

Work as a Paralegal

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**Manchester
Metropolitan
University**

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WORK AS A PARALEGAL

The recession has had an effect on the paralegal job market and vacancies in corporate law areas, including corporate/commercial work, commercial litigation and property work have been drastically reduced over the past 24 months. However, there have been a number of vacancies in the areas of claimant personal injury and defendant insurance work and related areas such as credit hire and uninsured loss recovery. There is also some evidence of an upturn in family & other private client work areas.

Most law students seek paralegal work either as a “foot in the door” to the legal profession having completed the BVC or LPC and as a way of building valuable legal experience whilst continuing to apply for pupillage or training contracts. It can also be a valuable way of developing practical legal experience between studying an LLB and embarking on the BPTC or LPC, or alongside the study of one those courses on a part-time basis. However, it is also possible to build a career as a paralegal as a legal alternative to becoming a barrister or solicitor.

The Work of the Paralegal

Duties vary widely. In some firms, paralegals undertake virtually the full range of trainee tasks; in others, they carry out high volume routine legal tasks which are a common feature in the fields of insurance, conveyancing and personal injury.

Firms may also recruit paralegals to undertake specific tasks within a single contract. Examples might include proof reading legal documentation being prepared for a multi million pound contract closure or the preparation of document bundles for a forthcoming extensive trial.

Typically, tasks include: -

- Legal research
- Drafting letters and documents
- Preparation of briefing notes
- Identifying key documents eg. Documents which will need to be disclosed to the other side during discovery or for due diligence in a takeover deal
- Document Management – bundling, scheduling, indexing, pagination, scanning, photocopying. A very high degree of accuracy and attention to detail is required. Hundreds of files may be involved. A typical trial bundle may run to 25 volumes.
- Proof reading
- Instructing counsel
- Taking client statements & notes in court
- Attending completion meetings

- Attending client meetings
- Making court applications
- Pleadings
- Billing
- Database entry and management., filing & general administration

Qualifications and Qualities Sought

Most firms will look for a minimum of a law degree or GDL. Increasingly, many firms prefer applicants to have completed the LPC or BPTC. Many look for a 2:1 and stress the importance of a strong academic background.

In some cases, previous paralegal experience, or other office/administrative experience is preferred, and IT skills are considered to be a valuable asset.

Desirable personal qualities are: -

- Willing to do anything and everything required by the partners or solicitors in order to progress the case.
- Willing to travel to clients
- Able to work unsupervised
- Able to prioritise own work, often under pressure
- Organisational abilities
- Willing to work flexible hours at times in order to meet deadlines. (Long hours are a frequent feature in corporate and commercial departments).
- Accuracy & close attention to detail

Training for Paralegals

The National Association of Licensed Paralegals has developed a **Post-Graduate Diploma in Paralegal Practice**. This is available as a 20 week part-time (evening) course and also by distance learning. It covers the practical & procedural areas of civil litigation, criminal practice, corporate & commercial work, matrimonial law, conveyancing & probate. The practical skills elements are interviewing, drafting, advocacy & negotiation. It is only available in London, although distance learning could be an option for those living outside. NALP offer licensed status to paralegals.

NB. This course may be of particular value to LLB graduates who view a career as a paralegal as an interesting alternative to becoming a solicitor, particularly in view of the cost of completing the Legal Practice Course and the fierce competition for training contracts.

For further information contact the National Association of Licensed Paralegals, Admissions, 3.08 Canterbury Court, Kennington Business Park, 1-3 Brixton Road, London SW9 6DE. Tel: 0203-176-0900

www.nationalparalegals.com

ILEX (Institute of Legal Executives) offer the Level 3 Diploma in **Vocational Paralegal Studies** in partnership with City & Guilds. See www.ilex.org.uk for further details.

The Institute of Paralegals is a professional organisation which is offering **Certified Paralegal** status to paralegals. In order to gain this status, you must become a Fellow of the Institute. For those with a law degree or the Graduate Diploma in Law, this requires 1 year's qualifying paralegal employment. For those with the BVC or LPC, Certified Paralegal status will be granted immediately upon gaining paralegal work.

Institute of Paralegals, No. 1 Poultry, London EC2R 8JR.

Tel: 020-7099 9122

www.theiop.org

Some firms have developed in-house training modules specifically for their paralegals; others encourage paralegals to attend in-house courses provided for trainees.

Paralegals and Training Contracts.

Many mid-sized and smaller firms will consider their paralegals for training contracts as they arise. Indeed, some firms of solicitors will now only offer a training contract after an LPC graduate has spent some time (typically 6-12 months) “proving” themselves with the firm as a paralegal. The larger corporate/commercial firms tend to keep paralegal work & recruitment quite separate from that of trainee solicitors and so paralegals are less likely to be offered training contracts, though some still are.

Those with paralegal experience should also find the experience a considerable advantage when applying for training contracts with other organisations.

Time spent working as a paralegal may reduce the time spent working in a training contract, under the Solicitors Regulation Authority’s Time To Count regulations. Any reduction in the length of a training contract is entirely at the discretion of the firm or organisation the individual is doing his/her training contract with.

The maximum amount of reduction allowed is 6 months, time reduces at half i.e. 12 months’ relevant work experience may reduce the training contract by 6 months.

In all such instances, application must be made directly to the Solicitors Regulation Authority.

www.sra.org.uk

Solicitors Regulation Authority
0870 606 2555

Applying for Vacancies

Vacancies usually arise on an ad hoc basis, with only a few firms having a regular requirement for new staff. Past surveys have shown that there can be more vacancies in summer and early autumn.

Many firms do not advertise vacancies, mainly due to the large number of speculative enquiries received. In addition, some firms require staff at very short notice and so do not have time to advertise – they employ a core of permanent paralegals, and then recruit temporary help as and when workloads demand. As a result, it is advisable to indicate in a speculative application the dates when you are available for work.

Firms who advertise do so via:

- Law Society Gazette (www.lawgazette.co.uk- search Legal Jobs section)

- University law schools/University Careers Services
- Recruitment agencies
- Firms' own websites
- Lawcareers.net website- (Immediate Vacancies section)
- Other websites listed near the bottom of this handout

Legal recruitment agencies generally require students to possess 6 months paralegal experience.

Applying in Manchester

Many of the city's commercial firms have occasional vacancies. A speculative approach may also prove positive. Contact details can be found by using the "Find A Solicitor" function on the homepage of the Law Society's website (www.lawsociety.org.uk)

In addition, some high street practices recruit a paralegal with a view to the person becoming a trainee at a later stage. Such vacancies are usually sent direct to the School of Law or advertised in the Law Society's Gazette or on Lawcareers.net.

Local authorities, private companies (particularly the regional offices of banks and insurance companies), and the Crown Prosecution Service have the occasional openings for paralegals – more commonly known as legal assistants in local authorities, or caseworkers in the CPS.

Legal recruitment agencies in Manchester tend to carry a large no. of paralegal vacancies, but usually specify a requirement of 6 months' minimum previous paralegal experience. Without this experience, students will need to make speculative applications to firms.

The MMU School of Law Careers & Employability Advisor has a separate handout listing legal recruitment agencies in the Manchester area and a list of useful websites.

Applying in London/nationally

Here are some useful contact details.

Useful contact details

Legal Executive Recruitment
www.legal-executive-recruitment.com
 01234 845721

Prolaw
www.prolaw.co.uk
020 7786 6965

Legal Practice Clerks
www.lpc-law.co.uk
020 7090 1500

Chambers Professional Recruitment
020 7606 8844
www.chambersrecruitment.co.uk

Totally Legal
www.totallylegal.com
0845 468 0268

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