

Develop Your Credentials: Reach for Line Items

By Tracy Fitzgerald and Linda S. Jevahirian

The concept of resume building usually starts to enter your awareness somewhere between the first and fifth year of your career. While paralegals of all levels are aware of the need for this, students and those in the early stages of their career should be especially attentive to this truth.

Consider the average paralegal in the third year of his or her career. The resume typically consists of one page of education, experience, and some unaffiliated community service. And that is all. There is no mention of professional associations or continuing education to certify his or her skills. However, there are numerous options available for enhancing these areas. Even mid- to senior-level paralegals will want to consider ways to keep themselves up-to-date and relevant.

Education

Paralegals achieve education through two-year or four-year curricula, or through shorter certification programs. The American Bar Association approves paralegal programs that meet their educational objectives. The school programs are a balance of academic prerequisites, law-related classes and specialty law classes. The increased demand for paralegals has made qualified programs more readily available.

Certification

Once the required curriculum is completed, that is, *after the ink dries on this line item*, graduates may consider additional law specialty classes to fulfill the expectations of a certain subject area. Classes in this category include intellectual property, bankruptcy, estate planning, employee benefits and others.

Other line items might be law-related certifications and association involvement. Certificates generally require the study of a particular subject and the passing of a test. They confirm the learning of skills and knowledge, and they vouch for competency. They also demonstrate dedication and commitment to self-improvement.

According to Brian Francis of Brian Francis Associates in Southfield, "Clients today demand a high level of performance from their lawyers and vendors. Certification assures that persons handling the matter have the necessary training and education." Francis is an insurance litigation consultant and continuing education instructor at Lawrence Technological University and also provides instruction for the Associates in Personal Insurance (API) program to personnel of insurance companies, including State Farm and AAA. "Like any other professional group, lawyers want more than a good paralegal; they want a better-educated paralegal," says Francis.

Numerous specialty areas offer certification. One of the most important benefits is that they give your employer a direct means by which to evaluate your professional skills while assuring a high level of proficiency. Determine first which practice area you service. Then, do some simple research to find out what is available and what you need to do to complete the certificate. A few examples:

Real Estate

The experienced real estate paralegal might consider obtaining a real estate license, with no intention to sell or broker properties. As no direct experience is required for application for a real estate sales license, what better candidate than an experienced real estate paralegal?

The real estate sales license is a 40-hour program of approved pre-license education before taking the examination. Once licensed, the salesperson completes six hours of continuing education each year. During the three-year license renewal period this will equal 18 hours of continuing education.

A real estate broker's license requires at least 90 hours of approved real estate education courses within 36 months of license application. Once licensed, six hours of continuing education per year is required. Brokerage qualifies you to work as a sole proprietor or as an associate broker who qualifies as a broker but is licensed to work under another broker. To learn about real estate licensing in Michigan, see http://www.mortgagenewsdaily.com/real_estate_license/Michigan.asp.

Banking

Understanding banking and regulatory compliance is a golden opportunity in the current economy. The International Certificate in Banking Risk and Regulation offered by the Global Association of Risk Professionals (GARP) is designed to develop knowledge and understanding of banking risk, regulation and supervision. Paralegals who work in banking, regulatory agencies, consulting firms, government entities, central banks and academic institutions can benefit from this type of certificate. Further information is available at www.garp.com.

Insurance

Many paralegals who work in the insurance litigation field transition to positions in insurance companies, or in corporations as risk managers. Numerous single-based certificate courses and associate programs are available that cover areas of insurance services, claims, underwriting, bonding, auditing, risk management and regulation. More information about the programs can be found at www.aicpcu.org/Programs/CertificateCourses.htm.

Finance

Paralegals working in the securities field may be interested in taking courses in financial planning, or even going the extra mile to become a Certified Financial Planner (CFP). At least six colleges in Michigan offer certificate programs, including Oakland University and Walsh College. The courses impact several areas of discipline including investments, risk management, tax, employee benefits and estate planning. To read more about the testing requirements consult with the Certified Financial Planner Board of Standards Inc. or go to www.cfp.net

Construction

Consider the construction litigation paralegal who has passed the required examinations for application for a Michigan builder's license. The exam is divided into two parts that measure a person's knowledge of residential building, trades, business management, finances, and the Michigan laws and rules. After completing the 60-hour pre-licensure education requirement, you can obtain a Residential Builder and Maintenance & Alteration Contractor License application at the Builders Web site at www.michigan.gov/builders, under "Forms & Publications."

The applicant must meet all requirements for licensure before receiving approval by the Department to take the examination. PSI Services LLC at www.psiexams.com provides the registration and examination process. Continuing education is required to maintain the license. More information can be obtained from http://www.mich.gov/dleg/0,1607,7-154-35299_35414_35455-193789--,00.html.

Obtaining a builder's license does not qualify the paralegal to do plumbing, electrical or mechanical work. However, possessing the license itself is a unique and relevant validation for the construction litigation paralegal.

Technology

Litigation paralegals are sought not only by law firms and litigation support departments, but also by litigation support vendors – all of whom are managing an increasingly high volume of lawsuits. Clearly, the technology wave in litigation is creating opportunity for certification and advanced credentials.

Litigation support and case management software such as Summation, CaseMap, Trial Director and LiveNote all offer extensive end-user training and certification. For example, Summation offers the Certified CT Summation Trainer through its Web site, www.ctsummation.com.

As litigation continues to generate a significant amount of work, paralegals who possess mid- to high-level technical mastery of litigation support software and current certifications in this practice will be in high demand.

Accounting

An enrolled agent is a person who has earned the privilege of representing taxpayers before the Internal Revenue Service. Enrolled agents, such as attorneys and Certified Public Accountants (CPAs), are unrestricted as to which taxpayers they can represent, which types of tax matters they can handle, and in which IRS offices they can practice.

There are two tracks to becoming an enrolled agent, which are described in federal regulations contained in a pamphlet known as Treasury Department Circular 230, "Regulations Governing the Practice of Attorneys, CPAs, Enrolled Agents, Enrolled Actuaries, Enrolled Retirement Plan Agents and Appraisers before the Internal Revenue Service." More information is available at www.irs.gov/pub/irs-utl/pcir230.pdf.

Patrick Palis, J.D., CPA, of Palis & Associates in Dearborn says, "You can become an enrolled agent by demonstrating special competence in tax matters and passing an examination. A paralegal with an enrolled agent certificate would be able to play a significant role in a firm's tax practice department."

Associations

A more traditional line item includes association membership. Typically paralegals join state or county bar associations, or independent local or national paralegal organizations. If your goal is to reach beyond the ordinary, participation should be active and include regular attendance at meetings, publishing articles for the newsletter or for other journals, running for office, chairing committee projects, and looking for new ways to improve the organization. This kind of activity generates strong, image-building line items.

Consider starting up a new paralegal association. Local city bar associations, especially those where you have strong community ties, may show a special interest in having a paralegal membership, or simply the assistance of a civic-minded paralegal interested in serving its board members. Volunteer your assistance to a function to get your foot in the door and create a line item by doing so.

Networking

There are not enough hours in the day for the things we need to do, let alone the things we want to do. Professional development should be a priority. Networking has the potential to take you out of your daily box. It motivates and inspires, which makes way for the creative thinking required for unique line items.

Networking can also be a beeline to a new line item. Make your next paralegal function a line item – or make an important connection that will lead you to a new line item.

Conclusion

Line items are things that you own. They are your assets. To make them happen ask yourself, “How can I be more useful? How can I improve my career?” As with many other things, not all line items are created equal. The challenge is to determine which line items will best serve your specialty area and employer.

For paralegals who have failed to address their line items – and especially paralegal students and recent graduates, all of whom are building and inventing their career – a resume line item is worth the time and investment. Put your reputation on a line.

*The views expressed herein are the individual views of the authors and do not necessarily represent the view of the employers for which they work.

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