

7 Habits Of Highly Effective Paralegals

By Ama Sarfo

Law360, New York (March 19, 2015, 2:38 PM ET) -- Paralegals rarely receive as many accolades as flashy law firm rainmakers, but their responsibility for keeping deadlines, documents and clients in check often means they are some of the most important law firm employees. Below, Law360 lists seven habits of highly effective paralegals.

They Keep Up With Technology

The rise of the Internet and computer-based technologies have dramatically redefined the nature of legal practice, and in an era where technology can become obsolete in months and there's an app for everything, staying on top of new databases and services is a matter of survival. The best paralegals are constantly on top of this shifting landscape and can pinpoint the best services for their practice groups, says Lisa Beck, a human resources manager with Faegre Baker Daniels LLP.

Laura Barnard, director of the paralegal education program at Lakeland Community College, says paralegals can add value to legal teams by introducing their attorneys to newer support programs and systems they might want to adopt in the office, such as products that can make organizing and remote conferencing easier and speedier.

Along with that, the best paralegals are often asked to help design software for their groups, become experts on particular software and technology and keep other paralegals abreast of important updates, Beck adds.

"The best paralegals think of themselves as technological experts who aim to make the practice of law easier," said Valerie Nowottick, owner of consulting company Paralegal Consultants.

They Defuse Tense Situations

The skills that make lawyers tenacious and imposing in the courtroom and deal-making table can also make them a little bullish in the law firm setting. And effective paralegals have a strong emotional intelligence that allows them to navigate all sorts of personalities and put people at ease, says Yvonne Miller, director of human resources at Faegre Baker.

Paralegals who have that skill know when to give their colleagues the benefit of the doubt, Nowottnick says.

“Considering that an attorney has a lot of responsibility on his or her shoulders, you have to allow for that,” she said. “However, there should never be a loss of mutual respect for either party because one needs the other just as much.”

Effective paralegals also recognize that anger is a professional liability and never issue emails when they’re angry or send angry emails period, Barnard says.

“That can damage you professionally and hinder your law firm’s ability to effectively help clients,” she added.

But a paralegal’s bottom line comes down to building relationships with professionals in the firm and showing that he or she is reliable and can be trusted, so they can navigate various situations regardless of who they are talking to, Miller said.

“I think that you have to remember at all times that you are a professional, and you also need to keep that in mind that a paralegal works as a team so you’re never alone in your endeavors, and you can seek the advice of mentors including paralegal mentors and attorney mentors,” Barnard added.

They Keep Personal and Private Technology Separate

Personal cellphones and laptops have spawned a 24/7 work culture that blends the personal and professional, but effective paralegals know that it’s imperative to keep the two separate, for the client’s sake, Barnard says.

“The need to maintain confidentiality is really critical, and those who are aware abstain from using their personal technology to communicate with clients,” she said. “It’s a challenge because it’s easy to say I’m on my home computer, and I can send this email really quickly. But paralegals need to make sure they’re in touch with their firm’s security concerns.”

“It’s a point that’s easily forgotten because there is so much technology, and it’s everywhere,” Barnard added.

They Remain One Step Ahead

Highly effective paralegals handle all of their tasks with finesse and plenty of forethought, meaning they already have a solution when others are just beginning to analyze a problem, experts say.

“Paralegals shouldn’t hesitate to bring to the attention of their supervising attorney some methods to organize their firm or practice and can always do that by saying something along the lines of, ‘Now that I’ve worked here for a certain amount of time, it seems as though if we did these certain actions, it would streamline the practice and get the office working in a more efficient fashion so you can service more clients in less time, or the same amount in less time,’” Barnard said.

And when projects are well underway, effective paralegals make it a point to reach out to others downstream and let them know what the next steps likely are, Miller added.

They Stay Curious

The most effective paralegals see continuing legal education as a must, experts told Law360.

Some paralegals, depending on their certification or affiliation with professional organizations, must attend CLE to maintain their status. However, Nowotnick says the best paralegals make it a point to attend those seminars even when they aren't obliged to.

"It's important because it can only enhance a paralegal's importance in the office, and attorneys like when paralegals take the initiative," she said. "And if a paralegal has been in his or her field long enough, when that person attends seminars, she'll likely recognize that some of the information is familiar."

They Triage Their Emails

Emails can easily mushroom and occupy a paralegal's entire day, but the most effective paralegals attack the most important messages first, save the rest for later and generally respond to messages within 24 hours, experts say.

Barnard says it's a challenge for paralegals to abstain from dashing off hastily written emails in the heat of the moment. Clients need answers immediately, attorneys need to service those clients as quickly as possible, and paralegals need to support that quick turnaround.

But effective paralegals know they need to manage their workload and triage their emails, Barnard says, so their responses are always well-thought-out and well-crafted.

"It's good to get a sense from your supervising attorney as to how long they expect you to be on email," Barnard said. "You don't want to be a slave to it, but I also think that 24 hours shouldn't go by without a response, even if the response is, 'I'm looking into it, I'll be back in touch.'"

They Admit Their Mistakes

Everyone makes mistakes, but the perfectionist nature of legal practice can dissuade professionals from owning up to those errors, for fear of serious repercussions. But hiding secrets can turn a bad problem into an ugly one, and effective paralegals know that if they want to maintain a career in the law, they have to fess up when they go astray.

"When you lose the trust relationship that is established with an attorney at the inception of your employment, you've lost everything," Nowotnick said. "If the attorney can't rely on your work product as accurate, can't rely on you to handle client affairs while he's at court, can't rely on you to make work appointments ... if any part of that trust is breached, things are doomed."

--Editing by John Quinn and Christine Chun.