paralegal Committee web page (www.mobar.org). The Paralegal Committee's web page also contains a listing of schools in Missouri with paralegal programs.

Good paralegal programs offer in-depth legal knowledge and practical application skills in nearly all legal areas from bankruptcy to trusts, from contracts to litigation. In addition, well-rounded programs offer courses in research, writing, and ethics. Most practitioners are simply too busy to convey all the knowledge they want the paralegal to have.

Employing inadequately educated paralegals to just "fill a space" can prove to be a dangerous and costly venture. Even for new lawyers much time is invested in training how the law and the legal system work. These are not easy concepts. Even competently completing a form requires a good level of contextual knowledge and background understanding of the law and legal system. Equally important is proper training in and knowledge of legal ethics for paralegals. Larger offices may have the benefit of staff designated to ensure that everyone is trained and aware of legal ethical obligations. Small offices do not have such a luxury and the task of properly imparting this information will fall to the attorney or attorneys supervising

their work. Offices can minimize these time-consuming processes and avoid a myriad of risks by hiring educated, well-trained paralegals.

Hiring qualified paralegals is not the end of the process, it is the beginning. Just as lawyers need to stay up to date, so do their paralegals. The legal profession recognizes the need for continuing education for lawyers to keep abreast of changes in the law and procedures, current trends in technology, and other new information relevant to the practice of law. Rules and procedures, as well as laws and regulations, change constantly. It is essential that persons in the role of paralegal are aware of the changes and how those changes affect the substance of their duties. To be truly beneficial, the paralegal must be as current as the lawyer.

The benefits to both lawyers and paralegals are straightforward. Paralegals who regularly attend CLE programs are more up-to-date and in-the-know regarding changes as they happen. Continuing legal education also offers opportunities for learning new material, hence, expanding the paralegal's capabilities. For lawyers still practicing in multiple areas of law, this is especially beneficial.

Other good reasons for paralegal CLE include the opportunity to replenish the memory banks, and to meet other paralegals, to learn of new resources and vendors. General practitioners in particular have a greater variety of legal matters and their paralegals should be

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as capable as they are in each area. CLE is an avenue to learning new material and remembering and supplementing infrequently used information. Even those firms with limited practice areas find that every case has its own peculiarities and needs all the resources at hand. Attending seminars is a good time for building networks of potential resources and even prospective clients. Attorneys sometime forget that paralegals make referrals, too.

Unfortunately, CLE is still not re-

quired for paralegals. As a result, seminars are difficult to find. Commercial seminars for paralegals are returning to the scene but seem to be confined to the St. Louis and Kansas City areas. They are also costly. The Missouri Paralegal Association is filling the gap by offering an annual seminar in a mid-Missouri location. The 2007 seminar on June 8 at Tan-Tar-A has expanded this year to include more topics than in previous years. The cost is reasonable, too. For information visit MPA's website at www.missouriparalegalassoc.org.

An educated paralegal supported by CLE is a tremendous asset to any prac-

ticing lawyer. Paralegals can save attorneys many hours of work for more work, family or other endeavors. Additional benefits derive from continuing legal education after arriving at the law office. The Rules of Professional Conduct require lawyers to be competent and to maintain that competency through continuing legal education. A good lawyer expects no less from his paralegal.

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