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Get Out of Neutral

Simple steps to put your corporate career in drive.

By Sally A. Kane

The career path for corporate paralegals today is more diverse and promising than ever before. Companies increasingly understand the value of paralegals and are becoming more creative about utilizing their skills. As a result, paralegals are now key players on corporate legal teams as they assume higher-level responsibilities, more sophisticated tasks, larger management roles and greater professional autonomy.

“Opportunities for in-house paralegals are increasing and will remain abundant in the coming years,” said Charles A. Volkert, executive director of Robert Half Legal, a staffing service based in Menlo Park, Calif., that specializes in the placement of legal professionals. “Corporate legal departments are building out their infrastructure internally to handle rising workloads, and with that comes the hiring of full-time paralegals, as well as project paralegals to staff litigation peaks and document-intensive transactions such as mergers.” The hottest legal specialties for paralegals seeking work within a corporation are regulatory compliance, complex litigation, corporate law, intellectual property and real estate, Volkert said.

Corporate opportunities also abound for paralegals with mergers and acquisitions, contracts and securities law backgrounds, said Penny Cierzan, a paralegal placement director in Minneapolis with The Esquire Group, a Special Counsel company. Like Volkert, Cierzan has observed an increase in demand for corporate paralegal services and a corresponding rise in the level of sophistication and complexity of in-house paralegal tasks. For example, she recently placed a paralegal in a corporate environment position who is serving as the primary contact in a multibillion dollar merger. The paralegal acts as the liaison between the buyer, seller, financing company and other parties, and oversees many of the the transaction details. Companies also are hiring paralegals to manage intellectual property matters. The intellectual property manager’s tasks include choosing intellectual property databases, determining how to utilize outside counsel, and designing the department’s policies and procedures, according to Cierzan.

Volkert noted that tech-savvy corporate paralegals also are assuming more responsibility, leading large document-intensive discovery projects in which they might manage first-, second- and third-year attorneys.

As responsibility levels and workloads rise, paralegal salaries also rise. “Experienced and supervisory paralegals will see the largest salary gains,” Volkert said. According to Volkert, salaries for in-house paralegals increased 5 percent this year, with average annual salaries for mid-level paralegals ranging from the mid-\$40,000s to the mid-\$50,000s, not including overtime or bonuses.

As corporations try to operate with fewer staff members, many look for paralegals with a minimum of three years’ experience who immediately can hit the ground running, Volkert said. Cierzan noted that more companies are requiring a bachelor’s degree and a

paralegal certificate from an American Bar Association-approved paralegal school. She believes these more stringent hiring requirements are an attempt to create a higher caliber pool of candidates who might be more loyal to the company and “in it for the long haul.”

Shifting Gears

As the profession evolves, corporations are creating more distinct and elaborate career paths for paralegals in order to retain and promote talented legal professionals within their ranks. Although the paralegal career track varies with every corporation, most organizations differentiate between entry-level, mid-level and senior paralegals through a grade or tier system. As a paralegal gains experience and shoulders more responsibility, he or she advances up the tier system and is rewarded with more challenging assignments, greater perks and higher compensation.

DuPont has a particularly distinct career path for its 60 U.S.-based paralegals. “We have six levels in the Career Progression Program for paralegals, beginning with an entry-level position and progressing to senior and then corporate paralegal,” said Barbara Wallace, a corporate paralegal with DuPont in Wilmington, Del. Advancement through the tiers is based on years of experience, job performance and contribution to the legal function. “Advancing to the next level is not arbitrary,” Wallace explained. “You know what you have to do and the path you must take.”

DuPont’s paralegal career structure is unique because the job descriptions, position profiles, skill sets and criteria for advancement were created by the paralegals within the corporation. “It is probably one of the most well-defined corporate paralegal career paths in the country,” Wallace said, noting that the company examined other programs when creating its own. “We really felt that we understood what we needed better than anybody when we created the levels.”

Sunoco, Inc.’s paralegal track also consists of six grades, said Tish DeCecco, one of 16 paralegals employed by Sunoco, at its Philadelphia headquarters. In grades one through three, one holds the title of paralegal. Grade four is senior paralegal and grades five and six are termed litigation specialist. The primary difference between the grades is a paralegal’s workload, responsibility and compensation, DeCecco said. Litigation specialists operate much like a junior attorney, retaining outside counsel from a list of corporate-approved counsel (the paralegals don’t negotiate rates) and determining the strategy of defense on routine cases such as slip-and-fall matters. DeCecco, who has been a paralegal since 1978 and worked in a law firm prior to her 17 years with Sunoco, believes that greater opportunities exist in-house. “There is more of a career path in a corporation. The tiers provide a career progression and I like that because it gives me something to work for,” DeCecco said.

The opportunities for in-house paralegals don’t stop at the highest paralegal career tier. Paralegals can leverage their unique skills to join the ranks of upper management or win high-level jobs in other parts of the company. “Although legal is a great door opener, the greatest opportunities may exist outside the legal department,” said Cindy Leidenfrost, an Atlanta paralegal who currently works for Coca-Cola Enterprises and has worked as an in-house paralegal for 17 years for various companies, including Waste Management, Inc., and Saab Cars USA. While at Saab, her success as a paralegal and legal manager led to job offers from various parts of the company, including purchasing, contract administration and human resources.

Rev up Your Role

So how does one advance from one level to the next? What separates the rising stars from the stagnating? How does a paralegal win coveted top roles in a corporation or create a career path when none exists?

“Generally, things do not come to those who do not ask for them,” says management guru David Maister (<http://davidmaister.com/blog/329/>). This wisdom is key to driving one’s career. You must remain alert to new opportunities, actively seek new assignments and avoid placing limits on the scope of your position.

“The paralegal’s number one priority is to add value for his employer through seeking out work ... and going above and beyond,” Volkert said. Being a self-starter is particularly important for in-house paralegals as corporations seek to keep the work in-house rather than hiring outside counsel, Cierzan added. Volkert noted that this trend is driven from the top: As general counsel garners more areas of focus underneath their leadership, they are looking to build strong legal teams.

By breaking out of your comfort zone and volunteering for more work, you diversify your skills, demonstrate an interest in contributing to organizational objectives and add value to the company. While at Saab Cars USA, Leidenfrost received three major promotions during her 14-year tenure with the company, in part, due to her “can do” attitude. When she joined the company, no distinct paralegal career path existed so she created her own opportunities. She realized tasks were being outsourced that a paralegal could accomplish in-house, such as filing annual reports, licensing and registration, and negotiating settlements for routine matters. She approached her boss and volunteered to take on these tasks in lieu of hiring outside counsel. “You have to carve out opportunities for yourself and make others aware of what you can do,” Leidenfrost said. After only 18 months with the company, a position was created for Leidenfrost and she was promoted to manager of the legal department.

Dorothy Roberts is a senior paralegal for The Kroger Co., in Cincinnati, and her initiative granted her the opportunity to serve as a corporate officer at The Kroger Co., the first nonattorney in the history of the company to hold that distinction. Several years ago, she observed that the general counsel and assistant general counsel, who served as the corporate secretary and assistant secretary, could use help drafting minutes and certifying resolutions. She convinced her supervisor that she was capable and available to help. At the next annual meeting, the directors elected her assistant secretary. “The biggest thing you can do to get ahead is to promote yourself and inject yourself into things,” Roberts said.

Wallace agreed. “You have to raise your hand and stick your neck out there,” she said. “They won’t bring it to you.” Sticking her neck out is exactly how Wallace landed her current position as the company’s global antitrust audit coordinator despite a lack of antitrust experience. DuPont was implementing a new compliance program to bring it into adherence with new government regulations. Wallace volunteered for the task, knowing what she could offer as a paralegal. “The attorneys had the antitrust knowledge and I had the organizational skills to put a compliance program into motion,” she said. Thus, a new position was created for Wallace, an opportunity that would not have existed if she had not actively promoted her skills.

A proactive attitude also helped Stephanie Hawkes, a senior paralegal with Nissan North American in Irving, Texas, advance within the company and win better assignments. "I volunteer whenever meetings or committees may need the legal department to be represented," Hawkes said. One of her current projects is enhancing the company's customer Web site and helping to create Web site disclaimers. Hawkes was not asked to join the committee; she learned of the project when another department presented the Web site plan to the legal department, which ultimately would sign off on the project. "They outlined their plan and I said, 'Can I just come to the meeting? I'm interested even if not from a legal aspect.' Now they see me as part of the team," she said.

DeCecco went beyond the requirements of her position when she stepped in to solve a problem between the company's legal and insurance departments. Discord had risen over what role each department should play in managing litigation. "I put together a procedure [outlining] that [the] insurance [department] would do the initial research on litigation cases and paralegals would perform certain tasks so each person knew what they were doing and there were no hard feelings." Although it took five drafts and four meetings for all parties to agree on the procedure, DeCecco's initiative helped to streamline processes and avoid departmental conflict. "You have to be your own champion," DeCecco said. "Always go beyond what you are asked to do ... let people know you can think on your own."

Another way to boost your visibility in a large company is to consider assignments outside your job description or department. What task forces, committees or projects need an additional team member? How can you leverage prior work experience and skills into new opportunities? What other departments might need your expertise? Working in roles outside the scope of your position can increase your visibility to management, broaden your knowledge base and lead to advanced responsibilities.

Wallace also believes that involvement in committees can expand a paralegal's opportunities in a corporation. "Committee work is really important," she said. "All paralegals should be on at least one committee and if you're a committee chair, it shows an even greater contribution and a leadership role." DuPont has several standing paralegal committees and practice groups in which paralegals can play an important role. Wallace noted that management keeps track of who attends such meetings. "The more you are out there and people see who you are, the better ... that's how I got my antitrust position."

Driving Down Costs

Unlike law firms which generate profit for their partners and employees, corporate law departments are cost centers. In today's competitive climate, legal departments are under intense pressure to cut costs, operate with fewer staff members and improve work efficiencies while keeping pace with an ever-widening scope of work. Paralegals can deliver measurable value to the corporate legal team by developing cost-savings strategies that contribute to the company's bottom line.

Slashing outside counsel fees is one major way that paralegals can reduce costs. Since outside counsel fees are one of the largest operating costs of corporate legal departments, performing the work in-house in lieu of hiring outside lawyers translates into significant cost savings. In fact, a recent survey of in-house counsel by the ABA found that nearly 82

percent of counsel cited “reducing outside legal costs” as one of their most pressing issues (“The Billable Hour: Putting a Wedge Between Client and Counsel,” by Thomas L. Sager and Steven A. Lauer, *Law Practice Today*, December 2003).

“Cost savings is huge. It’s the biggest challenge right now,” Hawkes said. “We work with outside counsel to contain costs.” Rather than paying outside counsel to draft interrogatories, answer discovery requests or perform legal research, Hawkes and the Nissan legal staff perform the work in-house. Several law firm paralegals joined the corporate law department concurrently with the company’s mandate to find ways to reduce outside counsel budgets. The law firm paralegals had answered discovery requests at their former jobs and knew they could do the same internally, at a cost much less than outside counsel.

Leidenfrost’s initiative in reducing outside counsel fees helped win her a major promotion with Saab Cars USA. While her predecessor hired outside counsel to handle every claim, she realized that negotiating with customers herself could achieve huge cost savings. In fact, she and the supervisors under her settled 95 percent of all litigation in-house, netting an estimated annual cost savings of \$2 million. Such results made the higher-ups take notice. After only three and a half years with the company, Leidenfrost was promoted to the management team, managing a \$17 million budget and 45 people.

Another way to boost the bottom line is through streamlining work processes. “I always look for more efficient ways to get my work done such as getting as much information as possible at the beginning when I get a case in,” DeCecco said. For example, when she receives a new slip-and-fall case, she immediately contacts the store manager, obtains videos and photographs of the accident and interviews employees working at the scene. Securing this information at the beginning of a case instead of waiting until the discovery stage to track down witnesses and evidence saves time and money down the line. When accident photographs reveal safety problems, she also contacts maintenance to repair those problems. By proactively investigating new cases and taking the next step, DeCecco can help control the litigation expenses.

Successful corporate paralegals think outside the box and look for creative methods to cut costs. Roberts developed a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to replace the costly program the company used to track subsidiary data. DeCecco negotiated settlements for small claims instead of involving outside counsel. Leidenfrost investigated and resolved lemon law complaints before they went to court. By impacting the company’s bottom line, you can create value, boost job security and position yourself for career advancement.

Get on the Tech Track

As corporate and legal processes become more automated, in-house paralegals must become proficient at an increasing array of word processing, spreadsheet, database, presentation and telecommunications software. Computer programs exist for almost every corporate function, from tracking stock options, trademarks and patents, and creating organizational charts to preparing budgets and monitoring outside counsel fees.

According to Outside Counsel’s 2007 In-House Tech Survey, more companies are leveraging technology as a key strategic asset (“Legal Departments Tell Firms: Get on the Tech Train,” by Anthony Paonita, *Law.com*, Feb. 21, 2007; and “The Lowdown on High Tech In-House,” *Law.com*, March 2007). Furthermore, the new amendments to the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure concerning electronically stored information have

fueled the need for paralegals with the technical skills to create and maintain information management systems. Volkert stated that, in an age of e-discovery, a paralegal can increase his or her base salary by becoming proficient in litigation database management tools.

In Leidenfrost's 17 years as an in-house paralegal, she has seen the use of technology in her field explode, especially within the last five years. In her current position with Coca-Cola Enterprises, all of her litigation management functions are performed with a Web-based computer application called PowerBrief. Outside counsel is required to be proficient in PowerBrief, a program that enables inside and outside counsel to share a secure, encrypted, real-time, electronic work environment.

Karen Ray, a Memphis, Tennessee-based paralegal with GTx, Inc., who specializes in corporate law, uses BrowneFile16, an Internet-based program to submit directors' and officers' Section 16 reports to the Securities and Exchange Commission. According to its Web site, BrowneFile16 allows users to create, manage and file Section 16 documents. Ray also uses technology to track GTx's vote tally information for annual meetings.

Roberts uses Excel to track directors' and officers' stock holdings and uses 10k Wizard, a subscription-based Web application that offers real-time alerts, for searching SEC filings. She also uses Livedgar, a research platform for securities research that lets users conduct online securities research and obtain source documents in one step, as well as the SEC database. When the company is sued, service of process is received electronically through PowerBrief. Roberts was instrumental in helping to roll out and train users on the PowerBrief system. She also uses OrgPlus to create organization charts for subsidiaries.

There is no doubt that technology is an integral part of today's corporate legal function. "The more technology experience a paralegal has, the better it is for his [or her] career, marketability and value to the corporation," Volkert said.

The Open Road

New corporate compliance regulations, increased merger activity, economic growth and rising caseloads have fueled the demand for skilled corporate paralegals. The trend of shifting legal work in-house has prompted overburdened corporate counsel to entrust paralegals with higher-level, more sophisticated assignments. This is good news for in-house paralegals seeking to break out of traditional roles and enhance their career opportunities. Armed with experience, technical know-how and a proactive attitude, today's in-house paralegal will find no limit to career success.

Sidebar

Tips From a Corporate Insider

Sally A. Kane, author of this article, worked as a corporate paralegal for seven years at several corporations including Robertson Ceco Corporation, Westinghouse Electric Corp., and CNA Insurance. Here is her advice for putting your career in drive based on her own corporate experiences.

- **Anticipate.** Add value by anticipating the next step and doing it, even if the task is outside your job duties. During my early days as a litigation paralegal with Westinghouse Electric Corp., I was frustrated with the level of assignments I was given. So, when asked to perform research on a motion for summary judgment, I

performed the research as asked, but then wrote the motion and supporting brief, too. I will never forget the look on the attorney's face when I placed the 12-page draft on her desk. While the draft was not perfect, the attorneys in the department realized they could rely on me to draft legal documents and began giving me more substantial assignments.

- **Think outside the box to cut costs.** When I joined Westinghouse, the company laid off 6,000 employees within two years, and was in the midst of divesting businesses and streamlining procedures. The company's mantra was "do more with less" and the legal department was put to the challenge of finding more efficient ways of functioning with half the staff. I contacted a local paralegal school and developed an externship program at the company. It was a win-win situation: The paralegal students worked in the legal department in exchange for school credit. We gained valuable assistance and the students gained work experience.
- **Go above and beyond.** In my former job, a paralegal in the litigation department volunteered to serve on a newsletter committee, drafting content and interviewing key personnel. Not only did it allow him to get his face in front of high-level corporate executives, but the committee was headed by the general counsel's assistant, a powerful person in a multibillion dollar company. At the end of the year, the paralegal received a special award for going above and beyond his job requirements.

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