



Decision time: choosing the right paralegal qualification

Amanda Hamilton offers tips on picking the right qualification for you and the benefits of working as a paralegal

IN BRIEF

- ▶ What to factor in when choosing a paralegal qualification.
- ▶ How work as a paralegal can improve legal knowledge and confidence.
- ▶ The career pathways available once qualified.

Being a paralegal is a rewarding career whether you work in industry, within a legal practice, or decide to set up your own business. Paralegals can undertake almost all the same activities as a solicitor, with a few exceptions known as 'reserved activities'. This means that your paralegal qualifications can also be a stepping-stone to becoming a solicitor if that's what you decide to do long-term.

The best way to get started on this career path is to complete an Ofqual recognised paralegal qualification. There are a number on offer, so how do you choose the one that will be best for you?

To a large extent the answer depends on why you want to achieve the qualification. So, let's look at the possible reasons.

Improving legal knowledge

Many individuals enrol for a legal course when something happens to them that may affect or reflect on their legal status. This could be a debt owed by you or to you, a dispute with a neighbour, or matters relating to renting, buying or being a landlord and even a criminal offence, or possibly something related to family.

If it is just basic legal information that is sought, such as how laws are made and what laws are meant to do and how the English Legal System works, then a Level 3 Paralegal Qualification could be

appropriate.

A Level 3 is equivalent to an A-level. There are three possibilities at Level 3. An Award may be the best economic option. It involves two units of study and does not cost the earth. If further knowledge is required, such as how to draft a Will or gaining details on how the Civil litigation process works, then a Level 3 Certificate may be appropriate. This is two further units of study, so four in all. Finally, a Diploma is two further units of study—six in all.

This is a great way to gain general knowledge and help you understand your rights, it is also a perfect beginner's course for anyone seriously interested in progressing their law career.

Enhancing existing know-how, or changing careers

Some people find themselves in a role involving a legal element where their only credential is the experience of doing the job itself. You may not have a background in law, but since you have been doing the job for so long, you know exactly what to do. However, you may not know 'why' you are doing it and the legal reasons behind it.

You may get to a point where you wish to bolster up your experience with particular knowledge of the law by completing a qualification. This will also benefit an employer as they will have relevantly qualified employees which will inspire greater customer confidence.

A Level 3 Paralegal Certificate or Diploma could suffice. However, if the employee is mature and has already gained qualifications at Level 3 or above, a Level 4 Diploma would be appropriate. Unlike the Level 3, there are ten mandatory subject

areas of law to study, so this is quite a commitment. A successful graduate can describe themselves as a fully qualified paralegal.

A Level 4 Paralegal Diploma would also be appropriate for someone (perhaps with a degree in another discipline) who wishes to change careers. Conventional careers take time: qualifying as a solicitor may take four to six years, and becoming a barrister three to five years, depending on whether an individual has a Law Degree or not. The cost is quite hefty ie the fees for a degree and postgraduate course fees. In contrast, qualifying as a Paralegal takes approximately one year at a small percentage of those costs.

Beginning your career

Going to university is not for everyone. Going straight from school to enrol onto Level 4 Paralegal Diploma is the quickest way to get qualified in law. Then the next step is to get as much experience under your belt as you can.

It is a fallacy that all paralegals work for solicitors. While many do, a substantial number do not. Experience can be gained by working in companies, organisations or charities. Experience can be gained anywhere: from Premiership football clubs to car manufacturers to movie production companies to retail outlets such as ASDA or Morrisons.

If you have already gained a law degree you may feel that you've already spent enough time and money and do not wish to pursue qualification as a solicitor or barrister. If that is the case, you can enrol onto a Paralegal Level 7 Diploma. This qualification bridges the gap between your academic law degree, and practice and procedural law and will qualify you as a paralegal.

For both of the above career pathways, once enough relevant legal experience is gained and can be evidenced, an application can be made for a Licence to Practise. This is subject to attaining Professional Indemnity Insurance and fulfilling other eligibility criteria. This would enable a Paralegal to set up their own Paralegal Practice and have their own clients (subject to strict practice guidelines which have to be adhered to in respect of reserved activities and holding out).

If you aspire to a career in law don't let time and cost hold you back. As you can see, there are genuine alternatives to help you develop an exciting legal career and to make a difference.

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