

Hiring a Full-time Paralegal - Would You Toss Resumes from New Attorneys and LLMs?

I posted a job offer on indeed.com for my firm's first full-time, on-site paralegal. I received nearly 50 resumes in 2 days. About 20 of them were from candidates with recent JDs or LLMs. My intuition is to throw all of those resumes in the trash and not even consider them because they will likely leave for an actual attorney position the first chance they get or want to be promoted to an attorney at some point. But I am looking for someone long-term and just a paralegal.

Is that intuition correct? Or am I being unfair to the LLMs and JDs?

Yes, someone who could be a lawyer and applies for a paralegal job is suspect. They like skills confidence or both.

I'd look for those with MLS degrees. If nothing else, librarian jobs are hard to come by. And people with this degree can look up anything and they've been exposed to Lexis and Westlaw.

I have a clerk who has an MLS. When he started he was not much more than a legal Sherpa. Over the last 7 years I've trained him to almost everything. I suspect with a Barbri class he could pass the bar.

He's become my legal alter ego though not my clone. We can withstand loud legal enlargement. And he accepts that the name on the door is mine.

Though he does win points.

He was invaluable in keeping the practice together when I took an unexpected 2-week vacation in purgatory.

He's also the firm's grammar NAZI.

So, if you can get a librarian.

No, you can't have mine. Besides he's my son.

John Davidson, Pennsylvania

This may depend on how not only how urgent your need for extra hands may be, but also, how quickly do you need your assistant to be up and running at a moderately functional level.

My biggest frustration with my last three paralegals (#3 is still in my employ) has been the inability to substantively process the task assigned, understand the steps to get their and recognize whether the requisite tools are available to successfully complete the task.

These deficiencies have a different kind of pain than that associated with mixed font (Arial v. TNR) or relying on phonetic intervention for the spelling of a caller's name rather than asking for it.

Example 1. I am successor trustee to a now deceased client. I prepared an Affidavit of Facts and Acceptance of Trust to trot off to the good folks at Key Bank. It referenced to Exhibits; (A) Certificate of Trust, signed by trustor, identifying me as successor; and, (B) the death certificate.

I on my way out to a business lunch, I asked her to put it all together as a *pdf. When asked if she could "hand write Ex-A and Ex-B," I told her, "No. You have the full version of Acrobat. Use the <Help> key if you get stuck." Ninety minutes later, she told me she was stuck. After 2 minutes of inability to manipulate the header, she suggested that I, "go do it on my machine so we could move on to the next task." I noticed she had opened the file in Reader, showed her the difference and apologized for under supervising her.

Three out of five people miss the Reader vs. Pro distinction.

Example 2 The Jonesboro Free Library Association was bequeathed a condominium. I was asked to represent the library in the sale.

I was presented with a draft deed as follows:

"We the Jonesboro Free Library Association, a domestic LLC. . . ."

Never a thought to change the lead pronoun. Never a thought to check Secretary of State's website for entity composition.

She's been in a law firm setting for real estate, probate and business for the past 15 years. C'mon.

Conclusion Unless you trained a new hire before, you will need practice too.

My 0.03

Michael Sweeney, Connecticut

I've heard that LA is a difficult market right now for new grads, so that could be part of the reason they are applying. Also, most of them have another 2.5 months until they find out their bar results, so they are just trying to get whatever work they can while they have to start paying their student loans.

We had great luck at my old firm hiring JDs. They were intelligent, asked good questions, and were generally everything you want in an employee, because they were looking for a good recommendation when they did go elsewhere.

All that having been said, if you want someone who is going to be your paralegal or legal assistant for a year or more, then a JD may not be the right fit for you. It sounds like you have a ton of applicants. You have to start weeding them out somehow. Maybe just grab a couple of the JDs to look at while tossing the rest? Remember, not all attorneys want to practice under their own name. There are a ton of staff attorneys and law clerks at the local courts who love doing the work, but hate the responsibility of being the name on the paper.

Corrine Bielejeski, California

A new attorney to me sounds like the worst of both worlds: he/she doesn't know anything practical, and probably doesn't want the job long term. (You say you don't want to promote them to lawyer eventually; if that's not the case, the calculus changes significantly.) Never say never, but such applicants would be at the very bottom of the pile in my opinion, only if you're desperate and can't get anyone more suitable.

David Nieporent, New York

As a follow-up, why have so many people had 5 different jobs in the last 3-4 years...? Is it just the unfortunate reality of the job market today, or is another reason to immediately trash the resume?

Stephen Charles McArthur, California

I think the context would be really important. If they had 5 different legal jobs in 3 years, I'd be very concerned. However, if they have been working stints in retail, it wouldn't be too surprising.

Kevin W. Grierson, Virginia

But, as always, details matter. Long ago and far away, Neal Kennedy told us how he was with something like 4 different firms in a short period of time, without so much as moving his desk. The firm was acquired by another, which was acquired by another, which was acquired by another

'-)

James S. Tyre, California

While I understand (and in some measure, share) your hesitations, I have to confess that one of the most competent paralegals I have worked with on behalf of OC is JD who, as I understand it, decided he liked “the work,” but didn’t want to be a lawyer, so never sat the bar. He assists a solo here, seems quite happy and well-suited to the work, and apparently does not aspire to pass the bar.

So, I guess I would at least inquire as to why they are not simply hanging out a shingle, and what their motivations are (or aren’t) before dismissing them out-of-hand.

Richard J. Rutledge, Jr., North Carolina

I second the notion about JDs. Although they might understand the law, and appreciate the head start, it won't take long for them to see the big picture. The money is paramount.

I've had a lot of trouble with younger assistants this year. I don't do things correctly, I can't possibly know as much as they, and I can't possibly want it done a specific way - it makes no sense to them, so they can't possibly work for me.

I don't think there's ever been a time when I had the gall to even pretend I wanted to communicate that I knew more than the person giving the instructions. And expect to be paid at the end of the week!

Reta McKannan, Alabama

That exact scenario played out with me.

I hired on to Firm A.

Five months in, the firm was sold to a new attorney who promptly changed the name to Firm B.

A little more than a year after buying the firm attorney absorbs another law firm, moves to a new office, and changes the name to Firm C.

So, in two years I'd been employed by three firms.

I'm still trying to figure out if I'm now at my 'second' firm, or (technically) my 'fourth'....

AnnMichelle G. Hart

I had something similar happen earlier in my career -- but I didn't (don't) list it as three separate jobs on my resume. I listed it as one job, with three different employer names.

David Nieporent

There is no such thing as "just a paralegal."

Harumph!

Pamela (the Paralegal) J. Starr

My son Bear, who practices in Oregon, has one of his law school classmates as his paralegal, and it seems like an outstanding arrangement for both of them.

Wendy Lascher, California

Good morning everyone.

The email from this morning asking about tossing the applications from JDs and LLMS for a paralegal job prompted this email.

For a while now I have been teaching business law at my local community college. For the upcoming fall semester, I have been assigned to teach the paralegal class that discusses procedural issues. Instead of using a generic paralegal textbook, we are switching to focusing on the court rules (specifically Michigan, but I'm working in the federal rules as well.) I've talked to a couple of people in my building about my class and they've pointed out that they haven't had good luck with paralegals from the program I'm moving in to, specifically that they don't understand the court structure or their role as a paralegal.

What I'd like to know from you is what good aspects you have encountered with your paralegals and what bad aspects have you had. For example, Michael this morning pointed out three things that have bothered him about his paralegals, so I've added to my development list a discussion of sites where people can look up business entity information or other things they may need to double check. What other things would you want a student in a paralegal program to learn to make them more valuable to your practice?

What kinds of bad skills/lack of skills or bad habits have you encountered?

I want to give my students practical information about what they may encounter in a law practice as well as try to help manage their expectations (a colleague complained that a couple of paralegals came in with the idea that they would be serving in a role similar to a new lawyer, but that isn't what the colleague wanted or needed.)

My class isn't practice area specific, so I am open to thoughts on any practice area.

Liz Ferguson, Michigan

See if you can expose them to the various computer programs they might need to know about.

Off the top of my head, there's the legal research websites, the forms websites for your local or state jurisdictions, and then there's the practice-area specific programs. In CA, family law attorneys want a paralegal who can run a DissoMaster. Nationally,

lots of consumer bankruptcy attorneys use BestCase. Think about what's popular for billing software too, since many jurisdictions allow attorneys to bill for their paralegal's time (not sure if yours does).

In my world, we have a lot of forms and form motions. A good paralegal should be able to take the client's file and input the missing information into those fields. A great paralegal will bring to my attention if something in the file is missing or doesn't look right. For example, "hey, I see they say their loan is with Countrywide. They don't exist anymore.

Who has the loan now?"

Another important lesson is not to give out legal advice. Clients will call and want to know if their plan is going to go through, if the judge is going to approve that motion, what they should do next, etc. Unless the attorney has already given direction on that issue, the paralegal should say "I will check with the attorney and get back to you." Then, he or she should check with the attorney and get back to the client. These are also good times to note the file. "CI called at 8:23 re: whether his CS will go down if his parenting time goes up. Said I would return call."

One of our local paralegal program brings in attorneys from various areas of law to discuss what their paralegals do and what practitioners in those areas are looking for. That might be helpful.

Corrine Bielejeski

Do attorneys handle real estate in your jurisdiction? If so, then a purchase and sale from start to finish.

Notarizations/how to become a notary.

Justin Meyer, Florida

I had a real estate paralegal refuse to get her notary designation despite my willingness to pay the state fee and the stamp et al.

I've since left that firm and she's thankful she kept her beautician's license.

UN-real. Flat out refused.

Michael J. Sweeney

Yes, some do real estate. Adding in the process for a sale from start to finish is a good idea.

I hadn't thought about the notary issue, probably because I am a notary as are the other attorneys in the building, but I'm adding that to my list as well.

Thanks!

Liz Ferguson
