

TIPS FOR TRANSITIONING TO A PARALEGAL CAREER

By Nancy Jordahl, ACP

Although I love being a paralegal, it is not my first career. Prior to this, I was a retail manager for Camelot Music. There are many people who did not start out planning to become paralegals but decided to make the transition for a variety of reasons. Here are some tips for making a career change to the paralegal profession.

The first thing to do is to carefully consider whether you are a good fit to be a paralegal. Although it is rewarding, it is a demanding profession that sometimes requires travel and overtime work. To be a paralegal, you need top-notch written and verbal communication skills. You have to love learning new things and be able to work with a variety of personalities. If these skills do not match yours, you should consider another profession. There are tests available to see what kind of career fits your unique skills. I took a skills test that told me I should be a paralegal, and it turns out it was correct.

You should consider the skills you have already acquired and how you can apply them as a paralegal. When I was a retail manager, I had to multitask, focus on customer service, pay attention to details, and deal with difficult people. All of those skills have served me well as a paralegal.

I already had a bachelor's degree, so I did not need an additional four years of college. I took a post-baccalaureate program to learn more about the paralegal profession. That type of program can be completed online in a short time period during non-working hours. While I went back to school to get my paralegal certificate, I worked in a law office as a receptionist. Any kind of experience in a law office is a great way to get your foot in the door. You can start out as a runner or file clerk. I worked as a receptionist for less than six months before I was promoted to legal assistant at my first law firm.

Review the qualifications to take NALA's Certified Paralegal (CP®) Exam. If you meet the requirements, consider applying. Obtaining your CP® shows prospective employers that you are serious about your career and possess knowledge and skills that are valuable in the profession.

Seek out connections in the legal field. Talk to people who have legal experience, including attorneys, judges, legal assistants, court reporters, or paralegals. They could pass along helpful information and assist with job placement.

Join your local paralegal organization. It can offer guidance, mentorship, friendship, and job search support. There will likely be someone in your local association who had another career before they were a paralegal, and you can talk to them about their career path.

Be open to different areas of the law. When I first became a paralegal, I thought I wanted to work in family law because it sounded nice to help out families. However, when I worked in family law at my first legal job, it turned out not to be so nice since I had to deal with divorces.

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Be willing to try more than one type of law or different sides (defense versus prosecution). Flexibility is an asset.

Do not expect to start out knowing everything about your new position. You must be willing to continue learning throughout your paralegal career, especially at the beginning. You will need to explore new computer programs, new areas of law, how to bill your time, and local, state, and federal rules.

Missing deadlines in the legal profession has repercussions. In your past career, you might not have gotten in trouble for not completing a task on time, but it is imperative to meet deadlines as a paralegal.

Patience is a virtue. You may not obtain a paralegal position or your dream job at first, but do not give up. A wonderful and fulfilling paralegal career is just around the corner.

Please feel free to reach out to me at njordahl@hotmail.com with any questions. I would be happy to discuss your career change with you or put you in contact with someone else who can assist you.