



Journey to Corporate Paralegal

Why more college grads and career changers are drawn to this fulfilling and lucrative field.

A gratifying, multi-faceted career as a paralegal is a perfect fit for those who wish to enter the legal profession without becoming an attorney. It's no wonder that a variety of backgrounds and personal journeys are becoming attracted to this booming field of immense opportunity.

The U.S. Bureau of Career and Labor Statistics has forecast an above-average need for paralegals through the next decade or so. More specifically, the corporate paralegal field is growing rapidly as companies of all sizes embrace the smart advantage of staffing an in-house legal department.

In speaking with four paralegals at First American Financial Corporation in Santa Ana—all of whom have earned their paralegal certificates from the University of California, Irvine Extension—it is quickly clear that paralegals not only enjoy being an important part of a legal services delivery team, but also derive meaningful satisfaction from knowing that their work makes a difference.

The Paralegal Career Path

When Karen Dahl was laid off from her job at an Internet company, her boss encouraged her to explore the legal field. She began as an administrative assistant for the regulatory counsel and eventually became a paralegal at First American. Similarly, paralegal

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Tanya Chopra, Paralegal

Denise Clause worked as a marketing manager in the automotive industry and in customer service at a health insurance company before she lost her job in 2008. Struggling to find another marketing position, Clause became intrigued by the paralegal field after hearing about it during career seminars. “As I moved through

my program at UCI Extension, I found a part-time opportunity so I could work while I studied, and found I really liked the field,” she recalls. Before she finished the program, one of her instructors invited her to apply at First American. “After being out of work for so long, it was nice to be employed again,” Clause says. “The best part is my job is never boring. I like getting into the minutiae of regulatory filings, even if others might find it tedious.”

Tom Pokladowski, Esq., Director of Law and Finance, UC Irvine Extension, confirms that half of the program’s students are career changers in mid-career, like Dahl and Clause.

“I loved my job as legal secretary, and I knew that being a paralegal was what I wanted to pursue as a long-term career,” says First American paralegal Jen Martin, who began working after school as a file clerk at age 15. “But in order to do that, I needed a paralegal certificate.” With an associate’s degree and seven years of experience, she earned her certificate while working full-time and attending classes at night. “The day I graduated from the program was the exact day I began at First American, with my instructor as my new boss,” Martin remembers. She landed her position rather unconventionally: by pleading her case on the last page of her final exam, vowing to give 110% as his hardest-working employee.

Yet another group of paralegals have earned their bachelor’s degrees and may still entertain the prospect of law school at a later date, with the paralegal certificate as a stepping stone. “I had always been interested in the legal field, but I wasn’t quite ready to take the plunge to enroll in law school after college,” says paralegal Tanya Chopra. She began the UCI program at the same time that she was hired at First American. “I gained real-world experience while learning in the classroom,” Chopra says. “Then I got involved in a paralegal association to keep up with the industry.”

Employee Experience as a Corporate Paralegal

A rather self-selecting career, the corporate paralegal path tends to attract people with the same distinct personality traits regardless of their previous experience: highly organized, hard-working, and attentive to detail. They're unafraid to take initiative and have a knack for prioritizing even the longest list of time-sensitive matters. Paralegals make a name for themselves as fast learners who are intense listeners and equally strong communicators. They also possess a natural ability to quickly shift from a micro perspective on a project to the big picture in a legal context.

"In the corporate world, things are always changing," Martin says. "You have to be flexible, accommodating, and open to learning new things. As a paralegal, I learn and grow on a daily basis," she says. She has another key word for paralegals: teamwork. "A paralegal is a supportive role to the attorneys, so it's very important to work well with others."

Corporate paralegals savor the added bonus of having a built-in social network and close camaraderie within the corporation. "You consider your co-workers to be your best friends at times because they're the

ones working overtime with you, doing you a favor at the eleventh hour or bringing you that Starbucks' mocha while you're working on a spreadsheet," Dahl says. They face and solve their obstacles together.

Value of Corporate Paralegals

Though paralegals cannot practice law, they can and do assist attorneys in their practice. On any given day, a corporate paralegal might draft contracts and legal documents, sit in on board meetings, help to review leases and trademarks, maintain and organize files, conduct client interviews, assist with case management, do investigative research, perform legal analysis, summarize depositions or attend hearings.

"I like the fast-paced environment," says Martin. "Every day is an adrenaline rush."

As a part-time instructor at UCI in business law and intellectual property, Zachary Zaharek, Vice President and Senior Operations Counsel at First American in Santa Ana, has hand-picked top students like Martin from his classes to fill paralegal positions. "Paralegals are the cornerstone of the legal department, making sure it runs smoothly and efficiently," he says.

Benefits of a Corporate Paralegal Career

Corporate paralegals are quick to share many of the reasons they look forward to reporting to work each day and making a difference on the job. Here is a quick snapshot of the elements that equal high job satisfaction among today's paralegals:

Variety and opportunity. No two days are the same, as paralegals constantly face new challenges that test their know-how and problem-solving skills.

Less expensive than attending law school and completed in a shorter period of time. Pay-as-you-go programs such as University of California, Irvine Extension's Paralegal Certificate Program eliminate the need for loans, enabling students to attend on a schedule that suits their lifestyle.

Less stressful and shorter hours than an attorney position. Though extremely hard-working, paralegals tend to find it easier to maintain a work-family-life balance, and with greater flexibility.

Room for ongoing learning and growth. Those who find their niche in an entry-level paralegal position may gain on-the-job knowledge to move up the ranks to a senior-level role, proving themselves through demonstrating exacting performance and a track record of significant achievements.

Competitive wages. For their relatively reasonable educational investment, paralegals are well paid and enjoy a comfortable quality of life. Some companies are open to negotiating a compensation arrangement—whether salary, hourly, bonuses, etc.

All clients are in-house. From the finance department to operations and sales, paralegals interface with their customers often and build rewarding long-term relationships with both clients and colleagues.



Paralegals at First American Financial Corporation, Santa Ana, CA (left to right): Denise Clause, Tanya Chopra, Jen Martin, Karen Dahl