

FUTURE LAW OFFICE: **Technology** Reshapes the Legal Support Profession



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About the Report

Technology Reshapes the Legal Support Profession is part of Robert Half Legal's annual Future Law Office research project, which tracks trends and developments in the legal field. This report includes the insights of Robert Half Legal's staffing and recruiting professionals, as well as the expert knowledge of other well-respected professionals in the legal field. It also references research and key findings from our surveys of lawyers among leading law firms and corporations in the United States and Canada.

Introduction

The roles of paralegals, who are more commonly referred to as “law clerks” in Canada, and other legal support professionals have become increasingly multifaceted and complex in recent years. In addition to performing higher-level duties, legal support staff often are responsible for helping their law offices implement and manage new technologies, including training associates and other colleagues on devices and applications.

In this paper, we provide an overview of technology trends affecting the work of legal support professionals. We also offer a glimpse into the hiring environment as well as the skills needed for success in today's market.

18%

Employment of paralegals and legal assistants is expected to grow by 18 percent from 2010 to 2020.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2012-13 Edition, Paralegals and Legal Assistants.

Impact of Technology on Legal Support Roles

Advances in computer-based information systems, particularly software applications, have dramatically changed the work of paralegals and legal secretaries. Tracey L. Young, PACE Registered Paralegal® (RP) and immediate past president of the National Federation of Paralegal Associations, Inc., has witnessed a shift in the roles and responsibilities of support staff. “Paralegals have new career opportunities in e-discovery, information management and technology-based litigation support,” Young says.¹

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Tracey L. Young, RP, immediate past president, National Federation of Paralegal Associations

Lynne DeVenny, paralegal at Elliot Pishko Morgan, P.A., Practical Paralegalism blogger and co-host of “The Paralegal Voice” podcast, agrees that legal support staff roles have greatly expanded. “Today’s paralegals are expected to be more efficient and productive – and to wear more complex hats due to technology,” DeVenny notes. “The time we’ve saved from standing at copy machines and redacting documents by hand is now spent doing more substantive work and learning new technologies.”²

The shift to cloud computing presents new challenges for paralegals, legal administrators and other legal support professionals, observes Karen D. Griggs, past president of the Association of Legal Administrators. Cloud computing enables users to access applications or data stored on servers at a remote location (the “cloud”) through an Internet browser or mobile application.

“Managing documents in the cloud requires a higher level of organizational skills,” says Griggs, a certified legal manager (CLM) and executive director at Baker Sterchi Cowden & Rice LLC. “Legal professionals have to learn new processes so they can utilize all the functions of new technologies. This will enable them to provide greater efficiencies and better service to clients and attorneys.”³

Hiring Trends

+2

Lawyers anticipate their organizations will add an average of two full-time positions in the fourth quarter of 2012.

28%

Twenty-eight percent of lawyers said they are most likely to hire paralegals.

14%

Fourteen percent said they are most likely to hire legal secretaries/assistants.

Source: Robert Half Legal Hiring Index, Sept. 12, 2012.

Technology’s Effect on Hiring Needs

As law firms and corporate legal departments look for cost-effective ways to enhance the delivery of legal services, they seek paralegals and legal assistants with expertise in technology-driven systems who can help the firm operate more efficiently. When hiring, they are placing a premium on legal support professionals who possess not only legal knowledge and administrative ability but also technological proficiency.

“A profile of the most marketable paralegal would include these essential features: A bachelor’s degree, four to seven years’ experience, certification or accreditation from a program approved by the American Bar Association (ABA), and technical aptitude,” says attorney Charles A. Volkert, executive director of Robert Half Legal and executive managing director of Robert Half Legal eDiscovery Services.⁴

Skills in Demand

Legal support staff should continue to see demand for their skills in the most active practice areas, including healthcare, general business/commercial law and bankruptcy/foreclosure, according to the *Robert Half Legal Hiring Index*. On the corporate side, general counsel seek paralegals with backgrounds in contracts administration, compliance, and labor and employment law.⁵

Aside from expertise in the hottest specialties, paralegals and legal assistants should have advanced proficiency in Microsoft Office and legal research platforms, such as Casemaker and Westlaw, knowledge of practice and litigation management software, and familiarity with legal and productivity applications for smartphones and tablets. DeVenny also recommends paralegals stay current with developments in e-discovery and litigation support – two areas that are in strong demand and for which these professionals are paid higher hourly rates.⁶ Volkert agrees, adding that knowledge of case management software, litigation and e-discovery programs, such as Concordance, Summation and Trial Director, is highly valued. “The more tech-savvy a legal support professional is, especially in the area of litigation, the better his or her prospects are in the current job market,” he says.⁷

“Paralegals should read everything they can about e-discovery,” DeVenny recommends. “Even if your firm has not yet done electronic data collection, if you work for litigators, it’s just a matter of time.” Because technology is always changing, continual learning is required. “Support professionals shouldn’t be afraid to embrace new tools, such as legal apps for smartphones and tablets that could enhance their productivity,” she adds.⁸

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*Lynne DeVenny, paralegal,
Elliot Pishko Morgan, P.A.*



Top Five Practice Areas Driving Demand for Legal Support Staff

1. Healthcare
2. General business/commercial law
3. Bankruptcy/foreclosure
4. Litigation
5. Labor and employment

*Source: Robert Half Legal Hiring Index,
Sept. 12, 2012.*

Besides paralegals, legal administrators should have broad technological knowledge. “Administrators need overall familiarity with hardware components, software, applications and processes in order to engage in meaningful discussions with clients, firm stakeholders, IT professionals, consultants and business partners,” Griggs says. “The same knowledge is critical for the administrator to align technology upgrades with the firm’s business strategy.”

Griggs also thinks legal administrators should be able to evaluate the firm’s technology budget, requests for purchases, “lease versus buy” choices and outsourcing options – an ongoing challenge considering the fast pace of technological developments.⁹

Paralegal Roles That Include Technology Support

Paralegals, especially those who support solo practitioners or work at small law firms without a legal administrator, may find themselves the designated “tech support person,” DeVenny notes, adding that it may fall to a legal assistant to address issues such as lost or malfunctioning devices. “For paralegals in these hybrid roles, thinking about ways to help their law firms become more digitally secure and aware is critical,” she advises.

A paralegal also might prepare an inventory of all the different mobile devices used by employees or make and distribute an emergency checklist to staff in the event that devices are lost or stolen, DeVenny says. Or the paralegal may be called upon to work with counsel in order to draft the firm’s policy regarding the use of mobile technology and social media.¹⁰

In a small firm setting, the legal administrator or office manager is often the de facto technology manager. “Given that they might be tasked with financial, operations and support personnel management, this can be an onerous level of responsibility,” Griggs says. She adds that many small firms do not have IT support staff – which makes it even more critical for these professionals to keep their technology skills current.¹¹

Although cloud computing offers convenience, flexibility and cost efficiencies, it also raises concerns about preserving the security and confidentiality of client information. According to the ABA’s Commission on Ethics 20/20, lawyers must make reasonable efforts to “prevent the inadvertent disclosure of, or unauthorized access to, information relating to the representation of a client.”¹² This responsibility extends to legal support staff members accessing information through cloud technology.

“When law firms opt to use an outside service provider for hosting or electronic storage, legal support professionals often play a key role in interviewing or choosing third-party vendors, particularly at smaller law firms,” Volkert notes. “When charged with this responsibility, the legal support professional must ensure that the provider has adequate safeguards in place to protect client data,” he says.¹³

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Charles A. Volkert, Esq., executive director, Robert Half Legal; executive managing director, Robert Half Legal eDiscovery Services

To keep their technology skills fresh and maintain a high level of proficiency, Young recommends paralegals with IT duties attend legal technology conferences and seminars, and view webinars by legal technology leaders. She adds that blogs and newsletters also are good resources.¹⁴ Other sources of information and education include professional organizations such as the ABA and the American Law Institute (ALI), which together developed the ALI-ABA Knowledge Portal, a subscription-based, online legal resource.¹⁵ The International Federation of Paralegal Associations and NALS, the association for legal professionals, also offer online learning centers and web-based education programs.

One emerging theme is the importance of understanding the available technology in order to identify the most appropriate tools to handle trial preparation and managed review work. This represents a new area of opportunity for paralegals to leverage their technology skills and add value for their firms. For example, when a firm is conducting e-discovery, paralegals can take on a leadership role in document collection, review and production. Many e-discovery vendors and associations, such as the Association of Certified E-Discovery Specialists and the Electronic Data Extraction Network, offer webinars and online learning opportunities to help paralegals and litigation support professionals advance their e-discovery knowledge.¹⁶

74%

Seventy-four percent of lawyers surveyed by Robert Half Legal said they have seen an increase in the number of hybrid or “blended” paralegal/legal assistant positions in the last two years.

Source: Robert Half Legal survey of 350 lawyers with the largest law firms and corporations in the United States and Canada.

As technology continues to change the practice of law, paralegals can use social media as a form of free continuing legal education in new developments as well as the nontechnical aspects of their jobs. “In as little as 15 to 45 minutes a week, paralegals can follow leading legal experts on Twitter and use an RSS feed to read frequently updated blogs,” says DeVenny. However, she cautions that social media should not be a replacement for in-person training, and recommends that paralegals try to attend at least one or two professional conferences a year.¹⁷

Many in the legal field are already taking advantage of social media sites. According to the *2012 ABA Legal Technology Survey Report*, LinkedIn and Facebook are the most popular social media tools among legal professionals (used by 95 percent and 38 percent of respondents, respectively). Seventy-two percent of those polled said they use social media for career development and networking, 44 percent use these tools for case investigation purposes, followed by client development (42 percent) and education and current awareness (15 percent).¹⁸ Social media tools provide numerous opportunities for paralegals to connect with other professionals in the field, position themselves as expert resources and find job leads.

But, while social media offers many benefits, there are pitfalls, too. “Nothing on the Internet is private, and that is the premise all legal professionals should assume before using social media sites,” DeVenny says. “I suggest that people conduct themselves the same way in the virtual world that they do in the real world, and don’t post anything they aren’t comfortable with their bosses or their mothers seeing.”¹⁹



To brush up on digital etiquette tips, download *Business Etiquette in a Digital Age*, Robert Half’s complimentary guide on the effective use of social media.

Conclusion

It is impossible to accurately predict which future technological innovations will have the greatest effect on the careers of legal support professionals. However, one thing is certain: the most successful professionals will be open to change and proactive about keeping their skills and expertise fresh.

“Legal support professionals should maintain a curiosity about new technologies,” Volkert advises. “Proficiency in the latest e-discovery, case management and social media tools will enable them to serve clients better, advance in their careers and make valuable contributions to their law firms or corporate legal departments.”²⁰

About Future Law Office

The Future Law Office project is an annual research initiative conducted by Robert Half Legal that examines key trends in the legal profession. Future Law Office is based on interviews with experts in law firm and corporate legal department management, other professionals in the field of law, as well as our own legal staffing specialists throughout North America. Our findings also are based on information from state and national legal publications and associations.

Robert Half Legal regularly commissions surveys of lawyers on a variety of workplace and legal management issues. Relevant statistics from these studies, which include responses from lawyers among the top law firms and corporate legal departments in the United States and Canada, are cited in this paper. All sources, including experts and articles consulted by Robert Half Legal, are listed in the report.

About Robert Half Legal

Robert Half Legal is the premier provider of highly skilled legal professionals for law firms and corporate legal departments on a temporary, project and full-time basis. The company also offers managed review and e-discovery services. We have built long-standing relationships with leading professional associations, including the Association of Certified E-Discovery Specialists, Association of Corporate Counsel, alliance partners current/verified Association of Legal Administrators and Minority Corporate Counsel Association.

Robert Half Legal was recently voted the “Best Legal/Litigation Support Staffing Firm” by readers of *The National Law Journal* (March 25, 2013). Robert Half Legal is a division of Robert Half, which once again was listed on FORTUNE® magazine’s list of “World’s Most Admired Companies” (March 18, 2013).

Experts Interviewed

Lynne DeVenny, paralegal, Elliot Pishko Morgan, P.A.

Karen D. Griggs, CLM, past president, Association of Legal Administrators; executive director, Baker Sterchi Cowden & Rice LLC

Charles A. Volkert, Esq., executive director, Robert Half Legal; executive managing director, Robert Half Legal eDiscovery Services

Tracey L. Young, RP, past president, National Federation of Paralegal Associations, Inc.

Endnotes

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2. Interview with Lynne DeVenny, paralegal, Elliot Pishko Morgan, P.A., Jan. 31, 2012.
3. Interview with Karen D. Griggs, CLM, past president, Association of Legal Administrators, executive director, Baker Sterchi Cowden & Rice LLC, Feb. 23, 2012.
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