

In Praise of the Paralegals

Their Work Has Evolved, and It's Now Vital to the Success of Any Firm

Paralegals Maureen C. Carneiro & Stacey L. Crane and attorney, Stephen N. Krevalin weigh in below.

By GEORGE O'BRIEN

The paralegal is hardly a recent phenomenon in the operation of a law firm, but these trained professionals are becoming an ever-more-important factor in the success and growth of many companies. By handling a variety of functions, they help provide cost-efficient service to the client, while freeing up lawyers to generate more business and handle those matters corresponding to their level of expertise.



Maureen Carneiro, left, and Stacey Crane, two of the paralegals at Springfield-based Bacon Wilson.

Steve Krevalin remembers a time — near the start of his career roughly 30 years ago — when law offices didn't have paralegals.

"At least they didn't call them that," said Krevalin, managing partner for the Springfield-based firm Bacon Wilson, who, upon exercising his memory, added, "and they couldn't do half the things paralegals can do today." He was referring to the legal secretaries or assistants with various titles who performed mostly simple tasks for those licensed to practice law. Which meant that if a lawyer needed most anything done, he or she would have to do it.

But operations in the law office have evolved, he continued, and the emergence of the paralegal has played a key role in this changing environment.

Paralegals now assume a host of tasks — from most details involved with a residential or commercial real-estate closing to many of the specifics within a will, to researching matters for litigation. In so doing, they provide a lower-cost option for those

more lawyerly things," Krevalin said, acknowledging that he was using somewhat clumsy terminology, but also getting his point across. "They're an integral part of the firm and the practice of law."

Peter Shrair agreed. As man-

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seeking legal services and, perhaps more importantly, free up attorneys' time for matters that specifically require their expertise.

"They allow lawyers to do

aging partner of the Springfield-based firm Cooley Shrair and a specialist in corporate and banking work, he now relies heavily on paralegals, or what this firm generally calls 'legal assistants' for a

wide variety of work that has become paramount to the firm's success.

Like Krevalin, Shrair said paralegals play a pivotal role at his and other law firms. These professionals take on what he called a "collaborative, or cooperative, relationship" with lawyers, one that helps client matters get resolved quickly and more cost-effectively than they might otherwise, while allowing a lawyer to fully maximize his or her time and, most importantly, create more business for the firm.

Referring to Candy Goodreau, a legal assistant who does extensive work for him, Shrair said, "she knows what I'm doing every minute of the day, whenever and wherever I am — because that's the best way to stay in touch and the best way to get things done for the client quickly and efficiently."

Meanwhile, the position of paralegal has become an ever-more-attractive career track, with a growing number of opportunities for work that can be rewarding on a number of levels.

"There's something different every day," said Stacey Crane, a paralegal with Bacon & Wilson who works with lawyers in the probate department, handling everything from wills to trusts to critical asset-protection planning. "Already today I've been in meetings with two different attorneys and two different families; both had an elder going into a nursing home and wanted to know what to do to protect their assets. It's rewarding to help people in those situations."

Susan Gay, a paralegal and office administrator with the Springfield-based firm Skoler Abbott and Presser, which repre-

sents management in employment law matters, agreed.

"We act as the go-between," she said, referring to clients and the lawyers they hire. "There's a lot of research involved, but there are times when we get to assist the lawyers in the courtroom and experience everything, from A to Z. It's interesting work, and every case is different."

In this issue, *BusinessWest* goes behind the scenes to examine the work of some legal professionals whose contributions often go unnoticed — accept by those who benefit most from it, meaning the clients and the lawyers they work for.

Case in Point

Christine Parylak has a lot on her plate these days.

A paralegal with Cooley Shrair, she specializes in bankruptcy and foreclosure work, and thus, in an unfortunate sign of the times, she and most others who work in this realm are quite busy.

"There is a lot of work to do with this downturn in the economy," said Parylak, a graduate of what was then a pilot program in paralegal studies at Westfield State College in the late '80s who now works extensively with John Davis, Cooley Shrair's bankruptcy specialist. She used her work to describe, in essence, what all paralegals do.

Davis meets with the client to review his or her situation to determine the best course of action, she said. With a bankruptcy, this would include deciding when and if to file and what type of bankruptcy to pursue: chapter 7 (liquidation) or chapter 13 (restructuring).

"He [Davis] oversees everything," she explained, "and I work under his supervision to meet the client's requirements, handling all the form work and other details."

Like other paralegals, Parylak does not practice law or dispense what would be considered legal advice (only licensed professionals can do that). Instead, she



Christine Parylak, a paralegal with Springfield-based Cooley Shrair, with the firm's managing partner, Peter Shrair.

Staff Photo

works with the lawyer in question to handle a client's needs. These efforts bring revenue to a firm (they have quotas for billable hours in the same way that most lawyers do) and free up the lawyers for what would be considered more important things.

This role has evolved over the years, and Maureen Carneiro has been a witness to history, if one can call it that.

She started out in the legal field about the same time Krevalin did, working as a legal secretary for a few different firms in Springfield. After several years in that capacity, a few of the lawyers she worked with convinced her to go back to college and attain a paralegal's degree. She did, and now handles commercial and residential real-estate work for Bacon Wilson.

Which means she's less busy than she might be if the economy was better — although things are picking up with a flood of refinancing — but still has plenty of work to do.

"And it's carried out behind the scenes, mostly," she said, noting that, with a typical closing, an

attorney will take the initial information for a transaction and essentially open the file. Carneiro is one of three paralegals in the real-estate department who will, by and large, take it from there, and hand the file back to the lawyer with the completed paperwork filled out.

Krevalin told *BusinessWest* that the number of paralegals at Bacon Wilson has grown steadily over the years. There are now 15 or so, and they work in a number of specialties, including bankruptcy and foreclosure, estate planning, residential and commercial real estate, litigation, finance, domestic relations, and many others.

The work and the workloads vary, but the general assignment is the same — to handle work that doesn't necessarily require a lawyer's expertise, thus bringing down the cost of the legal bill (paralegals bill at rates less than half of what lawyers charge) and freeing up the lawyers' time for generating more business and handling more complex work.

"Using paralegals simply makes a lot of sense," he said.

"They allow lawyers to delegate, and allow them to do things that only lawyers, by their training and by their expertise, should be doing."

Over the past three decades, Krevalin said the common-sense nature of the use of paralegals, as well as a broadening of the skills they bring to a firm, has led to an expansion of their use — from what was mostly at larger firms to ventures of all sizes, and from major urban areas to second-tier markets like Springfield.

"We've been doing it for a long time," he explained, "but the use of paralegals and the numbers of them that we use have grown considerably over the years, and especially the past decade."

Forms and Function

All the paralegals at Bacon Wilson have a degree in that field, said Krevalin, noting that several area colleges, including Bay Path, Elms, and Westfield State, have programs. The educational regimen essentially prepares individuals for the work, meaning that it focuses on critical thinking and other skills, rather than on actual particulars of the law.

In some respects, this mirrors what goes at law schools, he continued, adding that most of what would be considered training takes place on the job — learning by doing.

"Working hands-on" was the phrase Gay used to describe the duties and the manner in which skills are acquired and honed.

"You learn critical-thinking skills and research — what to look for and where to find that information," she said of what her college program and others like it focus on. "But the real learning comes on the job."

And this learning never stops, said Crane, adding that paralegals are continuously honing their skills, through both experience and professional seminars where they learn about changes in the law and other matters.

But beyond statutes and tax-law amendments, paralegals

must also learn the patterns and preferences of the lawyers they work with and for if they are to be truly effective in that collaborative relationship described earlier.

“You learn how they like things researched and how they want things handled,” Gay explained. “It becomes second nature, and this helps you assist the client and be of real value to the firm.”

Crane told *BusinessWest* that she took a somewhat unusual route to her work as a paralegal.

She went to Hesser College in New Hampshire to get the specific training required to be a court stenographer, and entered that field in the early '90s. Stenographers were essentially independent contractors in those days, she said, meaning they traveled all over New England to take assignments. The compensation was good, but the hours were long and the travel extensive.

“It could have been lucrative had I stayed with it, but I wanted something else,” she said, adding that she called several area col-

leges inquiring about programs for legal secretaries. They had none, but told her about paralegal studies. She listened, became intrigued, and eventually attended the program at Bay Path.

Today, she is one of six paralegals working in Bacon Wilson's probate department, handling often-complex work involved

Medicaid or asset-protection planning became a big area when all the Baby Boomers' parents started going to the nursing home; I became a guru at Medicaid and guardianships. I then moved on to estate-planning work, so I've covered all the bases of our department.”

In recent years, she worked

the client.

Closing Statements

Returning to his thoughts on that collaborative relationship that must exist between a paralegal and a lawyer, Shrair said there are two vital keys for successfully serving any client — “communication and information.”

“Without good information for any these specialties, you can't provide a good product,” he said, referring to everything from bankruptcy filings to real-estate transactions to estate planning. “You need someone to stay on top these things.”

Beyond simply staying on top of all that information, paralegals are proving to be major assets for their firms — yielding greater efficiency, productivity, revenues, and cost savings for clients.

And for Krevalin and others, distant and unkind memories of what life was like without them.

George O'Brien can be reached at obrien@businesswest.com

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with estate planning and particularly asset protection that she's learned by doing.

“I learned everything from scratch,” she said referring to lessons imparted by the firm's lead estate-planning specialist, Hyman Darling.

“I started with guardianships and did nothing else for a year and a half,” she continued. “Then,

with Darling to present seminars on these subjects, thus broadening the public's base of knowledge, while essentially helping to create new opportunities for the firm.

That's not the official or unofficial job description for the paralegal, but that's what the work comes down to — opportunities, for growth and better service to