

Paralegal News

Graduates saturate dire labour market

By Lyndsey Jones

The market for jobs in the legal profession has become saturated with LPC graduates which is likely to increase competition for paralegal work, according to Kat Gibson, chairwoman of the Junior Lawyers Division of the Law Society.

“Many [LPC graduates] are looking to do paralegal work in the interim period. You can expect more people to be looking for paralegal work next year too,” she warns.

There are many issues that are adding to the employment gloom. One problem, for example, is that law firms are deferring training contracts until next year. “This doesn’t just impact on this year’s graduates but on next year’s as well,” Ms Gibson says.

The number of training contracts being cancelled by law firms has also increased and some trainees are losing their jobs. “Trainees are becoming

qualified but they are not being kept on. Law firms used to keep two-thirds on, now two-thirds are let go.

“A lot of people are finding themselves out of work. It’s dire out there.”

Furthermore, many people who have been qualified for one to five years are finding themselves being made redundant.

“Many of these people were working in property or banking legal departments and now these departments are closing. The impact on junior members is very high,” Ms Gibson says.

She has also heard anecdotal evidence of paralegals working for less money. “People who would have been made redundant are working for less and some are working for less than the minimum salary.”

The Law Society has seen a considerable uptake on its helpline for recession issues. About 200 people watched its website video on what to do if facing redundancy, including financial and stress management, and a further 1,500 downloaded it to view.

If you are looking for a job during these tough economic times, however, there are some steps you can take to improve your chances of finding work and help you stand out from the paralegal crowd.

First, make sure your CV is well presented. “Be intelligent in how you use your CV – such as make sure there are no spelling errors,” Ms Gibson says. CVs with spelling errors will put employers off



Network to find jobs before they are advertised Photo: Wendy Mszyca

as it could indicate a sloppy attitude towards work and they could consign your CV to the bin.

Second, at an interview, remember to sell yourself and your skills. “It’s important to look at your skills and highlight selling points. If you have had experience in working in the property sector, for example, highlight your transferable skills and willingness to learn,” Ms Gibson said.

Third, you could train to move into a new field. However, it is difficult to move from property, for example, to probate and in terms of looking for work you will be competing with newly qualified jobseekers. Fourth, update

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Tips for jobseekers

Make sure your CV is well presented

Remember to sell yourself and your skills at interview

Train to move into a new field

Update your knowledge

Consider voluntary work

Network to promote yourself

Look for jobs by using our website recruitment search



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your knowledge by enrolling on courses such as those run by the National Association of Licensed Paralegals so that you become more valuable to your employer or increase your worth to potential employers.

Paralegal Nicole Hinds, 34, was keen to expand her knowledge to maintain an edge in a competitive job market so she studied the NALP's post-graduate diploma in paralegal practice, completing the course earlier this year.

"It's more competitive than ever to get into the legal field," says Ms Hinds who works for Axiom, an interactive marketing services company, in south-east London. "I wanted to keep up to date with my knowledge and skills and the NALP's course helped me to do that.

"I've recently taken on other responsibilities on the corporate side,



Kat Gibson:
It's important to look at your skills and highlight selling points

producing annual returns and I already knew some of the background from doing the corporate assignments of the NALP's post-graduate diploma."

Fifth, if you are out of work, think of volunteering. Pro bono voluntary work at your local citizens advice bureau will keep your finger in the employability pie. Sixth, network. Paralegals are also welcome to go along to their local Trainee Solicitors Group or local Junior Lawyers Division. "Networking will help you to hear about jobs before they are publicised," says Ms Gibson. (See article on this page.)

Lastly, subscribe to trade publications or sign up to a professional update. Look for jobs in your area by using the NALP's recruitment section at www.nationalparalegals.com/recruitment. As Ms Gibson says, "It's vital to keep up to date and stay in touch."



Always be ready for small talk

Photo: Wendy Mszyca

Improve your networking

By Kay Buckby

Networking is an essential tool for finding work, promoting your business and knowledge sharing. To help you develop your skills, follow my top tips taken from my networking course:

Do your homework: Have a clear objective to achieve so you attend with a purpose. Get the attendee list from the organiser and work out the people you would like to meet and why.

What do you have to give? Think through things you can give to fellow attendees that may help them. It could be "top tips to organising a team away day" or "Train to Gain have a leadership grant available for £500". This is a good way to make new contacts as you have something that you are happy to give away and they can attribute a value to it.

What do you need from them? Networking is about give and take. Be prepared to ask for what you want. This could be "Does anyone have a contact within AAA Organisation? If so, I'd appreciate your help." Help is a good word to use as psychologists believe most people respond positively to it.

Arrive prepared: Get to the event early so you can help to welcome people.

Be ready for small talk: Some people make the mistake of selling or talking business too early into an initial meeting. Be prepared to talk about easy subjects such as the weather, the venue and local or national news topics that are

interesting without being controversial.

Be ready for the question "What do you do?" I am constantly surprised at responses people give when asked this. Sometimes people bore me or behave nervously because they haven't planned what to say. Think in terms of what you do and why your clients use you. For instance, an attendee on my presentation skills course thanked me for building their confidence. So my response to this type of question is: "I enable people to do their job more effectively because I help their confidence."

The follow-up: This is the most important point. It is so tempting to get back from an event, pocket full of business cards, throw them in a drawer and do nothing with them. If you have met someone whom you think it will be useful to know more about, contact them that day and arrange a coffee or a chat on the phone to keep the dialogue going.

Networking is a part of your long-term business strategy. It is about meeting new people who could expose you to endless possibilities.

"Since Kay's session on networking ... I have more confidence when it comes to building relationships through net-working, which is now an important part of my job," said Mark Connell, a trainee patent lawyer in Birmingham.

Kay Buckby is a director at The Development Company, which runs events ranging from coaching and seminars to half-day courses. Call The Development Company on 01604 810801 or email training@thedeveco.com

Be a successful advocate

By John Stacey-Hibbert

From tribunals and courts, to job interviews and business meetings, advocacy – the art of persuasion – is an essential skill for paralegals. Whether you are trying to convince a judge, another lawyer or a tribunal to agree with you, you will need to be an articulate persuader.

To succeed as an advocate, you will be able to communicate an idea, opinion, or fact – your case – in a way that it will be accepted. The ability to express your case can be more important than the concept of the case itself. In order for your listener to accept your side, they have to believe it. The key to effective advocacy, therefore, is believability.

Whether you are trying to apply for an extension of time to file a statement of case or argue your final submission to a Tribunal Bench after a complicated unfair dismissal case, what you say will have little effect unless the District Judge or Tribunal Bench finds you easy to listen to.

Yet, the believability of your message – its credibility – is not necessarily in the message itself but in the way you deliver or present it. To be an effective advocate, the following three elements must always be present:

The verbal: the content of the message itself.

The vocal: the way in which you say those words. The intonation, projection, resonance, emphasis, pauses of and in your voice. Actors know this and spend hours practising their parts.

The visual: how you are seen to say what you are saying by the way you use your body to create interest with gestures and emphases. The more interesting you are when you speak, the more credible you are and the more likely you will be listened to.

Do you look as though you believe what you are saying? Are you nervous or awkward? Do you make eye contact? Do you appear confident? Do you smile? Do you avoid annoying habits like folding your arms?

Studies have conclusively shown that the degree of inconsistency between these three elements – the verbal, the vocal and the visual – is the factor that



The key to effective advocacy is believability Photo: Wendy Mszyca

determines believability. If all these elements work together, the message is consistent and believable. The content works with the enthusiasm and articulation of the voice and the energy and animation of the face and body, to reflect the conviction of what is said. If these three elements do not work together, the message appears inconsistent and will be doubted.

The most believable of the three elements is: visual, at 55%, followed by vocal, at 38% and verbal at 7%. Therefore it is important to look and be professional.

We lean towards the person who “comes over” the best. Take politicians, for example. The personality factor is key. Think about this in connection with

a job interview. It is not necessarily the person with the best CV who succeeds. The CV will get them the interview, but it is their personality that will get them hired. It is the same with advocacy. The person who comes over the best will more easily persuade the listener to accept their argument.

What you say will be emphasised by how you say it and how your mannerisms confirm its credibility. This is the starting point for advocacy.

The way in which you dress will also help. If you dress the part you will feel the part.

Another key element of being a successful advocate is to make sure you are prepared. If it is your first time in a particular court or tribunal, you will feel more confident if you watch a case beforehand. You will see what the District Judge or the Tribunal Chairperson is like. ‘Fore-warned is forearmed!’

Know your case. Even if it is a simple application, what is it that you want to achieve? If it is a more complicated matter like a Small Claims hearing or a tribunal application read and re-read the statements of case, witness statements and disclosed documents.

Once you have done that, write out your closing submission. Know what you want to elicit at the hearing; the emphases that you want to make and the comments you want to stress.

Lastly, practise your final submission. Never try to “wing it” by thinking that you will be inspired when you open your mouth and that words will flow – they won’t! Arm yourself with (a) the facts (the verbal), (b) careful phrases that will powerfully portray your case (the vocal) and (c) how confidently you are going to do this (the visual).

The advocate’s motto should be the same as the Boy Scouts: “Be Prepared”.

John Stacey-Hibbert is the Programme Director at the NALP



Question time

Amanda Hamilton, NALP General Secretary, answers your dilemmas and queries

Legal secretary has Higher calling

I have been a legal secretary for 10 years and I live abroad. I am considering doing the Higher Certificate in Paralegal Studies so that I have a qualification when I return to the UK. Will I be capable of completing this course?

The Higher Certificate is exactly the course for you. It is clear and written in such a way that anyone can understand. We actively encourage legal secretaries to further their careers by pursuing the Higher Certificate. More importantly it will give you an edge since you can market yourself as a “paralegal/secretary”.

Freelance to build up experience

Why can't I find paralegal work even though I have a Law Degree?

Attaining a Law Degree does not necessarily mean you are qualified and able to undertake paralegal work. A degree covers Principles of Law but does not include areas of practice and procedure. Therefore, in order to work as a paralegal you will need further training.

Also, you should try to gain as much experience working in a legal environment as you can. This can prove difficult if no-one is prepared to give you a job without having experience – a chicken and egg situation! You can't get a job without experience and you can't get experience without a job. The answer? Work as a freelance paralegal. For more information about this, please contact the National Association of Licensed Paralegals at info@nationalparalegals.co.uk

How can I do better interviews?

I am not very good at job interviews. Can you give me some tips on how to perform better?

This is something that most of us never really sit down and think about and yet we all have to go through it several times in our lives. It is so important because it represents how others perceive us. So here are a few basic tips: the first thing I make note of if am interviewing, is what the applicant looks like when they walk through the door, what they say, how they said it and their demeanor. First impressions are vital. So Point number 1: always dress smartly and say good morning/afternoon and make eye contact.

When they sit down the first thing I say to the applicant is whether they have looked at our website. If they say ‘no’ then, without realising it, they have already let themselves down. Point 2: always do your homework and research your prospective employer. This kills two birds with one stone because it not only gives information about the firm but also should raise some questions that the applicant may want to ask at the interview – which brings me onto Point 3: always have a few questions ready to ask when prompted. There is nothing worse than asking an applicant whether they have questions and they shake their head. It means that the interviewer has done all the talking and gets no feedback at all.

Your questions

Do you have a dilemma? Email your questions to Amanda Hamilton at: Amanda@nationalparalegals.co.uk. Letters are selected for publication and we cannot give personal replies. The magazine accepts no legal responsibility for advice.

Sue's licence to boost confidence

Sue Stedman, 59, decided to study to qualify as a licensed paralegal so that she could not only boost her salary but also her confidence. She was working as a legal secretary when she first enrolled on a NALP course. Since then, she has completed both the NALP's Associate and Fellowship Award and has been a licensed paralegal for four years, specializing in divorce and child contact matters. “I decided I wanted a qualification because I didn't have anything other than experience,” says Sue, who has been working for law firm Hine Downing in Falmouth, Cornwall, for 11 years.

“The courses have helped me gain experience and confidence to ask questions and take steps. The clients also trust you and feel at ease with you because they know you are qualified.”

The qualifications have also helped her to build her confidence when attending court. “You know you can hold your own with barristers. You get a little more equality with them as a licensed paralegal,” she says.

Her employer paid her course fees because, she says, “my boss thought it was great because it would give him some assistance”. Her boss Mike Wilson, a senior partner at Hine Downing, says: “Sue is able to deal with some of the drafting of paperwork and deals with some of the clients, thus freeing my time for more complex matters for preparation for hearings and researching issues.” Sue would recommend this course because “if people want to get on, explore and start off to see what they want to do, these courses are a good first step. Then you can go on and specialize. The courses give you a good grounding in law and a good idea of what you want to do.”

We want to hear from you

If you have been on one of our courses we would like to hear from you. Please email testimonials to info@nationalparalegals.co.uk