

The President's Message

With a little help from my friends

by Jim Yoro

Most lawyers would like to believe that the primary reason for the success they've achieved in their practice is due to their own hard work and effort. However, when asked for a realistic assessment of their situation, most lawyers will admit that a crucial part of their success depends on their support staff. Depending on the type of practice one has, a paralegal/legal assistant may play a vital role in that success. In my own practice, I depend on my legal assistant, Lesleigh Johnston, to perform many essential functions that contribute to the successful outcome of my cases. In fact, I consider her to be an indispensable member of my firm, who is as valuable as the associate attorney who also works with me. Therefore, I would like to give special recognition to all of those hard-working paralegals and legal assistants that make our jobs easier by devoting my message this month to them.



There are many ways that one can become a paralegal. Depending on one's background, training and education, a paralegal may be able to handle many aspects of the legal process or the workup of the file. For example, my legal assistant was previously employed for more than 10 years as an insurance adjuster with a major workers compensation insurance carrier before she came to work for me. Because of this experience, she was well-equipped to evaluate cases and understood the nuances of how a workers compensation file should be handled from beginning to end.

Since building an effective legal team is important in order to serve the best interests of the clients and achieve success in one's practice, what should one look for when hiring a paralegal? I asked this and several other questions to two of the paralegals in our firm, Barbara Hass and Donna Wilkins, and here were their answers:

What background, education, and/or training did you have in order to become a paralegal?

Barbara Hass:

"Background: 37 years in the legal field. I began my career as a legal secretary in 1980. In 1985, I became a civil

defense paralegal for Art Pearl, and then Larry Peake. In 1995, I began working for David Cohn as a personal injury paralegal and supervisor of his PI practice. I also taught Personal Injury Law at CSUB's Attorney Assistant Program in the evenings for many years and wrote the text book for the class utilized by CSUB.

Education: Completion of the Attorney Assistant Program at California State University, Bakersfield. Examination through the National Association of Legal Assistants for my certification as a California Advanced Specialist in Civil Litigation; Advanced Paralegal certifications in Trial Practices, Discovery, Wrongful Death, and Personal Injury.

Training: Under the supervision and training from the best attorneys. Art Pearl and Larry Peake hammered in me civil procedure, while David Cohn and Matt Clark fine-tuned the art of personal injury and case management.

Comment: Education cannot replace experience. Education is the stepping stone. Experience is the mountain top. All the education in the world cannot teach a paralegal how to navigate through the day-to-day encounters of an area of law. Only experience gives you that. That is why it is a combination of education and experience that makes for an outstanding paralegal."

Donna Wilkins:

"My background is not your typical educational background that you will find of most paralegals today. There were no schools specializing in paralegal studies when I first started in the legal industry in 1979 when I was 19 years old; the only specialized education I could find to help assist me in advancement was a correspondence course, which I did take and complete.

My background is solely from experience. I started as a receptionist in 1979 for a small firm in San Francisco. From the day I sat at the desk, I knew I had found my calling. I did everything I could to learn as much as I could and kept asking questions and requesting more responsibility. I absorbed everything I could and advanced to legal secretary in less than a year. I moved firms about 3 times in 5 years in order to obtain knowledge in the areas

of personal injury, construction defect, probate, family law and insurance defense. Later in my career I worked in the areas of criminal law, corporate law, and civil and criminal appellate law. The more I learned, the more I wanted to learn and was very fortunate to find employment with attorneys and firms that encouraged my advancement and shared their knowledge with me—even allowing me to sit in on depositions, court hearings, oral argument in appellate court and civil trials. Next year I will have 40 years in the legal field, over 25 of them as a paralegal and I have never looked back—only forward to the next challenge as a paralegal.”

What skills are necessary in order to be a quality paralegal?

Barbara Hass:

“At a minimum, all paralegals are required to be in compliance with Business and Professions Code Section 6450 - 6456. In addition, it is very important for paralegals to possess excellent writing and research skills, understand the rules, procedures and mechanics that apply to their area of practice; stay up-to-date on the changing rules and

procedures; possess exceptional technical skills; and possess excellent analytical and case management skills. However, having all of these “skills” doesn’t make a great paralegal. To be a great paralegal you must also possess the qualities of a great employee: loyalty, work ethic, detail oriented, dedication to your craft, tenacity, and a thick skin.”

Donna Wilkins:

“In addition to skill, I believe it is absolutely imperative to have an affinity and love for what you do. Knowledge and skills are one thing, but if you do not love what you do, you won’t be as successful as you could be. The most important skill I believe is the ability to prioritize. With all the work that lands on my desk, I must be able to determine what must be done now and what can wait. A system of following up on projects is also imperative. Organization is crucial, as you can’t get things done if you do not have a system in place to make sure that nothing is missed. You must be able to communicate, both verbally and in writing, with the attorneys and staff, but also with clients and the courts. Maintaining knowledge of current case law and statutes which pertain to your area of practice is also necessary.”

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