

# Becoming an Invaluable Member of the Legal Team

By Nickie L. Stewart, CP, FRP

**W**hether you are new to the paralegal field or are a seasoned paralegal, I have some tips that may benefit you in your career. Consider what you can do to assist on each file on which you have been asked to work. If you know that records need to be requested or certain documents need to be drafted, go ahead and take the initiative and prepare a draft for your attorney to review, rather than waiting for your attorney to tell you to do so.

**Draft each document as if you are going to be the one to sign it.** If you look at a document from this perspective you realize the importance of the document and you will want to ensure that it is accurate.

**Faster is definitely not better.** When drafting a document or letter for review by your attorney, resist the urge to rush. Even if the matter is urgent, you must take the time to take a step back (and a deep breath) and review the document thoroughly. This is especially true if you have been asked, as I have been, to forward a document drafted by someone else. I learned the hard way that prior to doing so, I should first review the document for accuracy. Once you forward the document, it becomes “your” work product and the recipient will credit any typos or mistakes to you. Your boss or client will not remember the speed in which you accomplished a task but they will remember any mistakes you neglected to correct.

**Consider what you can do to assist on each file on which you have been asked to work.**

**Even if you have not been requested to review a document you should take a few moments to quickly review it for accuracy.** Many times in the past I was requested to hand deliver a pleading to Court for filing in order to meet a deadline, and while glancing at the document in the elevator I discovered a mistake. It is better to ask the attorney to take a final look at the document *before* you file it rather than point out a mistake *after* it has been filed. One of the secretaries would always say when she saw me coming back to her desk “Uh oh, what did I do wrong this time?” You should take as much pride in someone else’s work product as you do your own and do your part to ensure that all work product that leaves your firm is of the highest quality and error free.

**Take an interest in the cases you have been asked to work on and do not be shy about discussing your thoughts with your attorney.** If you are working on a case that is document intensive, go

the extra mile and review the documents thoroughly. I assisted two attorneys at the beginning of this year defending an employment law case in a four-day jury trial in Federal court which involved multiple witnesses. After the trial began we discovered that the plaintiff obtained copies of the trial witnesses’ employment documents from the government entity we represented. One evening after a full day in trial I reviewed those documents and learned information about the witnesses’ employment disciplinary actions and we were able to deal with those matters and diffuse the severity of the information



rather than being ambushed by that information by opposing counsel's examination of the witnesses.

**When reviewing documents to be used as trial exhibits, take special care to examine any headers, footers or handwritten notes appended to such documents and point these out to your attorney before you submit them to opposing counsel or the Court.** If they are your client's documents, the attorney may want to scrub the headers and footers. In this same trial there was a document submitted by the plaintiff as a trial exhibit. During the trial when it was displayed on a large screen for the jury to view we noticed a footer called "Rainy day file." As the plaintiff was claiming employment discrimination, it did not look good for her case that she was making notes "for a rainy day." By the end of the day even the Judge was referring to the document as "the rainy day memo."

**Be prepared to go "all in."** If your situation allows, let your attorney know that you can work overtime if necessary when you are preparing for trial. When getting ready for trial I have come back early from vacation and worked through the weekend and 15–18 hour days when needed. These situations are very rare but I know that it is time well spent. I missed many meals and did not get much sleep for two weeks but it was worth it as we achieved an excellent result for our client.

**Finally, I have learned to always have a pen and legal pad with me when I go into an attorney's office.** You can pretty much bet that if your boss calls you into his or her office you will be given an assignment, and nothing is worse than not being prepared to take careful notes.

Nickie L. Stewart, CP, FRP, has been a litigation paralegal for more than 25 years at Henderson, Franklin, Starnes & Holt, P.A. She works for a team of 10 attorneys in a variety of fields including employment law, eminent domain, and mortgage foreclosures. She obtained her CP certification in 1987 and became a Florida Registered Paralegal in 2008. Nickie was the recipient of the 2015 Affiliates Award at the NALA Convention in Tulsa in July. She is currently the NALA Liaison for Gulf Coast Paralegal Association, Inc. and serves as a proctor for the CP exam, as well serving on the steering committee of the School of Business and Technology at Florida SouthWestern State College. She is also in the 2016 NALA LEAP Class.



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