

Profile: Carolyn Saenz, Senior Paralegal, Western-Southern Life Insurance Co., Cincinnati, OH

By Regan Morris

As a senior paralegal with Western-Southern Life Insurance Co. in Cincinnati, OH, Carolyn Saenz travels the country investigating employment law complaints and cases within the company. LawCrossing speaks with Saenz about her career.

Saenz says networking and doing your homework are keys to success in the paralegal profession. After 16 years in the legal department of a shoe company, Saenz found herself out of a job when the company was bought out. But because she had plenty of experience and contacts from her involvement in professional associations, Saenz quickly landed on her feet.

"I went to lunch, and someone said, 'Hey, I heard of this job.' And I called in September, and it had been open since May; they just hadn't found the right person to fill it," she said. "So I was fortunate that I was able to take the position, and it was purely through networking. There had been nothing in the papers. Most of all the jobs that pay a decent wage are the ones that you find from networking."

Because Saenz had been focused primarily on product liability (she said plenty of people who fall down blame their shoes and try to sue the shoe company), she had to expand her area of expertise to convince Western-Southern Life Insurance that she was right for the employment law job.

"I had a little experience in employment law, and I did a lot of research because I knew that this job was open in the investigation area," she said. "I did a lot of research before I went for the interview so that they would know that even though I didn't know everything, I was a quick learner and could get up to speed."

She said the fact that she wasn't "a spring chicken" helped her obtain the job because it often requires asking angry and upset employees personal and probing questions to get the facts of a case.

Western-Southern has more than 180 offices in 23 states, and Saenz is often the person employees go to with any employment law issue. Saenz has been with the company for 10 years.

"Most of what I do relates to before we get to lawsuits. When complaints are made in relation to employment law issues, I do all of the internal investigations," she said. "People have issues, and you don't know what it's going to be until you make inquiries and look into it. Because remember, most people in the field offices don't have an employment office. They don't have a personnel department, and I'm the one assigned to do it."

Saenz, who is originally from England, has always worked in a corporate law setting and says she likes the fast pace and the opportunity for increased responsibility.

"I've never worked in a law firm. I wouldn't know how to bill time," she said, adding that it's easier to earn more money while climbing the corporate ladder. "It's a lot easier to bargain for because you can increase your responsibilities without practicing law."

Saenz is on the board of the American Alliance of Paralegals, Inc., and the Cincinnati Paralegal Association. She is also a member of the advisory committee for paralegals at the College of Mount St. Joseph.

"I've always felt that my professional development, particularly through networking with other paralegals, is extremely beneficial," she said. "My employer has been extremely supportive to the point where they pay for me to go to Phoenix for the annual meeting and any other meetings I need to attend that relate to the paralegal profession."

Paralegals should push their companies and law firms to support their professional development, she said.

"We have people in our company who are certified accountants, and they go for accounting courses, and the lawyers go for their CLE; so we're professionals here too, and we need the help and support from our employers," she said.

Saenz said she travels a lot for her job, but her traveling schedule "peaks and valleys" depending on what is happening within the company.

"When you're in the law, as you know, you can't anticipate when something's going to happen," she said. "Most of the times in a corporation you're in a defensive position, you're not in an offensive position."

Saenz said she has a lot of autonomy and responsibility in her job, partly because of her supportive boss and colleagues.



"I have a lot of autonomy because of the kind of work that I do and the people I work for," she said. "I love it."

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