



# Paralegals: the new legal career path?

It's no longer a one size fits all for law graduates, as paralegal chief Amanda Hamilton explains

Once upon a time, if an individual was completing a qualifying law degree, it signified that they were intending to go on and sit professional examinations to be a solicitor or barrister. This was the pre-requisite qualification in order to do so. This is no longer necessarily the case today for several reasons.

- ▶ First, the cost of enrolment onto the post graduate professional exams has been increasing over a period of 20 years and consequently, is out of the range of affordability for many.
- ▶ Second, the lack of training contracts (a pre-requisite to qualifying as a solicitor) due to so many graduates flooding the sector. For similar reasons, the lack of pupillages available for those wanting to qualify and practise at the Bar.
- ▶ Third, the introduction of the new SQE (Solicitors' Qualifying Exam).
- ▶ And, fourth, the virtual eradication of legal aid in 2013 meant that there has been limited access to justice at a reasonable cost for consumers.

If you have recently graduated with a law degree or if you are about to take your final exams, you may be wondering what to do once you have graduated, and one very good option is to become a paralegal.

## What are the differences between solicitors and paralegals?

Paralegals are trained and educated to perform legal tasks and offer advice and assistance to consumers. Many have law

degrees, and some are even ex-solicitors or non-practising barristers. Others may have qualified by successfully completing nationally recognised paralegal qualifications. The point is that with a law degree, graduates now have another career pathway into the legal sector. Paralegals are now the fastest growing sector within the legal profession.

Of course, there are some activities that paralegals cannot perform, and these remain the monopoly of solicitors. These are the reserved activities as defined by the Legal Services Act 2007. The two most relevant are that there is no automatic right of audience and that paralegals cannot conduct litigation. However, in practice, some of these reserved activities are being eroded by the courts in order to allow access to justice.

However, here are just a few tasks paralegals can perform:

- ▶ Assisting someone who wishes to represent themselves in court.
- ▶ Help people who have been arrested and taken to a police station.
- ▶ Helping people with matrimonial issues.
- ▶ When someone wishes to take action against an employer through a tribunal.
- ▶ Assisting in the writing of a will or obtaining lasting power of attorney.

Every paralegal that joins the voluntary regulatory body, NALP (National Association of Licensed Paralegals) is very much aware of these restrictions.

So, what are the advantages of opting for a career as a paralegal?

Becoming a paralegal is far less costly than becoming a solicitor. Qualifying as a Paralegal is significantly less costly than qualifying as a solicitor. The introduction of the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) allows for two routes to qualification: the first is for non-law degree applicants; the second for those with a law degree. The costs for the first route should include prep courses for the SQE of anywhere up to £5,000 plus the approximate cost of sitting for the SQE itself of £4,000.

As a law graduate, you can work as a paralegal without any further qualifications, but most employers will look for relevant paralegal qualifications. The NALP Level 7 Diploma in Paralegal Practice is designed to bridge the gap between an academic degree and the practical, procedural knowledge and skills necessary to be able to function effectively as a Paralegal Practitioner. The National Paralegal College is currently charging £1,660 for this. As a distance learning qualification, this can be studied while you are working, so you can start working—and earning—within a legal practice or in a legal department while studying.

## You can start working in a legal environment sooner

Becoming a solicitor in the UK takes five–six years, including your degree. This includes your SQE and at least two years of qualifying legal work experience. Qualifying as a Paralegal will take you less time and be less costly. It is important to find that job as soon as possible after you qualify, as practical experience is vitally important. Look for paralegal jobs that will give you that crucial experience that help you learn how to apply the theoretical knowledge you gained while studying. Working as a paralegal can be within a legal environment such as a law firm but experience can also be gained by working within companies, charities and in-house legal departments in industry.

## A stepping-stone

Paralegals are in high demand and being a paralegal is a rewarding career in itself. Nevertheless, for some it may be a stepping-stone to becoming a solicitor. Paralegals are an extremely important part of the legal profession and the experience you gain as a paralegal can hold you in good stead if you wish to become a solicitor later down the line. **NLJ**

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