Paralegals and Legal Assistants

Summary

Paralegals and legal assistants help lawyers prepare for hearings, trials, and corporate meetings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quick Facts: Paralegals and Legal Assistants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2015 Median Pay</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$48,810 per year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$23.47 per hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Typical Entry-Level Education</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Work Experience in a Related Occupation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>On-the-job Training</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Jobs, 2014</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>279,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Job Outlook, 2014-24</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8% (As fast as average)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment Change, 2014-24</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21,200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What Paralegals and Legal Assistants Do
Paralegals and legal assistants do a variety of tasks to support lawyers, including maintaining and organizing files, conducting legal research, and drafting documents.

Work Environment
Paralegals and legal assistants are found in all types of organizations, but most work for law firms, corporate legal departments, and government agencies. They usually work full time, and some may have to work more than 40 hours a week to meet deadlines.

How to Become a Paralegal or Legal Assistant
Most paralegals and legal assistants have an associate’s degree or a certificate in paralegal studies. In some cases, employers may hire college graduates with a bachelor’s degree but no legal experience or specialized education and train them on the job.

Pay
The median annual wage for paralegals and legal assistants was $48,810 in May 2015.

Job Outlook
Employment of paralegals and legal assistants is projected to grow 8 percent from 2014 to 2024, about as fast as the average for all occupations. This occupation attracts many applicants, and competition for jobs will be strong. Experienced, formally trained paralegals with strong computer and database management skills should have the best job prospects.

State & Area Data
Explore resources for employment and wages by state and area for paralegals and legal assistants.

Similar Occupations
Compare the job duties, education, job growth, and pay of paralegals and legal assistants with similar occupations.

More Information, Including Links to O*NET
Learn more about paralegals and legal assistants by visiting additional resources, including O*NET, a source on key characteristics of workers and occupations.
What Paralegals and Legal Assistants Do

Paralegals and legal assistants may conduct legal research.

Paralegals and legal assistants do a variety of tasks to support lawyers, including maintaining and organizing files, conducting legal research, and drafting documents.

**Duties**

Paralegals and legal assistants typically do the following:

- Investigate and gather the facts of a case
- Conduct research on relevant laws, regulations, and legal articles
- Organize and maintain documents in paper or electronic filing systems
- Gather and arrange evidence and other legal documents for attorney review and case preparation
- Write or summarize reports to help lawyers prepare for trials
- Draft correspondence and legal documents, such as contracts and mortgages
- Get affidavits and other formal statements that may be used as evidence in court
- Help lawyers during trials by handling exhibits, taking notes, or reviewing trial transcripts
- File exhibits, briefs, appeals and other legal documents with the court or opposing counsel
- Call clients, witnesses, lawyers, and outside vendors to schedule interviews, meetings, and depositions

Paralegals and legal assistants help lawyers prepare for hearings, trials, and corporate meetings.

Paralegals use technology and computer software for managing and organizing the increasing amount of documents and data collected during a case. Many paralegals use computer software to catalog documents, and to review documents for specific keywords or subjects. Because of these responsibilities, paralegals must be
familiar with electronic database management and be current on the latest software used for electronic
discovery. Electronic discovery refers to all electronic materials obtained by the parties during the litigation or
investigation. These materials may be emails, data, documents, accounting databases, and websites.

Paralegals’ specific duties often vary depending on the area of law in which they work.

Corporate paralegals, for example, often help lawyers prepare employee contracts, shareholder agreements,
stock-option plans, and companies’ annual financial reports. Corporate paralegals may monitor and review
government regulations to ensure that the corporation is aware of new legal requirements.

Litigation paralegals maintain documents received from clients, conduct research for lawyers, retrieve and
organize evidence for use at depositions and trials, and draft settlement agreements. Some litigation paralegals
may also help coordinate the logistics of attending a trial, including reserving office space, transporting exhibits
and documents to the courtroom, and setting up computers and other equipment.

Paralegals may also specialize in other legal areas, such as personal injury, criminal law, employee benefits,
intellectual property, bankruptcy, immigration, family law, and real estate.

Specific job duties may also vary by the size of the law firm.

In small firms, paralegals’ duties tend to vary more. In addition to reviewing and organizing documents,
paralegals may prepare written reports that help lawyers determine how to handle their cases. If lawyers decide
to file lawsuits on behalf of clients, paralegals may help draft documents to be filed with the court.

In large organizations, paralegals may work on a particular phase of a case, rather than handling a case from
beginning to end. For example, paralegals may only review legal material for internal use, maintain reference
files, conduct research for lawyers, or collect and organize evidence for hearings. After gaining experience, a
paralegal may become responsible for more complicated tasks.

Paralegals and legal assistants often work in teams with attorneys, fellow paralegals, and other legal support
staff.

Unlike the work of other administrative and legal support staff employed in a law firm, the paralegal’s work is
billed to the client.

Paralegals may have frequent interactions with clients and third-party vendors. In addition, experienced
paralegals may assume supervisory responsibilities, such as overseeing team projects or delegating work to
other paralegals.
Work Environment

Paralegals and legal assistants work in law offices and libraries.

Paralegals and legal assistants held about 279,500 jobs in 2014. The industries that employed the most paralegals and legal assistants were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legal services</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local government, excluding education and hospitals</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal government</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State government, excluding education and hospitals</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance and insurance</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Paralegals do most of their work in offices. Occasionally, they may travel to gather information, collect and review documents, accompany attorneys to depositions or trials, and do other tasks.
Some of the work can be fast-paced, and paralegals must be able to work on multiple projects under tight deadlines.

**Work Schedules**

Most paralegals and legal assistants work full time. Some may have to work more than 40 hours per week in order to meet deadlines.

**How to Become a Paralegal or Legal Assistant**

Many paralegals and legal assistants have an associate’s degree or a certificate in paralegal studies.

Most paralegals and legal assistants have an associate’s degree in paralegal studies, or a bachelor's degree in another field and a certificate in paralegal studies.

**Education**

There are several paths a person can take to become a paralegal. Candidates can enroll in a community college paralegal program to earn an associate’s degree. However, many employers prefer, or even require, applicants to have a bachelor's degree.

Because only a small number of schools offer bachelor's and master's degrees in paralegal studies, applicants typically have a bachelor’s degree in another subject and earn a certificate in paralegal studies.

Associate’s and bachelor's degree programs in paralegal studies usually offer paralegal training courses in legal research, legal writing, and the legal applications of computers, along with courses in other academic subjects, such as corporate law and international law. Most certificate programs provide intensive paralegal training for people who already hold college degrees.
Employers sometimes hire college graduates with no legal experience or legal education and train them on the job. In these cases, the new employee may have experience in a technical field that is useful to law firms, such as tax preparation, nursing, or criminal justice.

**Other Experience**

In many cases, employers prefer candidates who have at least 1 year of experience in a law firm or other office setting. In addition, a technical understanding of a specific legal specialty can be helpful. For example, a personal-injury law firm may desire a paralegal with a background in nursing or health administration.

Work experience in a law firm or other office setting is particularly important for people who do not have formal paralegal training.

Many paralegal training programs offer an internship, in which students gain practical experience by working for several months in a private law firm, the office of a public defender or attorney general, a corporate legal department, a legal aid organization, or a government agency. Internship experience helps students improve their technical skills and can enhance their employment prospects.

**Certifications**

Although not required, some employers may prefer to hire applicants who have completed a paralegal certification program. Many national and local paralegal organizations offer voluntary paralegal certifications to students able to pass an exam. Other organizations offer voluntary paralegal certifications for paralegals who meet certain experience and education criteria. For more information about paralegal certifications, see the More Info section.

**Important Qualities**

**Communication skills.** Paralegals must be able to document and present their research and related information to their supervising attorney.

**Computer skills.** Paralegals need to be familiar with using computers for legal research and litigation support. They also use computer programs for organizing and maintaining important documents.

**Interpersonal skills.** Paralegals spend most of their time working with clients and other professionals and must be able to develop good relationships. They must make clients feel comfortable sharing personal information related to their cases.

**Organizational skills.** Paralegals may be responsible for many cases at one time. They must adapt quickly to changing deadlines.

**Research skills.** Paralegals need good research and investigative skills to conduct legal research.
Pay

Paralegals and Legal Assistants

Median annual wages, May 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legal occupations</th>
<th>$78,170</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paralegals and legal assistants</td>
<td>$48,810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total, all occupations</td>
<td>$36,200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All Occupations includes all occupations in the U.S. Economy.

The median annual wage for paralegals and legal assistants was $48,810 in May 2015. The median wage is the wage at which half the workers in an occupation earned more than that amount and half earned less. The lowest 10 percent earned less than $30,670, and the highest 10 percent earned more than $79,010.

In May 2015, the median annual wages for paralegals and legal assistants in the top industries in which they worked were as follows:

- Federal government: $63,720
- Finance and insurance: $58,940
- Local government, excluding education and hospitals: $48,300
- Legal services: $46,790
- State government, excluding education and hospitals: $45,810

Most paralegals and legal assistants work full time. Some may have to work more than 40 hours per week in order to meet deadlines.
Job Outlook

Paralegals and Legal Assistants

Percent change in employment, projected 2014-24

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paralegals and legal assistants</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total, all occupations</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal occupations</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All Occupations includes all occupations in the U.S. Economy.

Employment of paralegals and legal assistants is projected to grow 8 percent from 2014 to 2024, about as fast as the average for all occupations.

As law firms try to increase the efficiency of legal services and reduce their costs, they are expected to hire more paralegals and legal assistants. In these cases, paralegals and legal assistants can take on a “hybrid” role within the firm, performing not only traditional paralegal duties but also some of the tasks previously assigned to legal secretaries or other legal support workers.

Law firms also are attempting to reduce billing costs as clients push for less expensive legal services. Due to their lower billing rates to clients, paralegals can be a less costly alternative to lawyers despite performing a wide variety of tasks once done by entry-level lawyers. This should cause an increase in demand for paralegals and legal assistants.

Although law firms will continue to be the largest employers of paralegals, many large corporations are increasing their in-house legal departments to cut costs. For many companies, the high cost of outside counsel makes it more economical to have an in-house legal department. This will lead to an increase in the demand for legal workers in a variety of settings, such as finance and insurance firms, consulting firms, and healthcare providers.

However, demand for paralegals within certain practice areas is dependent upon the overall health of the economy. During periods of slow economic growth, law firms’ workloads may decrease as clients become less likely to engage in litigation, mergers, or other types of activity requiring legal expertise. When work is slow, lawyers will have less work to delegate to paralegals. This may make a firm less likely to keep some paralegals on staff or to hire new ones until the workload increases.
Job Prospects

This occupation attracts many applicants, and competition for jobs will be strong. Experienced, formally trained paralegals with strong computer and database management skills should have the best job prospects. In addition, many firms will prefer paralegals with experience and specialization in high-demand practice areas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paralegals and legal assistants</td>
<td>23-2011</td>
<td>279,500</td>
<td>300,800</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21,200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


State & Area Data

Occupational Employment Statistics (OES)

The Occupational Employment Statistics (OES) program produces employment and wage estimates annually for over 800 occupations. These estimates are available for the nation as a whole, for individual states, and for metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas. The link(s) below go to OES data maps for employment and wages by state and area.

- Paralegals and legal assistants

Projections Central

Occupational employment projections are developed for all states by Labor Market Information (LMI) or individual state Employment Projections offices. All state projections data are available at www.projectionscentral.com. Information on this site allows projected employment growth for an occupation to be compared among states or to be compared within one state. In addition, states may produce projections for areas; there are links to each state’s websites where these data may be retrieved.

Career InfoNet

America’s Career InfoNet includes hundreds of occupational profiles with data available by state and metro area. There are links in the left-hand side menu to compare occupational employment by state and occupational wages by local area or metro area. There is also a salary info tool to search for wages by zip code.
## Similar Occupations

This table shows a list of occupations with job duties that are similar to those of paralegals and legal assistants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OCCUPATION</th>
<th>JOB DUTIES</th>
<th>ENTRY-LEVEL EDUCATION</th>
<th>2015 MEDIAN PAY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Claims Adjusters, Appraisers, Examiners, and Investigators</strong></td>
<td>Claims adjusters, appraisers, examiners, and investigators evaluate insurance claims. They decide whether an insurance company must pay a claim, and if so, how much.</td>
<td>See How to Become One</td>
<td>$63,060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lawyers</strong></td>
<td>Lawyers advise and represent individuals, businesses, and government agencies on legal issues and disputes.</td>
<td>Doctoral or professional degree</td>
<td>$115,820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupational Health and Safety Specialists</strong></td>
<td>Occupational health and safety specialists analyze many types of work environments and work procedures. Specialists inspect workplaces for adherence to regulations on safety, health, and the environment. They also design programs to prevent disease or injury to workers and damage to the environment.</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>$70,210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCCUPATION</td>
<td>JOB DUTIES</td>
<td>ENTRY-LEVEL EDUCATION</td>
<td>2015 MEDIAN PAY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupational Health and Safety Technicians</strong></td>
<td>Occupational health and safety technicians collect data on the health and safety conditions of the workplace. Technicians work with occupational health and safety specialists in conducting tests and measuring hazards to help prevent harm to workers, property, the environment, and the general public.</td>
<td>High school diploma or equivalent</td>
<td>$48,070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Secretaries and Administrative Assistants</strong></td>
<td>Secretaries and administrative assistants perform clerical and administrative duties. They organize files, prepare documents, schedule appointments, and support other staff.</td>
<td>High school diploma or equivalent</td>
<td>$36,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contacts for More Information

For more information on the Certified Legal Assistant certification, schools that offer training programs in a specific State, and standards and guidelines for paralegals, visit

NALA – The National Association of Legal Assistants

For information on the Professional Paralegal certification, visit

NALS – The Association for Legal Professionals

For information on the Paralegal Advanced Competency Exam, paralegal careers, and paralegal training programs visit

National Federation of Paralegal Associations

O*NET

Paralegals and Legal Assistants

Suggested citation:


Publish Date: Thursday, December 17, 2015

www.bls.gov/ooh | Telephone: 1-202-691-5700 | Contact OOH