

# Measuring Up

## Getting ahead goes beyond billable



BY DOROTHY M. PRITCHETT

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How do you measure the value you bring to your law firm? Is it the number of billable hours? That is a goal anyone can achieve, provided he or she is willing to devote the time.

True value goes beyond timesheets. It's measured through knowledge, expertise and relationships with clients and staff.

Each of us has unique goals, values, skills and abilities. As paralegals, however, attorneys evaluate what we can do. We are measured, in part, by the knowledge we bring to our assignments. This knowledge may have been acquired from previous employment, academic training or from life experiences. The following paralegal success stories will help you pinpoint ways to ascertain your true value, measure up and get ahead.

### **Build on What You Have**

Skills acquired from a previous nonlegal career may jump-start your value as a paralegal. For example, one successful paralegal was a sales representative for a manufacturing company before she went to paralegal school. Prior to becoming a paralegal, she learned to take initiative, to formulate presentations, to address concerns up front and to meet new challenges. Those honed skills helped her excel at working effec-

tively with a diverse staff and multiple client personalities.

Before I began my paralegal career, I worked for a public opinion organization. I had to interview a randomly selected group of men and women from rural North Carolina about their views on topics such as satisfaction with the U.S. Postal Service and fast food preferences. I learned to listen and ask questions, and I frequently used these skills as a paralegal.

Just as I discovered, you too can learn to maximize transferable skills such as writing, teaching, selling, organizing, creating and solving problems. All are skills that you can use to create value in your career. The challenge is to discern the appropriate use of these skills and to demonstrate a willingness to accept tasks using these talents.

### **Emphasize Education**

Paralegal training gives you the academic knowledge needed to understand law and is part of the foundation needed to build a successful career.

When my clients consider hiring entry-level paralegals straight out of school, they usually ask, "How well did they do in paralegal school?"

Employers value dedication to academic excellence. Skills learned in paralegal school shorten your learning

curve after employment. For example, if you excel in your computer research class, you will be able to tackle on-the-job research assignments more quickly and efficiently, saving your firm time and money.

Once on the job, acquiring additional knowledge in your line of work increases your value to your employer. Teri Wall, a senior paralegal environmental specialist, increased her value by learning as much as possible about how her company manufactured its products. She volunteered to be part of the company's corporate environment audit program. Since her company has some 500 facilities scattered across the country, it was receptive to adding another member to the team.

Because of her involvement with the audit program, she learned more about the manufacturing process and could better serve her clients with that knowledge. Among many challenges she requested to be a part of, she also did the following:

- > Asked to be included in conference calls pertaining to her cases
- Volunteered to be the first line of contact with clients, so the attorneys would be free to do more substantial legal work
- Asked to be copied on all correspondence and documents related to her assignments
- Asked to attend all pertinent strategy sessions  
Requested to be involved with a task force doing a departmental presentation to the CEO on two high-profile cases

## Tips For Advanced Paralegals

### TO JUDGE YOUR VALUE, ARE YOU.

1. Selected for complex assignments that require creative solutions?
2. Included in strategy sessions with attorneys?
3. Supported in personal initiatives for professional growth?
4. Taken seriously about work issue concerns?
5. Compensated in line with local paralegal market?

### TO MEASURE UP AND GET AHEAD

1. Focus on effective ways to create a collaborative paralegal/attorney/staff approach to your assignments.
2. Develop an annual plan to increase skills with measurable goals throughout the year.
3. Seek assignments that require new skills and additional knowledge.
4. Request mentoring opportunities with less experienced paralegals.
5. Demonstrate leadership and initiative in assignments.
6. Analyze your contributions to the firm's cost effective delivery of legal services and provide the information at your review.

Volunteered to work with state agencies to develop a uniform procedure that would save money for her company.

### Extending Your Worth

Stephanie Simmons worked in the law library of her firm before she became a paralegal. Every month, Westlaw training representatives allotted free research time to the firm's employees, and Simmons made use of that time by performing research on current cases, rather than spending the time on training exercises.

Since Simmons did an outstanding job researching, she was given billable research assignments. She was praised for her creative use of the time and for the savings she generated for the client. You too can add value to your firm or corporation by getting involved and using your creative skills, as demonstrated by Wall and Simmons. If your creativity is directed toward saving money or time for the firm, you will automatically increase your value dramatically. Consider the following tips for other ways to increase your value and get ahead.

- > If you think you can reduce outsourcing costs, volunteer to do the projects yourself. If you find that you don't have the necessary skill set, notify your supervisor immediately and point out that, although you were not able to complete the project, you were able to accomplish some of your objectives and identify your learning through this process.

> Appreciate the importance of accuracy and the scope of the project. It's just as important to be accurate with your non-billable projects as it is with your billable assignments. Your value will not be enhanced if your work product doesn't meet the firm's standards. Don't second-guess your supervisor about moving forward with projects that have been put on the back burner.

➤ Have a thorough understanding of the issues presented in your cases, so that you can assist in developing strategies for successful challenges.

Sometimes, however, it's a challenge to find a supervisor who will appreciate your contributions. If you feel frustrated in your efforts to become a meaningful part of the department, ask yourself the following:

- Am I communicating effectively with this person? How could I be more effective?
- Do I have a clear understanding of what my supervisor values and expects from me?
- Am I focusing on the applicable information to make meaningful contributions?
- Have I performed previous assignments with a consistently high quality of work?

### Be a People Person

Teamwork is one of the most consistent factors paralegals say they want from their work environment.

Stephen R. Covey, the author of "Principle-Centered Leadership," discusses in his book how individuals and organizations can increase quality and productivity by having an appreciation for the importance of building professional relationships. Positive professional relationships, according to Covey, can thrive in an atmosphere of free interaction, where being well informed about the realities of a particular situation and feeling free to express yourself without fear of censure, or embarrassment are encouraged.

You may be evaluated at review time on your ability and willingness to:

- > Understand and appreciate the responsibilities of other members of the firm or your department
- > Trust other members of your team
- > Understand the culture of the organization and contribute to their goals and expectations

- > Participate in problem solving for the group
- > Participate in *pro bono* activities and other non-billable projects sponsored by the firm
- Have flexibility with your schedule to meet deadlines.

A paralegal's value is also measured in relationships with clients. In this day of half-hearted customer service, we get excited when someone does more than expected. When you listen to client concerns and then follow-up with appropriate actions, the client feels he or she is being heard and you have created value for yourself and the firm. By providing a conduit for communication, you are not only validating the client, but your care and concern may help the client to better understand what is happening - you make a difference.

### **Get Ahead With a'Can Do' Attitude**

Your value is measured by how effectively you use and gain additional knowledge, how creatively you solve problems and how willing you are to support other staff members. You are measured by your contribution to the total work product of the firm and by your "can do" attitude.

Clients and attorneys have increased their expectations for paralegals, which raises the bar for adding value. Clients are savvy about the role of paralegals and, therefore, they demand greater service, detailed explanations of the legal process and greater accountability for legal fees. Most attorneys also have higher expectations for paralegals - a more inclusive view to give paralegals greater responsibilities. Along with increased responsibilities comes a greater demand for high quality and seamless service to clients. These trends all provide tangible options for you to prove your value to your firm or corporation.

Value goes hand in hand with success. I don't have a single magic formula to assure that you will receive a higher salary, gain recognition from your peer and firm management or find satisfaction in your career. However, I would endorse a formula from the authors of "Gung Ho!," Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowies. They cheer you on to greater success with:  $E=mc^2$  -Enthusiasm equals mission times cash and congratulations. 1111

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