



5 STEPS

to Boost Your Legal Career —
and Your Paralegal Salary

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Research high-demand practice areas or sectors

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Introduction

If there's one word to describe today's paralegal, it could well be versatile. Paralegals are responsible for handling everything from research and trial preparation to patent filings and eDiscovery projects — and, of course, much more. This expanded scope is a result of market pressures that prioritize cost-efficient legal services: For some legal matters, billing rates for paralegals are typically less than those for lawyers. But this is not to say salaries are static. To the contrary, the sheer demand for skilled paralegals is boosting the average paralegal salary.

If you are a paralegal, making more money isn't your only goal as you pursue a new position or advance in your career, but it's certainly an important

consideration. So how do you make sure you take advantage of these favorable conditions to take your own paralegal salary to the next level?

The key is to be informed. You need to be familiar with current compensation rates, as well as the skills and educational requirements employers are seeking.

Here's a step-by-step guide to help you make the most of your paralegal career and increase your paralegal salary.

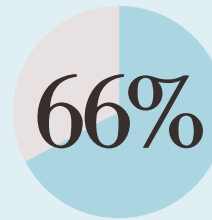


STEP 1: Research high-demand practice areas or sectors

If your goal is to earn a higher paralegal salary, you need to know which practice areas and sectors are generating the greatest number of legal jobs — and driving up salaries for paralegals.

In a growing economy, law firm clients are demanding more services. To meet this need, many firms are augmenting their offerings in hot practice areas — such as compliance, healthcare and commercial law — resulting in more paralegal job opportunities and higher salaries.

Corporate legal departments are also expanding their legal teams to manage more matters in-house and contain spending on outside counsel. And because workloads are increasing, especially in the areas of compliance, contract administration and eDiscovery, there is more demand for full-time and project-based paralegals.



of lawyers interviewed for a Robert Half Legal survey said knowledge of a specific practice area makes paralegals most marketable.

Source: Robert Half Legal survey of 200 lawyers among the largest law firms and corporations in the United States

HOT PRACTICE AREAS & SKILLS FOR PARALEGAL JOBS



Litigation: Litigation expertise is always in demand, particularly for paralegals with backgrounds in insurance defense, personal injury, medical malpractice and employment law.



Business/commercial law: An increase in corporate transactions related to mergers, acquisitions and joint ventures, along with other legal matters associated with business growth, require larger in-house teams.



Healthcare: The Affordable Care Act has spurred growth in the U.S. healthcare industry and increased the need for related legal services. Paralegals with expertise in the legal aspects of healthcare aren't just landing jobs in law firms. Many are scoring in-house positions with insurance companies, government agencies, hospitals, biotech and pharmaceutical firms, and other organizations.



Real estate: The real estate market relies on paralegals to help with the sale and transfer of commercial and residential properties. Paralegal jobs in this industry may involve navigating state and local laws, handling contract negotiations, researching property surveys and titles, resolving zoning issues, and assigning leases.



Intellectual property: The protection of patents and trademarks is a thriving practice area. Paralegals with intellectual property expertise often command above-market salaries.



Compliance: Legal support professionals who can help businesses understand and comply with changing regulations are highly valued by corporations and law firms. Paralegals in corporate compliance departments support compliance managers and analysts and help ensure the company meets various mandates and regulations.









Data privacy and security: Heightened concerns about privacy and security matters in the legal field today are prompting corporations and law firms to seek paralegals with experience supporting legal risk managers, security auditors and analysts.



What is demand like for paralegals in your area? Scope out the market by searching our [paralegal job listings](#).

STEP 2: Identify skills that can boost your paralegal salary

Besides knowledge in hot practice areas, what other skills can help you stand out and command a higher paralegal salary? Law firms and companies are particularly interested in paralegal candidates who possess the following skills and attributes:

-  **General experience:** Employers regularly look for previous experience with a law firm, including working under the supervision of an attorney, preparing briefings and conducting research.
-  **Education:** Hiring managers increasingly seek a bachelor's degree and a certificate of completion from an American Bar Association-approved paralegal education program. Some law firms are also hiring entry-level legal assistants who have a paralegal certificate but lack a four-year degree. A specialized recruiter can help you determine what criteria employers in your market require.
-  **Soft skills:** Paralegal duties may involve interfacing with clients directly. This requires outstanding interpersonal skills, such as writing and verbal communication, in addition to customer service. In many firms, team collaboration is also essential to success.
-  **Flexibility:** Paralegal candidates who can perform multiple job functions, produce high-quality work and take on responsibilities traditionally assigned to first-year associates are highly marketable.
-  **Advanced technical skills:** As technology continues to rapidly transform the legal field, employers are seeking legal support candidates with advanced technical skills, including proficiency in Microsoft Office, litigation support, billing and case management programs. Employers are particularly interested in paralegals who are familiar with the latest [eDiscovery](#) software. A candidate who is trained in these programs and stays current with the latest in technology and litigation software will have a competitive advantage.
-  **Bilingual skills:** In certain markets, [bilingual abilities](#), especially Spanish and Mandarin language fluency, have become increasingly vital for legal support professionals.

All of these can make your skills more attractive to an employer and bump up your paralegal salary.



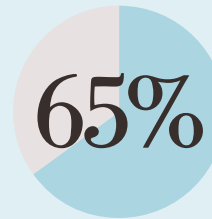
Need more clarity about what responsibilities are usually assigned to paralegals and legal assistants at various levels of experience? Review our [online glossary of paralegal/legal assistant job descriptions](#).

STEP 3: Keep up with the changing nature of paralegal jobs

Paralegal jobs are evolving in response to developments within the legal field, so it's more important than ever to be aware of how these changes can affect demand for your skills — and affect your paralegal salary.

Hybrid or blended paralegal/legal secretary jobs are becoming more common as organizations streamline legal support functions to improve efficiencies. Some colleges and paralegal associations now have formal programs to prepare hybrid support staff.

With law offices maintaining more efficient legal support teams, hiring managers are looking for paralegals who are capable of handling tasks typically performed by first-year associates, such as trial preparation and litigation support.



of lawyers said blended or hybrid paralegal/legal secretary positions are more common today than they were two years ago.

Source: Robert Half Legal survey of 200 lawyers among the largest law firms and corporations in the United States

EDISCOVERY PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Legal professionals will be facing ever-increasing eDiscovery challenges as time goes on. That means more paralegals are likely to be tasked with eDiscovery management, regardless of prior training.

While every litigation matter requires careful planning and implementation, eDiscovery projects can be particularly challenging. Typical assignments include:

- Verifying all hardware and software needs in the planning phase, so errors are caught when they can be corrected affordably and efficiently
- Reducing the sorting, tagging and cross-referencing of relevant electronically stored information (ESI) into smaller, more manageable assignments
- Keeping communication restricted so that eDiscovery project data leaks are avoided and/or traceable
- Ensuring ESI is thoroughly analyzed to reduce instances of missed or misinterpreted information
- Controlling costs through careful management of resources and allocation of employees
- Minimizing unnecessary or wasted effort by team members

Preparing now for eDiscovery project management could put you ahead of the curve and keep your paralegal salary on an upward trajectory.

STEP 4: Know your worth

In this changing marketplace for paralegal jobs, you risk missing out if you're not clear about what your experience and abilities are worth to an employer. Candidates with backgrounds in the hottest practice areas — litigation, business and corporate law — are in short supply. This is [intensifying competition](#) and driving up paralegal salary ranges in those areas. Highly sought legal professionals are receiving multiple job offers, counteroffers and, in some cases, signing bonuses.



Click or tap to enlarge map

LEGAL SALARIES

In the legal field, starting salaries are expected to increase 3.6 percent in 2017. The paralegal positions that are projected to see the greatest salary gains are:

- Midlevel paralegal/legal assistant (4-6 years' experience), small/midsize law firm; average starting salaries of \$55,750 to \$70,000 are anticipated, a 5.2 percentage increase over 2016 projections
- Senior/supervising paralegal/legal assistant (7+ years' experience), midsize company; average starting salaries of \$68,000 to \$93,750 are anticipated, a 4.0 percent increase over 2016 projections



Law Firm/Company Definitions

Small/midsize law firm (10-35 lawyers)

Midsize company (\$25 million-\$250 million in revenue)



Find salary information for paralegal jobs in your geographic area using Robert Half Legal's [Salary Calculator for legal professionals](#).

STEP 5: Negotiate your best paralegal salary

Whether you're finalizing a job offer or approaching a current employer for a pay increase, the prospect of negotiating your paralegal salary might make you a little nervous. As in so many areas, preparation is key. If you've already researched current pay rates for comparable positions, now is the time to consider strategies for arriving at the best outcome in salary negotiations.

WHEN YOU'RE APPLYING FOR NEW PARALEGAL JOBS

You know you deserve competitive pay for your work, but money is a sticky subject and [salary negotiation](#) with a prospective employer may seem risky. Here are four ways to approach this conundrum:

1. **Simply state from the outset what you hope to earn.** To provide some wiggle room during the negotiation process and avoid taking yourself out of contention for jobs with lower salary ranges, state what salary you are hoping to make as a range rather than an absolute number.
2. **Alternatively, avoid specifics so you have more leverage to negotiate later on.** If you wait for the employer to suggest a starting figure, you won't risk asking for too little when the employer was prepared to offer you more money.
3. **Consider an in-between approach.** If you don't want to discuss a specific paralegal salary level with your potential employer but want to give a gentle push for him or her to broach the topic, ask, "Can you explain how compensation for the position is structured?"
4. **Wait to reveal an amount when answering an ad.** Sometimes, a job posting will ask that you provide details about your current or most immediate past salary. If you don't want to divulge this number, you could write in your cover letter: "I hesitate to discuss salary until I know more about the company and the position's requirements. I'd be happy to discuss wages and benefits after an interview and if I receive a job offer." If you decide to reveal your current wage and it is on the low side, you might try this: "My current salary is below the market average, which is one reason I'm looking for new opportunities."



Remember, timing is everything. Even if you do decide to be the first to bring up salary during the hiring process, it's wise to delay the discussion. Revealing your paralegal salary requirements in the first interview before learning more about the role and company could be premature. Instead, start by mentioning the value you will bring. If the hiring manager hasn't brought up salary by the second or third interview, you can raise the issue at that time.

MORE PARALEGAL SALARY NEGOTIATION TIPS

When negotiating your paralegal salary, it's important to prioritize and focus on what is most important to you. Consider all aspects of the compensation package, including salary, health care benefits, retirement programs, training opportunities and flexible work hours. If the base compensation you are offered doesn't match your expectations, try negotiating more time off or a signing bonus.

Here are additional tips for successful paralegal salary negotiations:

- **Negotiate through a reputable recruiter:** Consider working with a [specialized staffing expert](#) who has access to the latest hiring and compensation trends for comparable positions in your market.
- **Be realistic:** If your new employer can't meet your salary threshold, ask about possible performance-based incentives that can be earned after the first six or 12 months on the job.
- **Remain positive and open-minded:** As you engage in paralegal salary negotiations, recognize the difference between coming across as self-important versus confident in your abilities. Make sure your skills and experience truly align with the compensation you're requesting.
- **Get it in writing:** Once you've successfully completed your negotiations, ask for the agreed-upon terms in writing, including hours, salary, benefits and any other details.
- **A final tip:** Always be honest and professional during paralegal salary discussions. This helps maximize your chances of developing a successful agreement and creates a good relationship with your new employer.



When negotiating a job offer, be sure to bring ample knowledge about salaries to the table. Visit the [Robert Half Legal Salary Center](#) to access the latest paralegal salary data and pinpoint information for your geographic area.

WHEN YOU'RE NEGOTIATING A RAISE

Has your role as a paralegal become more and more complex? Have you proven that your work adds value to the organization? Has your experience made you increasingly indispensable to your legal team?

If your answer to any of these questions is yes, it may be time to ask for an increase in your paralegal salary — particularly if it's been several years since your last one.

It's important to be strategic about your request and start conversations on a positive note. Consider these seven questions:

1. **Do the firm's or company's lawyers see you as an indispensable team member with specialized knowledge?** Jot down specific examples of how you've supported them in this capacity. Look through your email and written correspondences for thank-you messages that describe a job well done.
2. **Have you recently completed courses that boosted your skills, such as tech training and continuing legal education?** How has this added to your skill set?
3. **Have you helped the firm gain a new client or retain a particularly valuable one?** How much was this effort worth to your organization?
4. **Have you saved the company time or money by implementing new practices?** Write down how — and how much.
5. **Have you recently taken on tasks that are not in your original job description?** Note what these tasks are and how you have gone above and beyond your core duties to complete them.
6. **Can you make a case for a raise based on market trends?** Conduct industry research to better assess the value you contribute and provide the tangible evidence that helps underscore why you deserve a higher paralegal salary. Don't forget to role-play possible questions and answers.
7. **Are you thinking outside the box?** If your employer can't offer an increase in your paralegal salary, you might be able to negotiate other benefits or a performance-based bonus.



Parting Thoughts

Remember that to succeed in paralegal jobs and reach your paralegal salary goals, you need to be strategic about [professional development](#). If your expertise doesn't quite match the most in-demand skills or practice areas, don't put off additional training. Sign up for continuing legal education and consider earning a relevant degree or certification.

Above all, never lose sight of the importance of maintaining your reputation for client service, dependability and attention to detail in your work. Supervising lawyers notice and value paralegals they can count on day in and day out in all types of circumstances.

To learn more [legal salary negotiation tips](#), visit the Robert Half Legal blog at blog.roberthalflegal.com.

Find [top paralegal jobs](#) now.



About Robert Half Legal

A leader among staffing agencies, Robert Half Legal specializes exclusively in providing skilled legal professionals for law firms and corporate legal departments. We understand the intricacies of working in the legal field and can connect you with the best available legal jobs.

We combine a robust matching technology with a deep understanding of the companies we work with to help find you contract and full-time positions that match your experience, career goals and work style.

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