

Working in the 21st Century with Virtual Paralegals

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In today's competitive market place, are you looking for ways to reduce costs and provide faster turnaround to your clients? Do you operate with a budget in mind and find getting help on a temporary or full time basis is too expensive? Do you have difficulty finding competent help when you need it?

These are challenging questions for any attorney or legal administrator, especially in tough economic times. Everyone faces the pressure of producing quick results at the lowest possible cost. Often this is not easy to do because of the high cost of hiring employees. Let's face it, nearly everyone is challenged by cash flow these days and anything that adds expense to your business must provide value to justify the costs.

Although most attorneys are used to having their paralegal at arm's length, the Internet has opened up a new way of doing business. Your paralegal can now be remotely located across the street or even in another part of the world. The Internet has provided amazing avenues of both revenue generation and cost savings. Using the power of the Internet to the advantage of your business will also serve your clients better.

One key advantage that is available to you via the Internet is the use of the virtual paralegal. "Virtual" in this case means an online paralegal service vendor who is as close as your computer. She (or he) works from a remote location on an "as needed" basis, enabling you to increase manpower without the expense of a full time employee. And the need for temporary employees is "virtually" eliminated. You pay only for the time it takes them to do the work. This means you do not pay for their socializing, coffee breaks, long lunches or trips to the restroom.

Virtual paralegals can also save you money in the following ways:

- no training costs
- no workspace costs
- no supplies or equipment costs
- no payroll taxes (federal, social security, unemployment, workers compensation)
- no overtime, bonuses, vacation, holiday or sick time to pay

Some other things to consider -- if you live in a high cost area, such as Washington, D.C., New York or California, you can hire a virtual paralegal from a lower cost area. You may also find better talent online than what is available locally. If you hire a virtual paralegal in a different time zone, a project sent to them in the evening may be completed by the time you are ready to work in the morning.

As you can see, there are many practical advantages to using a virtual paralegal. You need to consider whether these advantages are important enough to you that they merit trying out the use of one.

The American Bar Association has published articles on the use of virtual paralegals on its website (www.abanet.org). One article, entitled Virtual Help: An Outsourcing Relationship With a Virtual Assistant Can Complete Your Team states, “Virtual assistants are an outsourcing strategy that can give lawyers the best of all solutions to the need for help.” Another article Outsourcing for Solos and Small firms: Virtual Paralegals states, “A virtual paralegal enables solos and small firms to take advantage of the economy that effective use of a paralegal can provide to a practice, on an as needed basis.”

Even though virtual paralegals exist, getting attorneys to adapt them to the needs of their practices remains a hurdle. Virtual paralegals represent unknown risks to you and your clients because you seldom have the opportunity to meet the paralegal and use your keen powers of observation and people skills to evaluate them. Fortunately, there are ways to mitigate these risks and start gaining advantage of the efficient and cost effective use of virtual paralegal services now.

You will want to make sure that the paralegal has a certification from a recognized paralegal program and a minimum of five years paralegal experience in a specialized area. It is desirable if she is a member of her local bar association and paralegal group. It will also be helpful if you obtain references or testimonials from the virtual paralegal’s past clients. And if they provide a service agreement, review it to see that it includes confidentiality guarantees to protect your practice and your client’s interests. You may be able to quickly check out all of this if she has a website.

Speaking of the website, does it look professional? Is it easy to contact her via the website or by fax? Is there a toll free number for you to use? How easy does she make it for you to buy her services? Can you be automatically invoiced? Does the website use a secure method for payment such as PayPal?

You will find that dependable, reputable virtual paralegals are available. Once you are focused on the one or two you feel most comfortable with, place an order for services and evaluate for yourself how well this works for you. Don’t be afraid to give honest feedback -- a reputable paralegal will thank you for it.

As a starting point, I invite you to visit my website -- www.etrademarkparalegal.com. Your questions or comments are always welcome. And best of all, I am “virtually” a keystroke away!