

From Applicant to Employee

By Kelly Humiston, NCCP

It's all about landing that first paralegal job, and the competition is fierce. Whether you are working toward your paralegal certificate or already have it in hand, here are a few tools, tips, and practices to help you become the job candidate who stands out from the rest, even if you have no experience.



MUST-HAVE TOOLS to help you measure up:

MS OFFICE - It's a staple. If you need a quick primer or refresher on Word, PowerPoint, or Excel, try this awesome free website: <http://www.gcfllearnfree.org/office2010> and be sure to check out the **Videos** tab. You'll be confident and competent in no time.

TYPING SPEED AND ACCURACY - An easy skill to hone. Key Hero is a free, fun, and an educational way to ramp up your WPM: <http://www.keyhero.com/> By typing quotes from literature and speeches, you'll teach yourself to type faster and more accurately. Key Hero will also track your progress, give you tips for improvement, and let you compete against others.

ATTENTION TO DETAIL - Critical to many paralegal jobs. Do you have a tendency to flip numbers around when you write or type them? Are you in the habit of double or triple checking the numbers you type for accuracy? If not, start today. Take any list of numbers, even grab a phone book, then open a Word document or a blank email and start entering the numbers as they appear. After you've entered a large amount of data, check your work. Make sure you've entered each number correctly. Get in the habit of checking and re-checking your work. Your trained eye *will* be a lifesaver someday.



TIPS to get you in the know:

LEARN THE LINGO of the field of law you are drawn to. Each field of law has its own language and key terms. Learn what they are now so that you can start to "speak the language" before the first interview. You can search for key terms right from your home by reading articles, law blogs, company websites, and especially job postings. For example, if you are interested in real estate and find a job posting that says you'll need to perform title searches, do a Google search to find out what a title search is and where a title searcher finds the necessary information. If you want to take it a step further, you could go to the Register of Deeds and watch title searchers at work. By researching the definitions of unique terms in a job description, you may find that you've done similar tasks at a previous job. You'll then be able to tailor past experience on your resume to fit the new job description and describe your similar

qualifications in your cover letter. Most importantly, learning the lingo shows you've taken personal initiative and already invested yourself in that area of law. Too many students send the same resume and cover letter to multiple law firms and then wonder why they never get a response. Take the time to invest yourself now, be proactive, because when the job opening comes and the attorney is flooded with resumes, yours will stand out above the crowd.

GET CONNECTED - There's a network for any field of law right at your fingertips. If you aren't on LinkedIn, get on board. LinkedIn is a professional website where you can create a profile and network with others already in the field of law you're interested in. Join local and national interest groups associated with that area of law. Join paralegal groups and participate in discussions. You can also follow law firms or companies, read their postings, or research the person you'll be interviewing with. Sometimes a law firm's website doesn't go into much depth about the partners. LinkedIn can be that supplemental source of information to help you write a more specific cover letter or find something in common with the interviewer to bring up in an interview.

Even if you don't want to tweet, a Twitter account can be a useful resource for following companies or law firms that you'd like to work for. By following a law firm's Twitter feed you'll quickly learn what's important to them - another avenue that will allow you to make your cover letter more specific. Not only that, but you'll be able to go to your interview having up-to-the-minute information that will make you outshine the competition and impress your interviewer.

Another way to get connected is to join a local paralegal organization like MPA. One of the best ways to learn about job opportunities is through networking. Metrolina Paralegal Association is made up Charlotte area paralegals that work in every area of law. Want to meet someone who works in intellectual property or family law? Check out the MPA directory for paralegals in those areas and send a friendly note! You'll also meet fellow paralegals at monthly meetings and social events. You can even go the extra mile and volunteer with MPA by serving on the executive board or on a committee, by organizing or participating in a service project, or by writing an article for *The Paraview*, to name a few. LinkedIn, Twitter, and MPA are all great investments of your time and resources.

BE WILLING TO TAKE A LESS-THAN-IDEAL JOB to get that first job. You've heard this advice a lot right? That's because it's likely to happen to you, so prepare yourself. Even if you land a full-time job rather than a part-time job right out of paralegal school, the work probably won't be glamorous, but there's a good reason for that. Attorneys need time to learn to trust you, and to trust in the quality of your work, before they will hand you the big assignments. The trust will build as your attorney sees that you are reliable and that you give your best effort in whatever you are asked to do. Successfully completing the smaller tasks with competence and a good attitude will bring larger tasks (and more hours) your way.

Don't lose heart if you end up taking a job in a field of law that isn't your first choice. There's nothing to stop you from staying focused on your goal. Concentrate on gaining good experience and references where you are at, but apply the tips above and keep learning about your field of choice. It is possible to change fields of law once you start working as a paralegal, especially if you learn the lingo and get connected to paralegals in your target field. Plus, all of your good habits and practices will transfer nicely.

Once you've landed that first job, here are a few ways to keep yourself valuable to your employer.



HABITS and PRACTICES to keep you on top:

ROLL WITH THE CHANGES as they come. Law firms change, partners come and go, new laws and regulations are created, and the policies of the firm can change as a result. Our job as paralegals is to make our attorneys look good, to make their job easier, and to be competent support. Resisting change isn't going to accomplish that. If you are one of those people who resist change or progress in life, learn to shift your focus to what's best for the firm or the company, instead of what's most comfortable for you.

BE READY TO TRAIN YOURSELF in more ways than you might expect. Sometimes new paralegals get detailed job training, so be grateful if you do. Other times there isn't someone available to give you one-on-one detailed training, so you might be expected to swim on your own after a few short lessons. Be ready for that potential scenario with these strategies:

(1) Bring a notebook to work and write down instructions after someone shows you how to do something. Are there certain steps necessary to log onto a website, to fill out a form, to use the copy machine, or to ship a package? Write down those details as soon as possible after learning them. Then use your notebook as a reference. You will spare others from having to tell you over and over again how to do things, and they will appreciate it.

(2) Is there a new software program you'll need to learn? Most likely there will be several. If you don't receive much help in learning new programs, don't be afraid to tackle them on your own! See what assistance you can find online or by asking other paralegals who use those programs (here's another plug for joining MPA). There may also be reference manuals available at work or at the library. Whatever you can learn on your own will save someone else from having to teach you, and in a busy law office that can be a huge help.

BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR FREE CONTINUING LEGAL EDUCATION (CLE) TRAINING in your current area of law as well as your target area, if they are not the same. Free legal education webinars are out there; see if you can find some online. Keep your skills current and fresh.

TAKE PRIDE IN YOUR WORK no matter what you are asked to do. You'd be surprised by the amount of sloppy work that's out there: the misspellings, the incorrect dates and citations. A small error can get passed along from document to document creating a huge headache and expense to fix. A little care to make sure your work is neat and accurate will be appreciated by your boss and by those who have to rely on your work.

DO SOMETHING THAT'S NOT ASKED OF YOU to help make sure that the firm or the company always puts its best face forward for the client. For example, if the firm has conference tables that get a lot of use during the day, like getting covered with fingerprints as the day goes on (or after some messy kids), take the initiative to clean off the tables now and then if no one else is assigned to do it. A small law firm without the resources of an in-house cleaning staff will appreciate your effort and the pride you take in the firm's image.



TIP THE SCALES IN YOUR FAVOR

Lack of experience does not have to mean lack of knowledge. When looking for that first paralegal job, you may need to build on or supplement what you learned in your paralegal program. Try to keep a strategic perspective: put yourself in the shoes of the hiring attorney and think about what type of paralegal you would want to hire. If you had two applications to consider, would you hire the candidate who sent you their resume but did not demonstrate in their cover letter that they had taken the time to learn about the field of law or your particular firm? Or would you be more inclined to hire the candidate who demonstrated that he or she had taken the initiative to learn some of the lingo in your field of law and had shown interest in your firm by reading about some of the current events or issues going on? Even if neither of the applicants had prior work experience in your specialty, which candidate would be more appealing to you if you were the hiring attorney? To move from applicant to employee, make the personal investment *now* to become the kind of paralegal that any attorney would be happy to hire.