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The legal profession is notorious for its demands: long hours and hard work. During an era when much of the United States' workforce is trying to create a balance between work and home, paralegals still seem to be glued to their desks long after the sun sets. It's time for a change.

Thanks to a thriving economy and record-low unemployment, many paralegals have tremendous opportunities to switch jobs or negotiate new rules for current positions. Although some of these opportunities exist outside the walls of traditional legal employers, in today's market, legal professionals can design jobs that allow more flexibility, leading to a more balanced lifestyle.

YOU KNOW IT'S TIME FOR A CHANGE WHEN ...

It's 10 p.m., and you're still at work. Alone. And it's the third time this week. While paralegals work in a demanding profession, and long hours are expected, there are clear signals that indicate your life is off-kilter. If any of the items on this list ring true, then it may be time to reconsider your current career status:

- 1 You feel strong resentment toward the person who gave you the assignment.
You're the only one staying late.
- 1 You know that your extra workload is consistently due to the

attorney's lack of proper planning.

- ▶ Assignments aren't challenging and are often more administrative in nature.
- ▶ The supervising attorney doesn't recognize your commitment or the quality of your work. You only hear about mistakes and deadlines.
- ▶ You're only given piecemeal tasks without being shown the overall picture of a case.

Of course, there are classic symptoms that apply no matter what your profession. You may suddenly find yourself answering people tersely - even outside the workplace. You may have insomnia, feel irritable or depressed or experience low resistance to illness. A chronic disorder may flare up. Your body may be telling you something bad is going on.

There are other signs as well. Take a look at your personal workspace. How does it compare to that of other employees at the firm? While it's accepted that attorneys will have premium surroundings since clients often visit their offices, is your area significantly less attractive? Are you crowded into a corner with limited access to support services, such as copiers and fax machines? Does the unspoken message seem to be that you aren't valued?

While the state of your environment may be obvious, professional aspects of working relationships are

more difficult to assess. You may feel that the attorney you work with isn't responsive to you. Perhaps there is no attention to concerns you have about legal matters related to your cases. You may be given an opportunity to present your point of view, but it's not taken into consideration or you receive no feedback to help you understand why specific decisions were made. Your employer may have unrealistic expectations. Your employer isn't satisfied with the volume you're producing, even though you achieve your prescribed billable hours. You may be promised flexibility in your work schedule, but the offer is never fulfilled.

Sandra Yates, a legal assistant in the Atlanta office of N.Y.-based Fragomen, Del Rey, Bensen & Loewy, knew it was time for a change when she became bored with her previous job at a credit processing company. The company had begun outsourcing work Yates found stimulating.

"I really enjoy litigation," Yates explained. "I like dealing with the 'what ifs?'" As the company outsourced this function, she was assigned to negotiate contracts. "It wasn't for me," said Yates, who has 10 years of paralegal experience. "It didn't hold my interest." As a result, she became unhappy and found herself withdrawing from social activities. "If you're not happy with your job, it affects your whole life. It impacts your ability to be involved



Legal careers always time to enjoy life.

with friends. I just wanted to go home and be mundane."

Today, Yates tells a different story. Determined to make a change, she contacted a recruitment agency and found a position with a law firm. "My brain cells have started working again," she said with a laugh. "Now I get up in the morning and look forward to coming to work." Her enthusiasm extends beyond the office as well. She's taking classes two evenings a week - one to prepare for graduate school and another in Bible study. "I have this sudden burst of energy," she said, and her life is now back on track.

Yates paid attention to the signals indicating that it was time for a change and created a better situation for herself. Don't let yourself be lulled into thinking that immediate action isn't necessary. If you don't follow through on assignments, if you begin making mistakes and things begin slipping through the cracks, it's time for a career assessment. Paralegals have to be detail-oriented. Poor performance will lead to unsatisfactory evaluations and references. Obviously, you don't want to be forced into leaving; you want to be in control of your decision.

NOW IS A GOOD TIME TO TAKE THAT LEAP

The time for change has never been better. The U.S. economy is flourishing, and continued growth is expected.

Because unemployment is at a record low, it's difficult for U.S. employers to secure and retain qualified personnel.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, unemployment remains steady at 4.2 percent (for September 1999 - the most recent figures available), a rate that has remained essentially unchanged since last March. And there is job growth in the service sector as well, which gained 132,000 jobs during August 1999 - slightly above-average growth for the prior 12 months.

In fact, a report recently issued by the U.S. Department of Labor stated that the paralegal field is one of the top 10 fastest-growing professions in the 21st century, with 189,000 paralegals projected to be working throughout the country by 2006 (see "Future Work for Paralegals" on page 14 in this issue). This compares to an average growth rate of 14 percent for all professions.

This expansion is primarily due to a boom in litigation support, according to author and columnist Chere B. Estrin.

In her book, "Paralegal Career Guide" (Second Edition, Wiley Law Publications, 1996), she stated, "Just as the use of computers in the legal community has grown over the past 10 years, so has litigation support evolved. These days, it is no longer only large law firms that have in-house litigation support facilities. Medium-size and

small firms, even sole practitioners, utilize litigation support."

Skilled paralegals are in demand. Those with top-notch technical skills or solid experience in a specialty area have the greatest options and the best salaries. In the 1999 Technology Survey conducted by LEGAL ASSISTANT TODAY (see March/April 1999), paralegals who ranked their technology

KNOW WHEN YOU'RE WILLING TO COMPROMISE AND WHEN YOU'RE NOT.

skills as above-average earned an annual average of \$3,197 more than those ranking themselves as below-average.

Because of these factors, employers appear to be open to creative options for talented people. If you have the specific skills required, a prospective company or firm may consider the flexible hours or part-time position you desire to obtain balance in your life.

PACING YOURSELF FOR CHANGE

Before making the leap to a new job, evaluate your lifestyle and determine the source of your desire for change. Is it your job or another area of your life you want to alter? Remember, change is stressful and requires a lot of energy. You may be able to get what you want without switching employers. If you want to change your area of specializa-

tion, you may want to first market your skills within your firm. If you simply want more challenging assignments, inform your attorney that you're able and willing to handle new responsibilities. You may want to offer this request carefully, though, since attorneys might feel threatened that you'll take away their billable hours. One way to assuage this fear is to remind the attorney that he or she will thus have more time to address other projects.

If you decide to take the plunge, make time to assess the overall picture. Determine what you want from your

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career and know what amount of time you're willing to devote to work. This will make an enormous difference in the type of job you seek. A position with more responsibility often means more work. If you'd rather spend more time with your family than at work, a potential conflict exists. It pays to think through your priorities before commencing a search.

After determining your desired time commitment and how this relates to your other priorities, there are several crucial questions to ask yourself prior to developing a strategic plan:

1 What is your career passion?



What is it that you would really like to do?

- ▶ What do you like least?
- ▶ What skills do you possess? (Be honest here.)
- ▶ Do you want to continue working in the same legal practice area or transfer to another specialty?
- ▶ Do you want or need to move to a different-sized organization to accommodate your time commitment or specialty area?
- ▶ Do you want more, less or the same amount of responsibility?

The next step is to set short- and long-term goals. What do you want to accomplish during the next year? Five years from now? Develop a flexible plan to achieve those goals. Also, determine what resources exist to support this change. Examples include job banks, friends, colleagues, recruiters and, of course, the Internet.

According to Estrin's book, "Designing your new job is not a complicated matter. It is really an inventory of likes, dislikes, vision, motivation and capabilities. What can become complex is how the new position fits into your overall goal criteria: Where do I want to be in my career?"

Psychology plays an important role in planning a career change. As humans, we want to feel good about what we're doing. We have a need to achieve and to have our efforts recognized. When someone acknowledges our contributions, it has an energizing effect. Look for opportunities to work with people who are natural motivators. Their feedback can be much more meaningful than any tangible reward.

LIFE OUTSIDE THE LAW FIRM

Be creative. Don't immediately turn to another law firm without considering other options. Many companies hire paralegals as contract administrators or to work in non-traditional areas.

The banking industry needs legal assistants to handle compliance, regulatory, trust and estate issues. Other alternative career opportunities include insurance companies, information technology companies, research firms, legal publishers, staffing organizations and public relations firms.

Mortgage lenders, medical records summary services, commercial real estate developers, film and television companies, finance companies, non-profit organizations and paralegal edu-

cation programs also offer additional directions for you to consider.

Geography may be a consideration, as well as the availability of certain specialties. International and immigration law are expanding areas in many cities with large companies conducting global business. Careful examination of your local market and industries could help you to think beyond traditional choices.

When weighing your choices, you may want to consider positions that involve claims administration or companies that have compliance and regulatory departments. The Internet has also generated a need for specialists. You may want to consider using your talents to teach others. Due to the nature of their work, paralegals have excellent time management skills. Consider leading seminars about this or other similar topics.

EXPANDING FIRM OPTIONS

Even within law firms, job options for paralegals are expanding. To help control costs, some firms assign tasks to paralegals that were once solely within the domain of attorneys. Years ago, legal assistants were rarely seen by clients and almost never allowed to interact with them. Today, experienced paralegals not only participate in client meetings, but they are also visible in the courtroom, assisting during trials.

As new specialty areas grow, so do additional job opportunities. Consider the case of Marjorie Dunne, who works as an environmental specialist for King & Spalding. The firm was originally seeking someone with a background in chemistry or geology to fill the position, which requires extensive research and the technical ability to proficiently navigate the Internet. Dunne had no specific training in these specialties, but turned out to be unusually wellqualified for the position. Dunne, who is in her 50s, had just completed paralegal training and had previous experience as a teacher, family counselor and computer resource specialist. But it was her training and experience as a registered nurse that really set her apart.

Disappointed with the path the healthcare profession was following under managed care, Dunne was looking for a way to apply her skills. "The job had become too task-oriented," she said. "I was not utilizing my knowledge and assessment abilities. I wanted to do something more intellectually chat-

lenging." Always interested in the law, she decided to become certified as a paralegal. With a teacher's obvious ability to do research and a strong technical background in medicine, Dunne was more suited for the job than she thought. "It's everybody's dream that your variety of interests and talents will come together in a job," she remarked. "In my situation, having a recruiter helped. She looked at my resume and saw beyond my immediate focus. I now have the perfect job."

NEGOTIATING THE DEAL

The interview is an ideal opportunity to determine whether an employer is a good fit for you. Carefully craft questions to determine if you will be able to obtain what you want from your career through this position. Some items to consider asking the employer include:

- 1 How does the firm or department evaluate paralegals?
 - 1 How are outstanding contributions from paralegals recognized?
 - 1 Are there plans for growth in this department during the next year?
 - 1 Are additional hires expected?
 - 1 Can you speak with another paralegal in the group?
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- 1 How is work assigned?
 - 1 How can a successful legal assistant grow professionally in this firm/organization?
 - 1 How many billable hours are required?
 - 1 What are the long- and short-term objectives and results expected of this position?
What characteristics is the successful candidate most likely to possess for this position?
What is the management style of the firm or organization?
Is this a new position, and if not, why did the prior paralegal leave?

Don't address salary questions during the initial interview. If the discussion can't be avoided, don't state a number as you may either price yourself out of the position or underbid what they are willing to pay. You may want to respond with the statement, "If you think my experience matches what you're looking for, I would entertain your best offer."

During the negotiating process, demonstrate confidence and show your potential value to the organization. If the organization can't immediately

meet your salary requirements, consider a signing bonus or an accelerated review timeframe. Be enthusiastic and somewhat flexible.

Before deciding, make sure your choice follows your plan. Determine if you're getting adequate compensation and growth potential. Unfortunately, many legal firms create a compensation structure that appears to lead to an opportunity to earn more money, but actually sets the stage for job burnout. If the only way you can earn competitive wages is to spend extra hours on the job, they aren't doing you a favor.

STAYING OUT OF THE SAME OLD RUT

To keep from falling into the same old rut, you should continue to examine your career on a regular basis. It's a continuous process because motivated people are often consumed by work before they realize what happened. Know when you're willing to compromise and when you're not.

Take control of areas that you can change and continue to explore opportunities for your professional growth. Consider cross-training. Yates said this opened the door of opportunity in her case. In her former job, when a col-

league specializing in immigration law went on leave, Yates filled in for her for a year. It gave her enough background to be considered for her current position as an immigration specialist.

"Take the opportunity to learn as many facets of the law as you can," Yates recommended. "You don't know where it can lead down the road. I willingly accepted the opportunity and would never have thought it would lead to a job in a legal firm, but it did."

Be prepared, however, for requests to handle additional work. Knowledge may be power, but it also tends to extend your workload.

If problems do arise, such as expectations to work longer hours than usual, be sure to communicate with management before a pattern is established.

Designing a balanced lifestyle doesn't have to be complicated, but it does require a commitment to change and a strategic plan. It also can be fun. The possibilities are limited only by your own vision. **IM**

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