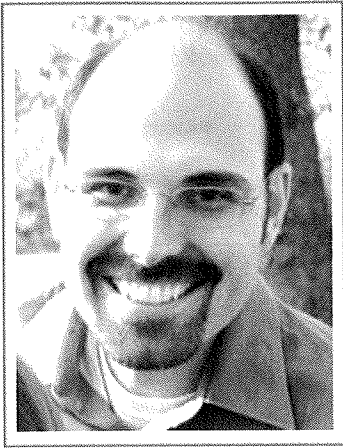


# “So, What Does a Paralegal Do, Exactly?”

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I cannot tell you how many times I have been asked that question. At first, when I was a freshly minted paralegal, I would recite a robotic statement found in most basic paralegal textbooks. It was long and corny, but it worked (or so I thought). After a few months of answering the question, my answers got much shorter. “Paperwork.” Or “Documents, lots of documents.” Recently, it

dawned on me that I had somehow allowed myself to get in a rut. I was doing a poor job of explaining what I do. I thought to myself: Why? I enjoy what I do immensely. It is at times challenging, at times exciting, and always rewarding. However, in my zeal to avoid talking to people I didn’t know at social functions, I made the job description as short and unappealing as possible. It helped me avoid small talk, but did nothing for my profession. I decided I needed to do a better job of representing the paralegal profession to outsiders. So I went back to square one: *The NALA Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibility*, found at <http://www.nala.org/code.aspx> and square two: *The Model Standards and Guidelines for the Utilization of Legal Assistants*, found at <http://www.nala.org/model.aspx>.

The Code of Ethics consists of ten “Canons.” Each canon deals with an ethical responsibility that every paralegal must uphold in his or her career. Some are specific to paralegals, such as Canon 5, requiring paralegals to disclose their status as a paralegal to clients, court staff, etc., to avoid misrepresenting themselves and their employer. Some apply to attorneys as well, like Canon 10, which states we are bound by the same bar association ethical and professional rules as attorneys. In all honesty, most apply to everyone in a law office setting; Canon 7, for example, regarding the obligation to maintain client confidentiality at all times.

The Model Standards are geared more towards the effective and legally allowed use of paralegals by employers. The Model Standards include the widely accepted definition of a paralegal and the educational and training standards for becoming a paralegal; as well as “guidelines” to assist employers and paralegals in defining the job duties and responsibilities of a paralegal. (In effect, the Model Standards explain the Canons listed in the Code of Ethics in more

detail.) They also provide information on case law and commentary where issues concerning the use of paralegals have come before the court.

Now, let’s go back to the question at hand. I reviewed the Code and Model Standards and decided I needed a catchy way to shorten them to allow me to a) remember the good stuff and b) not bore the listener. After all, it is a good deal of information. So I came up with my “Code and Model Standards for Dummies” translation. Keep in mind this is not an official description, nobody has endorsed it or accepted it. It is merely my feeble attempt to wrap up all the details of what a paralegal does in a nice neat little bow for the non-legal person. So now, when asked the age old question “So, what does a paralegal do, exactly?”; I can respond with a short, easy to understand yet accurate description of what I do: “I use my legal education and continued training to perform a large number of tasks for attorneys under their supervision to assist with providing efficient and cost-effective legal services for clients in an honest and ethical manner according to the rules of the profession.” When they ask for details or, or what that really means, I can come back with: “This includes client meetings, witness interviews, drafting legal documents and correspondence, legal research, fact investigation and reviewing and summarizing important legal documents, and other necessary tasks needed to bring a case to resolution.”

Well, I may not say it word for word, but that is the best definition I could come up with. It isn’t overly loquacious and confusing, nor is it mundane and boring. I won’t spend 15 minutes at a party speaking to someone I don’t even know and watching their eyes glaze over. I also won’t give a three-second explanation that leaves people thinking: “Man that sounds like a terrible job.” I think it works, but I am interested in hearing what others have to say about it. How do YOU explain your profession to others?

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