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Interview with Paralegal, Linda McGrath-Cruz

Linda McGrath-Cruz is a paralegal in Miami, Florida. She works for Arnstein & Lehr LLP, which claims to be one of the country's oldest and most respected law firms, and has 15 years of experience in the field. She is a Florida Registered Paralegal and an Advanced Certified Paralegal who specializes in discovery and trial practice. She serves as chair of the Dade County Bar Association's paralegal committee as well as chair of the Miami Dade Legal Support Association's scholarship committee.

CareerColleges.com recently interviewed Ms. McGrath about working as a paralegal, and what advice she has for individuals potentially interested in a paralegal career.

Q. What is a typical workday like?

A. My regular work hours are 8 am to 4 pm with a 30-minute lunch break. When I arrive at the office, the first thing I do is review my email. I check for new assignments and respond as necessary. Because I work in litigation, I spend the majority of my time collecting evidence. I am responsible for performing investigations to locate witnesses and providers, such as employers, educators, doctors or hospitals. I also prepare subpoenas for records, follow up to make sure records are received, and review records once they are provided. While reviewing the records, new witnesses may be discovered and the cycle continues.

I also spend a lot of time preparing attorneys for depositions, hearings and trial. This usually involves meeting with the attorney to determine his/her approach, discussing exactly what they need in order to prepare, and then reviewing file materials to gather all of the necessary information.

Q. What is your favorite part about your job?

A. My favorite part about being a paralegal is investigating issues and finding those little nuggets of information that no one thought could ever be found. I love getting my hands dirty on the cold hard facts of the case and piecing them together like a jigsaw puzzle.

Q. What is your least favorite thing about this career?

A. The thing I like the least about my job is the "billable hour," which is a necessary evil for many paralegals. Depending on the type of firm, paralegals may be required to track their time spent on each assignment for a case so that the client can be charged for that time. This allows the employer to not only recoup the expense of the paralegal's salary and benefits but also to be profitable.

Time is normally tracked in increments of six minutes throughout the day, and depending on the client's requirements, the description of the assignment done for each time entry may need to be painfully detailed. Keeping track of billable hours is an art form and may take some practice before it can be perfected.

Some firms have mandatory billable hour requirements for paralegals and some have no requirements at all, making this something that should be discussed during the interview process so there are no surprises later on.

Q. What is the most challenging part of your job?

A. The most challenging thing for me is balancing family life with the unpredictable nature of trial work. Working for a well-staffed office generally allows for a predictable schedule without a lot of unexpected overtime; however, there may be instances when overtime is unavoidable. For example, the weeks leading up to a trial can be filled with late nights, and the trial itself can mean days or weeks away from home.

Q. Do you ever travel for work?

A. Yes. I have travelled to different parts of Florida to attend depositions, hearings and to assist at trial. Sometimes the trip may just be for one day, and sometimes it may be an overnight trip lasting a week or longer.

Q. What kinds of experiences stand out for you so far in your career?

A. One of my most memorable experiences was attending my first trial. It was a really an amazing opportunity. Besides allowing me to see all of the work our team had done come to fruition in front of a jury, it also gave me a better understanding of how all the pieces fit together once presented to the judge and jury and why our role as paralegals is so critical.

Also, the opportunity to be the chair of the Dade County Bar Association's paralegal committee was definitely a milestone for me. The DCBA is such a prestigious organization, and I am lucky to have the opportunity to be involved with them.

Q. How have you grown in your role from previous years?

A. Since my move to a larger firm in 2010, I have been able to play a greater role in the discovery process and really get into the smallest details of my cases and develop them. I have also been able to gain substantially more pre-trial and trial experience that I could never have gained in a smaller firm environment.

Q. What skills are most valuable for a paralegal?

A. Attention to detail is very important, as is having good grammar and communication skills. Being comfortable with technology is a definite plus as many law firms utilize different hardware and software programs, and paralegals need to be able to adapt their tech skills quickly.

Paralegals also need to be dependable and responsible. Their attorney needs to know they can depend on them to be there when needed. I think they also need to be naturally curious and inquisitive.

Q. How competitive is it to get a job or promotion in this industry?

A. The job market is very competitive, but it is also thriving. There are excellent opportunities available for paralegals who set themselves apart from the crowd by gaining a quality education and honing their skills.

New graduates need to be prepared to market themselves and be proactive in their job search. Once employed, paralegals need to be their own best advocate when seeking a promotion.

Q. How can a recent graduate find an entry level job as a paralegal?

A. Networking is very important for recent graduates. It gives them a way to develop relationships with employers so they will already have a foot in the door when a position opens up.

Face-to-face networking is also important. New graduates should look for opportunities through paralegal groups and local bar associations. These organizations usually have various types of networking opportunities available to suit every budget and schedule.

Social media is also very helpful and new graduates should ensure they have a positive and professional presence on sites such as LinkedIn. A strong online presence can help connect them with job opportunities, and it allows employers to find out more about them as a possible candidate.

Q. How can you move up and get promoted as a paralegal?

A. Continuing education is critical to keep skills sharp and ensure potential moves up the ladder.

While the paralegal career was once seen as a stepping stone to becoming an attorney, that is no longer the case. It is now a respected career with lots of room for growth. It is important that paralegals stay current with emerging trends and continue to advance their skills to make sure they remain a valuable part of the legal team.

Q. Do you have any final advice for those interested in becoming a paralegal?

A. Students should go into this career path with their eyes wide open. Make sure they know the kinds of things that may be required of them and be sure it is what they want. This is a career, not simply a job to get them through the month. It requires hard work, dedication and a lot of focus, but it is also extremely rewarding.

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