

# The Power of a Paralegal

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As your career expands and your workload increases, passing off work to a paralegal can be very appealing. Whether you're looking to hire a paralegal or more effectively use one you already have, there are some important things to keep in mind to maximize the value added by a good paralegal and comply with Ohio law at the same time.

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It is important to remember what a paralegal, certified or not, is permitted by law to do. At the most basic level, a paralegal should never do two things – (1) provide legal advice and (2) sign pleadings or documents. If you adhere to these two rules, you will avoid most issues that arise when paralegals extend their reach too far. While most practitioners are quick to name what paralegals cannot do, there are few resources that define specifically what paralegals are permitted to do. With that comes a wide

array of ways to utilize your paralegal to aid your practice.

Paralegals can perform much of the necessary “behind the scenes” work. In litigation, a paralegal can help with legal research, organization of pleadings and trial preparation. In other areas of practice, a paralegal can conduct UCC searches and make sure all appropriate forms are filled out correctly. A well versed paralegal can be an attorney's best friend.

With today's technology enhanced way of delivering legal services, paralegals are more incorporated than ever into the practice of law. It is safe to bet that your paralegal communicates with clients and court personnel on a daily basis. Because all of these interactions are a reflection upon you and your firm or agency, it is important to empower your paralegal to sharpen his skill sets so he is able to continue adding value to your practice. Locally, the Paralegal Association of Central Ohio is a wonderful resource for paralegals. Since 2004, the Columbus Bar has provided management and other services to PACO, while the PACO executive board is responsible for all administrative matters. PACO is an active member of the National Federation of Paralegal Association with over 400 active members.

Resources such as PACO provide the benefits we receive as attorneys from bar associations. It allows paralegals to take leadership roles, have exposure to professionals at the top of their field, and learn new skills. A PACO membership automatically includes a membership to the National Federation of Paralegal Associations, where members can obtain advanced certifications such as “Registered Paralegal” status.

If you are a solo practitioner or work in a small firm and are considering hiring a paralegal, keep in mind all the skills necessary for a paralegal to add value to your practice. Since the bulk of your paralegal's time will be spent communicating, you need someone with effective oral and written communication skills. Given our reliance on technology, general technology skills are beneficial and are starting to become a mandatory skill given the prevalence of efilings and ediscovery. Technology skills also play a role in the research and investigation a paralegal must do. The volume of your workload will require someone with great organization skills, who is able to multi-task and still pay attention to detail.

While it may take some effort to determine how best to utilize a paralegal to maximize your productivity, investing the time now can mean investing in your bottom line for years to come.

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