

Making a Case for Paralegals

January 22, 2014

By: Bernadette Starzee



There's a growing demand for paralegals at Long Island law firms – and they're being asked to perform higher-level tasks.

"The role of paralegal has traditionally been the toughest for law firms here to fill," said Joe Campolo, managing partner of the Ronkonkoma firm [Campolo, Middleton & McCormick](#). "There is no shortage of lawyers who would rather work on Long Island than in the city, and there's no shortage of legal secretaries." McCormick added that the latter role, which, unlike paralegal and attorney positions is 9 to 5, has been dominated by working mothers.

But when the economy tanked in 2008, newly minted lawyers couldn't find associate attorney positions, and many took paralegal

posts.

"The law schools were telling new lawyers to take any job they could get at a law firm to get their foot in the door," Campolo said. "We even had an attorney apply for a receptionist position."

[Nixon Peabody's](#) Jericho office hired an attorney in a paralegal role, and it's proven to be an advantage, according to hiring partner James Weller.

"We have been able to assign her tasks that had not been typical of a paralegal," Weller said.

In general, the trend toward fully educated and qualified attorneys filling open paralegal jobs has helped elevate the role.

"It has informally changed the position, because it has changed our expectations of the skill level we can expect to get in this role," Weller said. "I believe it's now tough for a freshly minted paralegal who just has a paralegal certificate to get a job, with the market still recovering."

But as the economy improves and attorneys in paralegal positions move up to lawyer roles, and more paralegals decide it makes economic sense to go to law school, Campolo predicts it will become more difficult to fill the position once again. And that could prove problematic at firms that have increased their reliance on paralegals.

"It's the same as in health care, where physician's assistants and nurse practitioners are doing more," he said. "Law firms are being forced to add more value for the fees they are charging."

In New York State, the number of paralegals and legal assistants is expected to grow by 17.2 percent from 2010 to 2020, nearly double the average growth rate of 9 percent for all positions, according to the Department of Labor. On Long Island, paralegals and legal assistants earn an average salary of \$58,010, according to DOL figures.

With paralegals handling more of the workload, law firms can bill clients at lower rates.

"It's more efficient and cost-effective for our clients to have our paralegals staff cases, assisting and supporting attorneys," said Terri McColgan, paralegal manager for Uniondale-based law firm [Rivkin Radler](#), which has grown its paralegal team in recent years to 18.

Though it has had opportunities to do so since 2008, East Meadow-based Certilman Balin Hyman & Adler chose not to hire attorneys at the paralegal level.

“It’s not a career move, it’s a stopping-off move – they’re not with you for the long haul,” said Managing Partner Bernard Hyman. “And since law school is an expensive, difficult, three-year grind, most of my partners and I weren’t comfortable hiring attorneys and calling them paralegals.”

Nonetheless, the paralegals at Certilman Balin, who are generally expected to have a four-year college degree and a paralegal certificate from an American Bar Association-approved school, are performing higher-level tasks than in the past.

“Paralegals have redefined what a person could do at a law firm without going to law school,” Hyman said.

The advancement in technology has been a major contributor to the elevation in the role.

“The growth in e-discovery and e-filing in courts has changed the work that paralegals do and the training that is required of them,” McColgan said, noting paralegals do preliminary reviews of electronic data. “In many cases they have to know as much as the attorneys.”

Read more: <http://libn.com/2014/01/22/making-a-case-for-paralegals/#ixzz2wFgvttcy>