

Effortless Job? Not quite so easy for today's paralegals
by Denise Doherty and Chelsea Richardson

Article appeared in Michigan Lawyers Weekly on January 24, 2011

It's been over 40 years since paralegals were introduced to the legal profession and with the technological tools to assist the paralegals, they now do significantly more than preparing correspondence, pleadings, motions, research etc. They have become a more integral part of the legal team. With time, Attorneys have come to appreciate the benefit that technology can provide their practice, and rely on the assistance of their paralegal with all facets of litigation especially, pleadings and discovery, research and trial. .

Slowly, but surely, cases have become paperless by scanning and saving documents electronically which provides immediate access of all documents to all members on the legal team. This has eliminated the need for indexing files and looking for documents.

Research no longer requires going to the library to pull books off shelves and breaking book bindings try to copy cases and statutes at the copier. Paralegals have instant access to online resources that provide cases, statutes and research at the touch of a button. Professional organizations and research companies provide List-serves where information can be shared and databases can be accessed for a wealth of information that can be critical to the case.

At the time of trial, Attorneys understand that they need to effectively communicate their case to a jury and rely on their Paralegal to assist them in determining how best to present the information to the jury that is understandable and convincing. Over time, the tools that are available to the attorneys have evolved from paper drawings to large foam core boards to digital presentations, video animations, video conferencing and the list goes on. Paralegals are essential in the use of technology in the courtroom. As the Courts obtain the funding to update the courtrooms with technology, it has become the paralegals responsibility to determine what technology is available to them at Court and what is needed to best present their case. Typically, they set up the equipment in the courtroom and use projectors, object display cameras (ELMO), and trial presentation software to exhibit the digital presentations they either created or assisted in creating.

One of our litigation paralegals, recently assisted a team try a case in another state. The entire file was saved electronically and was available to each team member on their notebook computers. Foam boards, demonstrative aids, anatomical models, charts, drawings, medical records were displayed using the projector and digital fetal monitoring strips were played like a movie when expert witnesses were testifying on the stand at trial.

It's been said that attorneys are "linear thinkers", so paralegals that can offer knowledge and support of the "traditional" paralegal along with the expertise of a computer specialist and graphic artist, will provide the attorney the opportunity to "think outside the box" when it comes to managing their practice and preparing for trial.

Beyond technology, other aspects of the paralegals job remains important. Teamwork is critical. For example, when preparing for a trial, a larger team may include associates, partners, paralegals, secretaries and other administrative staff. In addition they are required to deal with outside parties including opposing counsel, experts and vendors. Not being a team player will most certainly negatively impact the attorney and their case.

Client relationships is key element of the paralegal's role. The paralegal must be the liaison between the client and attorney and must develop the trust and confidence of the client. Often, attorneys are out of the office and are not available to respond to the client, therefore, it becomes the paralegal's function to be available for the client. A paralegal with good interpersonal and communication skills can be the difference in the client relationship.

Paralegals have taken on significant responsibilities and as a result they are more involved and more valuable to the practice of law. A good paralegal may give the impression that the job is effortless, but we know that the demands of the job may be quite the juggling act.



Denise C. Doherty is the Marketing & Legal Administrator for Sommers Schwartz, PC. She has been with the firm for over 30 years. Denise is also very involved in the Association of Legal Administrators. She is the past president and the current Director of Business Partner Relations.



Chelsea Richardson is a Personal Injury Paralegal with Sommers Schwartz PC. She has been with the firm since 1997. Chelsea works with two of the firm's senior shareholders, Charles Ash and Anne Schoepfle.
