

Did You Choose Your Practice Area, or Did Your Practice Area Choose You?

When you first began working as a paralegal, did you know what practice area you wanted to work in?

Do you like what you're doing all day in your current paralegal job?

If you don't like the practice area you're currently working in, how easy is it to move into a new area?

These are all questions I asked myself when I started on my paralegal journey.

When I was young, I naively assumed that most attorneys were litigators, researching and building their cases and spending most of their time in courtrooms. I had never given much thought to all of the various areas of law in which one could practice. Then later, as a residential realtor, I worked with attorneys who specialized in Real Property law, and I participated in residential real estate closings literally on the other side of the table. When I first started my paralegal program, I didn't know that certain fields of law even existed: Elder law, Intellectual Property law, Tribal law, to name a few. I realized then that there are a whole group of practice areas I had never even thought of, and that many attorneys don't even step foot into a courtroom.

After receiving my paralegal certificate, my initial focus area was on Family law. I'm not married and I have no children, so I thought I could be fully objective and not get too emotional about each case. However, as it turns out, the first legal job I was offered (and which I happily accepted!), was at a reputable local Immigration law firm. I knew nothing about Immigration law other than heated issues in the news. While there, I learned everything I needed to know about immigration to do my job well.

Maybe you accepted the first legal job you were offered (and who could blame you in this economy?) So you fell into your current practice area by default. Or maybe you had the luxury of time and held out for an opportunity in your chosen practice area. Either way, there are bound to be some things you like and some things you don't like about your current job.

As Harrison Barnes, Esq. states in his article on www.bcgsearch.com entitled "*Changing Your Practice Area*":

"In a lot of respects, the path attorneys take to joining a particular practice area is nothing short of insane. Most attorneys interview for summer-associate jobs, take the best summer job they can get, and join a particular firm without much thought as to what practice area they will be in."

Although his article is geared towards attorneys, I believe this applies to paralegals as well. Especially in this economy, we often take the first legal position we are offered, thankful to have a job, paying no mind to whether the position is in the ideal practice area of our choice.

So, what if you truly wish you were doing something different every day than you are currently doing? What if you are a corporate paralegal, but really want to be in a courtroom daily? What if you have a passion for commercial real estate, but you are working in a small law firm specializing in wills and

trusts? What if you work for a solo practitioner's family law practice, but you want to work in the legal department of a global corporation?

Barnes goes on to say:

"It is difficult to switch practice areas, but it can be done. Your ability to switch practice areas will depend upon your academic background, the length of time you have practiced, the law firm you are with, the condition of the legal-job market, the market demand of the practice areas you want to leave and enter, your geographic location, and perhaps pure luck."

There are so many factors to consider when switching jobs, let alone, when switching entire practice areas. Think long and hard about your personal "brand", how you choose to define yourself, what gets you excited, and what makes you proud. Before making a blind leap, realize that there is so much more to a job than just the salary. This change is not to be taken lightly and you want to make sure that you not only will be happier in a new practice area, but also that this new area compliments your skills and interests for the long haul.

If you are not satisfied with the job duties of your current position, how do you go about changing your practice area? Like any important decision, it takes thought, focus, planning, perhaps additional training, and, like Harrison Barnes, Esq. said above, a little pure luck couldn't hurt either. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

1. **Take CLE classes in the practice area you are interested in.** As paralegals, many of us are required to take a certain number of hours of CLE (Continuing Legal Education) per year in order to keep our certification status. Try to find some CLE offerings in the areas of law that you're interested in. Even if you take more than your required number of hours, you should be able to find classes in your new practice area of interest.
2. **Network and explore new relationships.** We have so many avenues available to us to connect with paralegals in other practice areas and in other cities. Try websites, such as LinkedIn.com or Meetup.com. Join local and state-wide legal associations and get involved and meet other members. Reach out to paralegals already working in the practice areas you are interested in. Invite them to lunch or out for coffee, or a friendly phone call, if they're in another city. They can be a great resource for you. They can give you insight into that practice area you'd like to move to and they can let you know what it is really like to work in that area day-to-day.
3. **Through your networking, try to find a mentor.** A mentor is a wonderful asset to your career. This can be another paralegal or even an attorney with whom you choose to develop a professional relationship. Mentors are wonderful people to brainstorm with, share your thoughts and ideas with, and they can offer advice and guide you along your path.
4. **If possible, do an internship or volunteer in the practice area you are interested in.** You can gain exposure to and meet people already working in your area of interest. The experience you

gain and the people that you meet in this new practice area will be very valuable in assisting you to secure a new paralegal position in your new practice area of interest.

5. **Research and read.** Then research and read some more. Go to a law library or search online for relevant information and cases in your new practice area. While reading through the information you find, think about how the important issues resonate with you. If you truly get excited, this could be the right path for you.

You can probably think of many other ways to make this transition successful. There are so many opportunities available for you to be truly happy and fulfilled with your working life.