



PARALEGALS

The Importance of Utilizing Paralegals

Paralegals play an important part in the legal field, but their knowledge and experience can often be undermined. Speaking to Christa Centolella, she addresses how law firms can utilize paralegals and the services they offer.

What is the role of a paralegal?

Paralegals, depending on experience and tasks needed, are often hired to deal with the customer service side of the practice, often being a spokesperson for the attorney. They gather all information, facts and proofs, engage in client conversations, communicate with courts and other legal firms and often provide office administration tasks. Paralegals are

Why would clients hire a paralegal over a lawyer?

Most often, those that hire me, do so for notary/signing agent services, process serving, document typing, research, referrals, document preparation and getting them the right forms and other support services that do not require legal advice and cost much less to administer. As an independent provider, I cannot give legal advice or represent the general public, so in such cases, they would

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often highly skilled individuals with specific knowledge sets to support and assist lawyers with their practice at all stages, from intake to resolution, however, they are limited in scope over what they can and cannot do on their own and in a law practice. Often, they are given the task to assess a case at intake and collect information to help decide whether it's a case that would require legal advice and attorney representation.

not hire me over a lawyer. However, I can gather information and point someone in the right direction by giving them referrals, suggestions for resolutions or help them get their case facts in order better so they can hire an attorney, if needed.

People will often seek my assistance first because their initial motivation is that they think they will save on money and think we are cheaper in fees. That is not always the case. I get a lot of calls for legal aid services,

but I don't provide free or pro bono services. They would not hire me instead of an attorney because I am providing support services, not direct legal services. There is a big difference between the two. I am often hired by attorneys to provide administrative or certain tasks that assist them with their client's case, not mine. I don't have a legal practice; I have a legal support and financial practice.

Often, people possess a great amount of business and legal knowledge and decide to represent themselves (if rules allow). On those cases, they usually need a little extra manpower on tasks such as research, making sure they have the right forms and notary information, or assistance with organizing information. The only other time I think someone would hire me over an attorney would be for notary services, as you don't have to be an attorney to be a notary public.

What aid can paralegals offer?

Having paralegals can be key to the success of every attorney's firm whether it is a solo practice, a partner practice or a large firm. They can assist you greatly in your daily practice needs and tasks depending on your business model and area of law. Sometimes paralegal fees may be higher than traditional legal support staff, but often that comes with experience and vast knowledge of certain subjects and areas of law. You are paying for higher knowledge and skills sets. It's the same for why someone would hire an attorney. Paralegals to attorneys are like physician assistants to doctors.

What are common misconceptions people have regarding paralegals?

I get requests I can't fulfil and the responses I get are that they think

paralegals are really the ones that do all the work. This is not generally the case. As it can be true, we do perform many types of tasks and carry a higher vast of knowledge than, for example, a legal secretary, but we don't do

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all the work. Paralegals in New York don't carry the license to be in fiduciary duty and do not counsel on the laws and how they apply. We are limited in scope. Usually, individuals or businesses seeking paralegals are seeking a more affordable way to get certain tasks done, usually due to budget constraints or affordability factors. They don't realize they still should invest in getting the legal advice regarding their situation, even if the attorney does not carry out the administrative tasks.

As an independent paralegal, what advice would you offer law firms, to better utilize paralegal staff?

Paralegals are usually entrusted with certain tasks due to their performance, experience and knowledge. You should hire those that carry knowledge sets in different areas and surround your practice with such supporting and knowledgeable individuals. The hiring attorney still takes full responsibility for the paralegal's actions. It's important to have good communication skills and a close relationship with your paralegal to ensure the tasks you assign are in accordance with your wishes and that

they won't jeopardize your practice and license. Attorneys also need to recognize that paralegals are their support line and should value their role and treat them well and accordingly. Often, I hear that paralegals leave a

practice for the way they are treated and/or viewed. An attorney's attitude and manners toward their support staff is of utmost importance and often is the key to a successful practice.

The reasons for when others seek an independent paralegal as opposed to the attorney is usually according to the misconception they conclude from the experiences they have encountered. If attorneys would pay close attention to the customer service provided to their clientele and not only to the income factors, they will increase their success rates. A legal practice thrives not only on its knowledge power, but word of mouth on the experiences of those who hire them.

If you're an attorney and overwhelmed with your workload, seek a quality independent paralegal service provider to help you expand or maintain your practice duties. The benefits are: 1) that you can write off them as a vendor expense, 2) change service providers at your choice and upon need without the hiring repercussions 3) build an additional referral source for your practice that costs less than some attorney advertising models and 4) increases the ability to expand your business model efforts, if that is the direction you are seeking. **LM**

About Christa Centolella

Christa Centolella is an Independent Paralegal and Solo Owner of CJC Judgment and Paralegal Services located in Auburn, New York. She regularly provides outsourced Paralegal Services for attorneys on an "as needed" basis. She provides legal support and financial services business model to her immediate and surrounding communities of the Finger Lakes Region of Upstate New York. Her territory coverage has expanded to provide mobile services to 21 New York counties. Firms outside New York or her county also seek her as a resource to assist with specific services in related areas.

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