

Practice Note 3

Joining the Paralegal Profession

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1. Who We Are

This Practice Note 3 is produced by the [Institute of Paralegals](http://www.theIOP.org). We are the oldest incorporated professional body for paralegals in the whole of the United Kingdom. A not-for-profit organisation, we are recognised by the UK government. The Institute is your professional home if you are a paralegal, aspiring paralegal, law student or paralegal law firm whether based in the UK, Hong Kong or internationally. We set the competency standards for paralegals and legal secretaries, issue legal qualifications and work with government, e.g. to promote apprenticeships to the legal profession. Please visit www.theIOP.org for more information.

2. Other Practice Notes

Other Practice Notes available are:

- a) Practice Note 1 – Prohibition on providing reserved activity services
- b) Practice Note 2 - Setting up a paralegal business/law firm

- c) Practice Note 4 – The route to qualification career path
- d) Practice Note 5 – Client engagement letters

3. Prospects

It is a very good time to be thinking about entering the paralegal profession and becoming a professional legal practitioner. The paralegal profession is one of the fastest growing in the country and right now thousands of paralegal vacancies are being advertised on the Internet and through specialist legal recruitment agencies.

4. Can You Become a Paralegal?

Be careful of anyone telling you that you must do training (or join them as a member) before you can become a paralegal. This is incorrect. The paralegal profession is mostly unregulated and therefore you become a paralegal simply by getting a job as a paralegal. There is no qualification you need to have first, nor course you must take - you do not even need to be a member of the Institute of Paralegals (although we highly recommended membership if you are serious about being a professional legal practitioner).

5. What Employers Want

First and foremost employers want people with some relevant prior experience. This is because experienced people need less training and can begin handling cases quicker. As a second-best alternative, employers usually give preference to people with relevant practical training that has taught them how to actually do the job in question.

We say ‘relevant practical training’ to differentiate such ‘practice and procedure’ courses from those law courses which, although they may be very good courses, are not teaching the things that employers’ value. The four types of course which are most often (but not always - it boils down to the personal opinion of the relevant employer) considered less relevant are:

Practice and procedure courses in the wrong area of law (you have done a course in conveyancing practice and procedure, but are applying for a job as a criminal litigation paralegal. Employers will pretty much ignore the conveyancing course)

Academic training which cannot be applied to the workplace very easily. Most law degrees and Masters degrees in law fit into this category.

Courses which cover a wide variety of different practice areas at introductory level. Paralegal specialise. Your employer will want you to be a conveyancing paralegal or a probate paralegal or a criminal litigation paralegal etc. Practical training in the relevant area is valuable, training in irrelevant areas is, well, irrelevant! Also, such courses tend to be more academic than practical. Even when they do cover the relevant area, there is rarely enough time to do it properly.

Similar concerns to those above exist about short courses of one week etc which involve such largely pointless exercises as visiting a court.

So although you are not obliged to do any legal training, and can apply for entry-level jobs right now, doing the right legal course should considerably increase your chances of getting an entry-level paralegal job.

Please note we say “should increase your chances” not “definitely will increase your chances”. Again contrary to what some course providers will tell you, there are no courses which will guarantee you a job as a paralegal. What you are doing is increasing your chances of success.

6. Work Out Which Area of Practice Interests You

Paralegals tend to specialise in one area of practice. The main areas in which paralegals work in solicitors’ firms are:

Civil Litigation
Commercial Property

Company Law
Debt Recovery
Employment Law
Family Law
Mortgage Repossessions
Personal Injury
Residential Conveyancing
Wills and Probate

The job of a paralegal differs dramatically depending on the practice area. A residential conveyancing paralegal will rarely have face-to-face contact with clients, and will constantly be working to immovable deadlines. A paralegal handling probate matters will mostly have a desk-bound job which is much less time-pressured. A paralegal doing criminal law work may find himself/herself regularly attending police stations and courts and dealing with suspected criminals, whereas a paralegal doing personal injury work will usually deal with ordinary members of the public who slipped on split yoghurt in their local supermarket etc.

Because the jobs are very different, it is important that you do some research first to see which area interests you, and whether you think you have the aptitude for it: for example not everyone is comfortable representing people accused of crimes.

Since the jobs are so different, it follows that anyone sending in an application to a law firm just asking for any vacancy as a paralegal doing any type of law will not impress. Also, individual departments within solicitors' firms are often run semi-autonomously, and so the hiring decision may well lie with the head of department and not the senior or managing partner of the entire firm. Smart applicants work out what area of law they want to work in and then identify solicitors' firms doing that type of law, and write direct to the relevant head of department.

7. Do a Good Practical Course in Your Chosen Practice Area

It also follows from the above that if you do want to do a training course, you need to do one in the relevant practice area. Doing a course on probate law, no matter how good, will not impress people if you start applying for jobs as a debt recovery paralegal!

The only type of training that solicitors' firms really value is practical training which gives you the knowledge and skills that you would have gained from practical experience – i.e. the skills they need you to have on a daily basis.

Paralegals are “doers” – they advise suspects in criminal matters; they incorporate companies; they complete and submit very important official documentation; they interview witnesses to get essential information. Generally speaking none of these things are taught on academic courses such as law degrees, Masters Degrees and the Graduate Diploma in Law. Accordingly, do not be surprised if any academic qualifications you have do not overly impress, regardless of how excellent they are. Employers would generally prefer you to have done a vocational course that taught relevant practice and procedure of one area of law in detail.

So if you do wish to do a course, which one would we recommend? We do not offer training ourselves. However this does allow us to review the courses on offer from various providers and recommend the best.

8. Recommended Courses for Beginners

The courses that we currently think are the best available in the country for people with no previous legal training and/or legal work experience are:

- 8.1. The two courses run by *Ashley Taylor Legal Training* which lead to the following qualifications (NB: these courses are designed to teach you all you will need to know about County Court claims relating to debt recovery enforcement or mortgage repossessions. They can be taken by beginners because they assume you have no prior knowledge. However, they are also extremely good for experienced practitioners because they cover all the aspects of bringing such claims).

The LPQ Certificate in Mortgage Repossession Practice

For more information visit <http://www.ashleytaylors.co.uk/ashley-taylors-legal-training>

The main features are ● both very good courses ● both lead to a recognised legal qualification ● also recognised by most employers ● run as home-learning so you can take a course wherever you live (even if not in the UK) ● study at times to suit you ● progress at the pace you are comfortable with ● tutor support provided ● typically takes one year to complete but can complete much quicker if spend more time studying ● assumes no prior legal knowledge on your part.

8.2. The BTEC Advanced Diploma in Paralegal Work

There are 11 different courses, each one of which leads to a BTEC Advanced Diploma. You can find full details about them at www.paralegaldistancelearning.co.uk/btechome

The main features are: ● very good courses ● government recognised qualification ● also recognised by most employers ● run as a home-learning programme so you can take a course wherever you live (even if not in the UK) ● study at times to suit you ● progress at the pace you are comfortable with ● tutor support provided ● takes approximately six months' to complete ● does not assume any prior legal knowledge on your part.

9. Recommended Courses for Those with Prior Legal Training/Experience

The courses that we currently think are the best available in the country for people who already have legal training and/or legal work experience are:

- 9.1. The two courses run by *Ashley Taylor Legal Training* which lead to the following qualifications (NB: these courses are designed to teach you all you will need to know about County Court claims relating to debt recovery enforcement or mortgage repossessions. They can be taken by beginners because they assume you have no prior knowledge. However, they are also extremely good for experienced practitioners because they covered all the aspects of bringing such claims).

The LPQ Certificate in Debt Recovery (Enforcement) Practice
The LPQ Certificate in Mortgage Repossession Practice

For more information visit www.ashleytaylors.co.uk/ashley-taylors-legal-training

The main features are ● both very good courses ● both lead to a recognised legal qualification ● also recognised by most employers ● run as home-learning so you can take a course wherever you live (even if not in the UK) ● study at times to suit you ● progress at the pace you are comfortable with ● tutor support provided ● typically takes one year to complete but can complete much quicker if spend more time studying ● assumes no prior legal knowledge on your part ● are also designated as “Mandatory Courses”, which means that you would have to take one of them if you ultimately want to progress to becoming a Qualified Paralegal with the Institute (the top level of the four stage Route to Qualification for career paralegals).

- 9.2. The nine courses run by the University of the West of England in conjunction with Central Law Training, which lead to a Specialist Paralegal Qualification Award from the University. The nine course options cover:

Civil litigation practice
Commercial property practice
Company law practice
Debt recovery practice
Employment law practice
Family law & practice
Personal injury practice
Residential conveyancing practice
Wills, probate and administration practice

The main features are ● a very good course ● government recognised qualification ● also recognised by most employers ● run as home-learning so you can take a course wherever you live (even if not in the UK) ● study at times to suit you ● progress at the pace you are comfortable with ● tutor support provided ● approximately 12-18 months' to complete ● assumes some prior legal knowledge on your part.

NB: You do not have to wait until you have completed any of the above courses before applying for jobs. The very fact that you are studying one of them will be of value (and speak volumes) to prospective employers. With luck employers will support you by picking up part of the cost.

For more information see www.paralegaldistancelearning.co.uk/UWE2

There are, of course, other providers on the market. You can view courses run by other recommended providers on our website: www.theiop.org/training/list-of-all-recommended-paralegal-courses.html

10. Join the Institute

There are many good reasons why you should apply to join the Institute - today.

However right now the main benefit is that it will help you find work, because telling prospective employers that you are a member of the Institute signals to them that you are already on the paralegal career path and serious about being a professional legal practitioner.

11. Benefits of Membership

If you are looking for your first job as a paralegal, then the main benefit of Institute membership is that it will improve your chances of getting work. It will do this in four different ways:

- As the profession is unregulated there is no particular standard that you have to meet - basically, your application has to look more attractive than those of the other applicants. It is like the old joke about two campers whose campsite is attacked by a bear. One camper begins to run off barefoot. The other stops to put his shoes on. The first camper says "Why are you bothering to do that, you can't outrun a bear! The other camper replies "No. I just had to out run you!" By being able to demonstrate to prospective employers that you are already plugged into "the system" and are already a member of the professional body for paralegals, then you will already be ahead of the numerous applicants who cannot demonstrate that they have already taken tangible steps/made any positive commitments to becoming a professional paralegal.
- Our IOP Newsstand member benefit will give you regular, plain English, updates on legal developments/issues. You can choose to receive updates on up to circa 40 different practice areas. This way, when you go for an interview you will be able to demonstrate relevant, up-to-date practice knowledge.
- Our monthly e-Journal, The Paralegal, will provide you with essential news about developments in the legal and paralegal professions. Again this could help you significantly when applying for positions because you will have insider information unavailable to most other applicants.
- Members can seek careers advice from us at any time.

In addition to the above benefits, we also offer our extensive member benefits program, called *IOP Plus*. This offers you discounts on over 50 goods and services that you might actually use. If you use any one of the top 12 discounts on offer it will save you more than the cost of your annual membership. Member benefits include:

Savings of hundreds of pounds a year through *IOP Plus* (NB not all offers open to members outside the UK)
Being part of a profession instead of just having an occupation
Pursuing a recognised career path instead of just having a job
Receiving essential monthly information about what is happening in the paralegal world through receipt of The Paralegal – the de facto "newspaper of record" for the paralegal profession
Free reciprocal membership of the New York City Paralegal Association

Access to the IOP Newsstand – the Institute’s law and market update service
Receiving free editions of the IOP Competency Standards for Paralegals
Obtaining a recognised professional designation
Eligibility for potential membership of Resolution; Interlaw, Sovil and other lawyers groups
Eligibility for membership of the Royal Overseas League club
Access to the pastoral support services offered by LawCare (not open to Affiliate members)
Discount on subscriptions to the New Law Journal
Discounts on LexisNexis services
Access to template paralegal practice documents (e.g. sample engagement letter)
Receipt of free Practical Careers Advice series of emails
Access to the Members' email enquiry service
Formal right to countersign passport applications
Letters after your name (Certified and Qualified Paralegals only plus overseas Associate Paralegals)

For a list of benefits please see: www.theiop.org/membership/Summary-of-Benefits.html

12. Membership Grades and Cost

UK Membership costs:

Affiliate member:	£39 for 12 months
Associate Paralegal	£79 for 12 months
Qualified Paralegal	£119 for 12 months
Fellow Member:	£139 for 12 months

Different prices apply to Hong Kong members and overseas members – open the relevant application form below for details.

13. Apply Online or Download an Application Form

You can apply online today or download an application form for later:

Live in the UK – see www.theiop.org/membership/how-to-join/uk-applications.html

Live in Hong Kong – see www.theiop.org/membership/how-to-join/HK-Members.html

Live anywhere else - see www.theiop.org/membership/how-to-join/Join-As-An-International-Member.html

Which Professional Designation Are You Eligible to Apply for?

Full details can be found on our web site by visiting <http://www.theiop.org/membership/how-to-join/General-Information.html>.

Membership at any of the four grades automatically puts you on the internationally recognised career path for paralegals, the [Route to Qualification](#).

We appreciate it can be tricky to work out what membership grade is appropriate for you. We therefore warmly welcome enquiries. Tell us what legal work you have done (if any) and any legal qualifications you have (if any) and we’ll be delighted to advise you. Email annie@theiop.org.

14. Audit Yourself Against the IOP Competency Standards

Employers want much more from paralegals than just technical legal knowledge. They want other non-legal skills such as the ability to team work and having business awareness: many of which you may well already possess.

Please visit the standards section of our website for more information and to download the standards for free by [clicking here](#).

Once there, download a set of the Introductory Level IOP Competency Standards for Paralegals. These are the standards that the legal profession itself has said it wants from paralegals at the beginning of their careers (i.e. entry level paralegals).

What many aspiring paralegals do is mark up the standards with the skills and knowledge they already possess and send a copy to prospective employers as this showcases their abilities in great detail. It also shows them as being well informed about the paralegal profession (i.e. that they know ahead of most new entrants that the standards exist!).

Many paralegals already in work give a copy to their employers and use it as a basis for discussions about career and training development.

15. Find the Solicitors Firm, Trademark Firm, Licensed Conveyancers Firm etc for You

There are eight groups of lawyers regulated under the Legal Services Act 2007. Five of them use paralegals:

- Solicitors
- Trade Mark Agents
- Patent Agents
- Law Costs Draftsmen
- Licensed Conveyancers

The representative or regulatory bodies for each of these groups is a good starting place to find relevant potential employers in your area. For example, if you visit www.lawsociety.org.uk/choosingandusing/findasolicitor.law you have the option of searching for solicitors firms by reference to their name, geographical location or practice area.

Remember, many firms delegate the hiring of paralegals to the relevant department. Therefore it is usually better to find the name of the Head of the particular department that you wish to work in, and write direct to him/her. If the firm does not have departments then write to the Managing Partner – but take the trouble to find his/her name first!

16. Look Beyond Solicitors' Firms Went Job Hunting

There are approx 44,000 paralegals working in solicitors' firms, but perhaps four times that number working in other sectors of the economy: commerce and industry; central and local government; charities; the military; the not-for-profit sector etc.

There are also circa 6,000 paralegal law firms.

Paralegal jobs in these other sectors tend not to be called paralegals. They have numerous other titles: contracts manager, legal adviser, housing assistant, trademark clerk, manager etc.

Job titles are not important, look at the legal work the job vacancy entails.

Ultimately all that counts is that you have good-quality legal work experience. Nor does it matter to future employers whether you gained your experience through paid employment or voluntary work.

17. Make Your CV Work

Your CV has only one role - to (honestly) show prospective employers that you have relevant skills, experience, aptitude, etc. However most CV's are bland hit-and-miss summaries of people's lives. Implicitly, such CV's rely on prospective employers to read them in detail and to work out for themselves why you might be the right person for the job. This is a mistake: employers generally have neither the time nor interest in doing a forensic analysis of a CV.

We suggest that you rewrite your CV so that as far as possible for each entry your CV maps against either the IOP Competency Standards or the particular skills, knowledge and aptitude required of paralegals in the practice area in which you want to work.

18. Make Your Covering Letter Work For You

Covering letters accompanying CVs, or e-mails to which CVs are attached are extremely important. If they are poor then the chances are that the employer will not bother looking at your CV. Our tips are:

- Follow convention. Any covering letter should be formal and have your address and the recipient's name and address on it. The contents should be brief - do not repeat the contents of your entire CV. Your CV is a bunch of dispassionate facts. Your covering letter is a chance to show you. Use it to show your enthusiasm, detailed research or exceptional news, qualities or qualifications that you want to highlight.
- Make sure your introductory paragraph is as powerful as possible and so will make the reader want to read on. A very good *opening paragraph* would be one which showed that: you were already connected with the paralegal profession; knew what you want to do and highlighted that you have relevant experience, skills or training. For example:

“Dear Mr Waddington,

Re Application to be a Debt Recovery Paralegal in XZY, Solicitors

I am very keen to become a debt recovery paralegal and am writing to you as XYZ's debt recovery department has an extremely good reputation. I have a modest amount of relevant practice experience and have been awarded Registered Paralegal status by the Institute of Paralegals. I am currently studying for the LPQ Certificate in Debt Recovery (Enforcement) Practice. As you will see from the attached set of Competency Standards for Paralegals, I believe I already meet 63% of the required skills/knowledge which the profession itself has said it wants from entry-level paralegals like me.”

We would hope that if the recipient had an opening for an entry-level debt recovery paralegal that they would at least be impressed enough to take your application seriously.

19. Look at the Totality of Your Application

Nowadays employers often receive huge numbers of applications. When that happens, they often look for reasons to reject applicants. Your application can therefore fail without the employer even getting to look at your CV! Even if the following do not automatically lead to rejection of your application, they will have almost certainly damaged your chances:

- Unprofessional e-mail addresses: employers want mature people who show good judgement. Your maturity may be called into question, and certainly your judgement will be, if in a professional situation where you are trying to impress you use a fun personal e-mail address (ilovewine@....), or one which makes an important statement (hurtbutsurviving@....) or somebody else's address (Sandra M's email coming from johncooper@...).
- Inconsistency regarding your name: we see this surprisingly often. For example, an email will be from helenbatters@, but the covering letter will be signed by Helen Foreman and the CV will be from Helen Butters Foreman. Stick to the expected format: first name then family name. Leave out the middle name.
- Formatting, spacing etc in both the CV and covering letter. If these things are very poorly formatted, spaced etc and/or just difficult to read because of the way they have been written then you are telling a prospective employer that you will produce equally poor documents for him/her if you get the job!

20. Review What You Can Offer Prospective Employers

Many paralegals do specialist work for clients in a particular sector of the economy. If you have knowledge of that sector, or possibly even contacts within it, then that is valuable to prospective paralegal employers. If you have spent the past few years working in, say, the NHS then your knowledge of the NHS, its terminology, procedures, the hierarchy and operational challenges may well be very valuable to a solicitors' firm acting for patients with claims against the NHS. Similarly if you were born overseas then your knowledge of the language, culture and business

environment of your country of origin may be very useful to the legal department of a company doing business there or a law firm with clients there or doing business there.

21. Understand What is Happening in the Paralegal/Legal World

If you are becoming a paralegal many employers will expect you to know what is happening in the legal and paralegal worlds – both are currently subject to great change. For example, did you know that since 2009 paralegals can be partners in solicitors' firms?

Finding out about what is happening is very difficult as there are not many public sources of information. The best way to find out what is going on is to subscribe to the leading paralegal journal – *The Paralegal* - which is free and published monthly. Unless you request otherwise, I will send your name to the Editor for inclusion on the mailing list. Every issue has essential information for aspiring and practicing paralegals. See www.theParalegal.org

22. Visit the Institute's Careers Section of the Website

To get in-depth advice on paralegal careers generally, and insider tips on how to locate jobs and apply for them, please visit our site - the leading careers advice website for paralegals by [clicking here](#).

23. Network Online

Join the professional's networking site www.Linkedin.com for free. Once you have done that join, again for free, a group called the Paralegal Forum run by the Institute. There you will find information, contacts and a place where you can let people know that you are looking for work.

24. Play to Your Strengths

Broadly speaking, employers are looking for strength in three categories:

- a) Legal/procedural skill – e.g. do you know how to do a conveyance of a house?
- b) General professional skills - do you have business awareness? Are you good at interviewing people? Can you work well in a team? Etc
- c) Relevant non-legal practice area information or skills - good legal practitioners need to understand their clients and the markets their clients operate in. So a solicitors' firm specialising in medical negligence work will be interested in any paralegal applicant who has experience of working in, say, the NHS. A firm that does work for a computer company will value a paralegal applicant who has knowledge or at least a strong interest in computing. A firm advising German companies in the UK are more likely to value a paralegal who can read and write German, etc. Look at your non-legal experiences, skills, knowledge and contacts and if they are strong then it makes sense to try and locate an employer who can make use of them.

25. Contact Us



INSTITUTE OF
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We hope this introductory careers advice information helps!

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