How to Hire a Quality Paralegal

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Lawyers have long recognized the benefits of hiring paralegals and how much they can contribute to the profitability of the law firm. Routine legal tasks that were once performed by entry-level lawyers can easily be delegated to a paralegal. Their duties and skills can be a great enhancement to any law firm.

So, what should you look for when interviewing paralegals? Employer requirements vary widely as to the “ideal” educational background for a paralegal, but a general rule of thumb would be to look for someone who has either an associate’s degree or a bachelor’s degree in paralegal studies, or a four-year degree from a college or university in any discipline, plus a certificate or extended study in paralegal courses. A paralegal with this background will bring to the job a quality liberal arts education and a better understanding of the legal profession than a person who received legal education from a short-term program.

With the current job market indicating that there are more paralegals looking for jobs than there are quality positions available, today’s employer can afford to be selective in the hiring requirements.

Many paralegal educational programs have received approval from the American Bar Association through its Standing Committee on Paralegals and Approval Commission. Although ABA approval is voluntary on the part of the paralegal institution, there are extensive requirements for colleges and universities about the legal basics that they expect paralegals to know. The colleges and universities seeking ABA approval are subjected to extensive investigation, on-site inspections, a review of the law library, and interviews with the faculty, advisory councils and students. The recommendations made by the ABA have led to the development of superior paralegal educational programs designed to raise the competencies and skills of those individuals who assist lawyers in the delivery of legal services. See http://www.abanet.org/legalservices/paralegals/.

The American Association for Paralegal Education (AAfPE) is a professional organization of educators who have an interest in providing the legal community with quality programs. Membership by colleges and universities is not mandatory, but it is an indication of how teachers and professors have responded to the establishment of programs with a curriculum of what lawyers believe paralegals need. AAfPE has stated that short-term paralegal programs do not meet the minimum standard of education necessary for a student to enter the paralegal profession. The minimum standards recommended by AAfPE are:

• Post-secondary coursework in substantive and procedural law, legal research and writing, ethics, and areas of legal practice as described in Core Competencies for Paralegal Programs;
• At least 18 semester credit hours of substantive paralegal courses, plus 60 semester hours of post-secondary study. See the AAfPE website www.aafpe.org for more details on recommended paralegal education.

AAfPE has also recommended that paralegal institutions become members of its organization, or approved by the ABA, or accredited by an agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education for courses offered at the post-secondary level.

Although some proprietary paralegal programs have established business relationships with local universities, these programs do not necessarily meet ABA guidelines or AAfPE recommendations.

As lawyers, why should you care about the educational background of the paralegal? Although paralegals are not yet regulated through registration, certification or licensure (other than California), the general trend in many states (North Carolina and Wisconsin) is that someone who has graduated from a “stellar” paralegal program will do a much better job for you and your client and be “entitled” to call himself/herself a paralegal. Thus the current trend is for voluntary certification and or licensure. Of course, such certification or licensure will not permit paralegals to practice law, but it will permit you, the employer, to distinguish between a “true” paralegal and someone who is merely giving himself/herself a title in order to get a job.

So, if you are in the search process for a quality paralegal, here are some of the questions that you should ask the interviewees about themselves. If your candidate is someone who has 20 years of paralegal experience, then you will find that he/she probably did not graduate from a university or college that offered a paralegal program, since
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