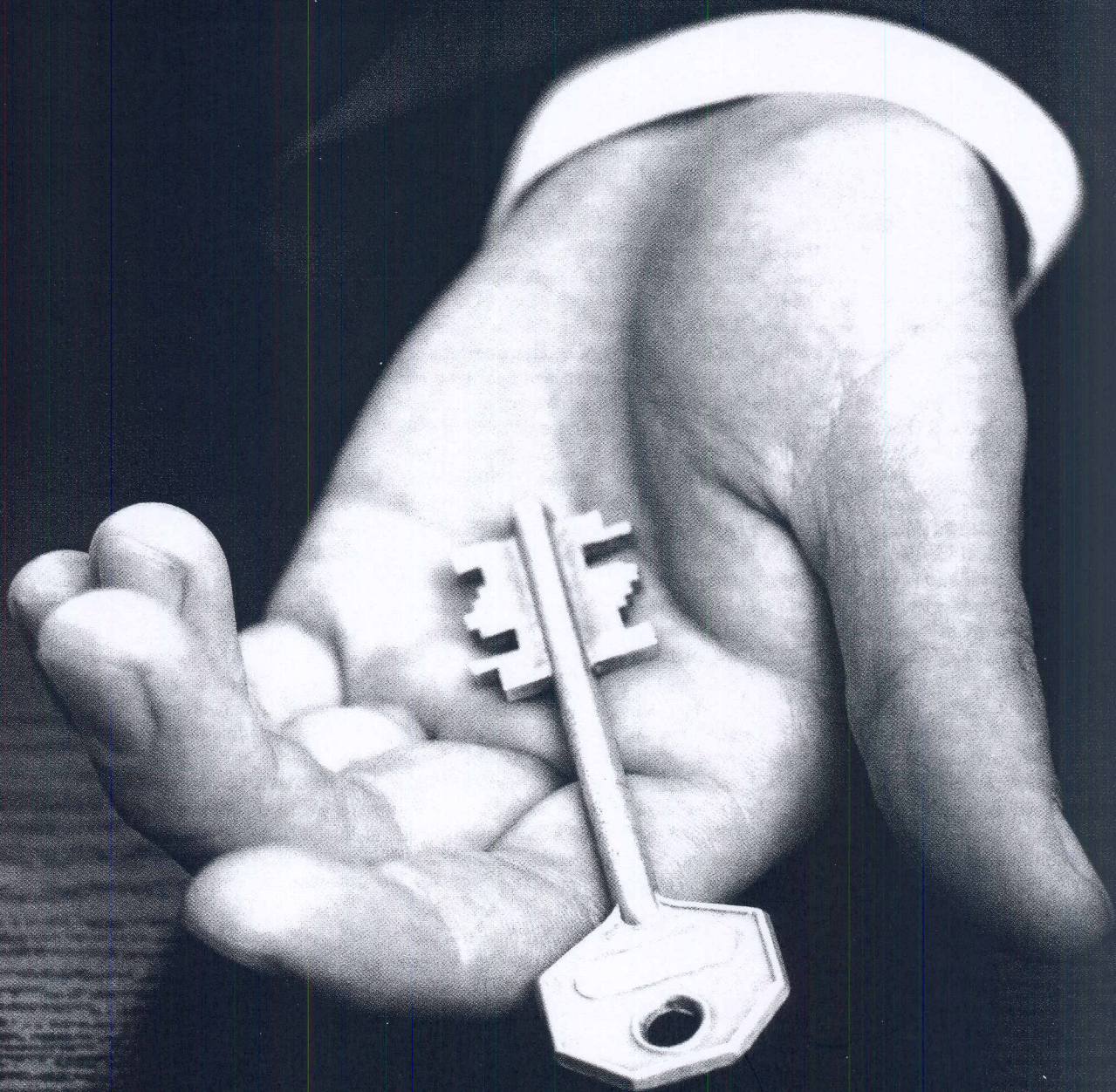


The Key to Your Future



Use internships to unlock your paralegal career.

By Ruth-ellen Post, Esq.

Whether it is called a practicum, an internship, an externship, or some other name, the off-campus work experience is much more than a requirement that students must endure for graduation. With good planning and the right approach, it can be the most productive stage of your entire education. The same is true for more experienced career changers. Managed effectively, an internship can be a sure-fire springboard into an exciting new legal specialty, or a potential shortcut to paralegal employment from a different professional background. The key in all instances is working proactively from the outset to create a valuable, practical learning experience — one that produces tangible results for you as you produce results for the internship office.

For both students and career changers, the first step in getting an internship involves getting a clear picture of your career goals. Identifying those goals rarely is an easy task; for most people, it involves deliberate investigative work. Students and career changers alike should attend local paralegal association meetings and talk to working paralegals about their specialty areas and employment settings. For example, the daily life of a litigation paralegal has little resemblance to that of a paralegal in real estate practice or in a corporate setting. The well-rounded diversity of a small general practice might be perfect for a student not yet ready to commit to any specialty, but could sound a bit scattered to someone else.

Put initial biases aside and ask working professionals what they like and don't like about their responsibilities. Also, what skills are most needed in their jobs? The answers will vary and can be highly revealing. Articles in paralegal publications and well-researched paralegal career guides also are extremely helpful. However you obtain it, your understanding of the major career differences is essential to finding a realistic job focus.

The payoff for your investigative work is more than worth the effort. Knowing what kind of paralegal employment you want becomes the basis for three more key steps in making your internship work for you: defining the learning objectives that will best serve your career; finding a setting that puts you on the right track; and then building support for those objectives.

What You Need to Learn

Once you have decided on what your future job focus is likely to be, you can begin identifying the particular skills and knowledge you need to be successful in that field. Each specialty area requires

its own skills. For example, a student eager to become a litigation paralegal will know from discussions with seasoned professionals that legal research, fact-gathering, factual and legal analysis, managing discovery, and drafting court documents are probably essential skills to develop. On the other hand, someone transitioning to real estate work needs experience in all phases of real estate transfer from the agreement of sale through closing. Smart interns also know what basic, nonspecialized paralegal skills they need to develop. Those vary with each individual but might include, for example, client communications, writing more clearly, organizing data and documents, developing certain computer competencies, or juggling multiple projects effectively.

Even before your first interview, make a list of the specific skills, experiences and knowledge you need to develop for the kind of position you eventually want. Be sure your list includes some basic, as well as specialized, skills. Although interviewers will often ask about your strengths (and you should have a clear mental list of those as well), your written list of learning

objectives is meant to drive your choice of internship setting. Creating this list is the most crucial step toward taking control of your internship experience.

Request an interview with several different offices and bring your written list to each interview. Share your list with each interviewer and ask whether you will have an opportunity to develop at least some of those skills. After discussing this list with three more offices, you will be armed with the information you need to make a truly informed and productive choice for your internship setting.

Find the Right Work Setting

Solo Practitioners

Solo law practices account for almost half of all lawyers in private practice, so this group represents the largest segment of potential internship possibilities and, of course, future employers. In this setting, job descriptions often overlap and every employee gets to do almost everything (except argue in court, of course). The salary level might be lower than in other settings, but a solo practice often is where

entry-level paralegals get the most varied experience, along with insight into the business side of law practice, so this group should not be overlooked.

In a solo practice firm, interns generally find the following pros and cons:

- There may be greater willingness to train
- Experience can be gained in various practice areas
- There may be frequent shifting of law office roles and combined job titles (such as paralegal/secretary)
- You must be able to mentally “switch gears” easily and often
- Opportunities may exist to learn virtually all aspects of law office operations
- You may have to balance conflicting demands and frequent interruptions
- Your relationships with clients may be more personal than in larger offices
- There are no opportunities for promotion
- Salaries generally are lower and benefits fewer
- The work schedule may be more flexible
- The atmosphere is usually less formal than in larger firms.

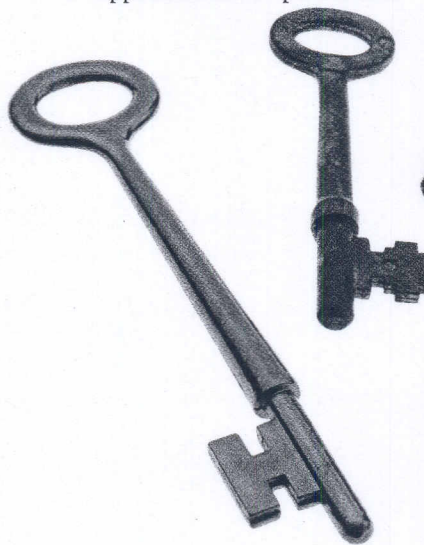
Small Law Firms

Small law firms may be thought of as those employing two to ten lawyers. Over a quarter of all private law firms fall into this category. Some provide a wide variety of legal services (general practice firms) while others may be “boutique” firms catering to clients in a certain field, such as entertainment law or patents and copyrights. Still, others might be high-volume firms offering fairly standardized legal services in limited areas, such as bankruptcy or auto accident cases, at lower costs than other firms.

In small firms, students are likely to find both pros and cons as follows:

- An exciting, highly varied, and often untapped market for entry-level employment
- A need to research each firm on the kind of legal work it does and whether it has prior experience with paralegals
- A frequent need to educate employers on what you can do for them
- The need to be flexible and adaptable

- Unpredictable variations in the following:
 - Definition of a paralegal’s role
 - Preferred qualifications
 - Level of intellectual challenge
 - Extent and nature of specialization
 - Salary levels
 - Opportunities for promotion.



which can make it difficult for newcomers to break into this environment.

A more favorable factor is the ranking system that larger firms often use to

A solo practice often is where entry-level paralegals get the most varied experience, along with insight into the business side of law practice.

Large and Medium-Sized Law Firms

“Medium-sized firms” may be defined as those having 11 to 30 lawyers and “large firms” as those with 30 to 50 lawyers. Around 14 percent of American lawyers in private practice work in large and medium-sized firms as defined here. Roughly another 14 percent of American lawyers in private practice work in firms of over 50 attorneys. In major metropolitan centers such as New York or Los Angeles, one can find law firms having five hundred lawyers or more — what some call “mega-law firms.”

Large and medium-sized firms typically have formal, complex organizational structures, as would be expected in any sizeable business. Legal work is usually divided among specific departments or divisions within the firm, such as for corporate work, personal injury litigation, criminal defense, family law, and so on. The attorneys and paralegals in each department tend to work exclusively in their assigned area of law. Because their work is so sharply compartmentalized, these firms frequently want paralegals with specialized expertise and considerable experience within their specialization,

classify and promote paralegal staff. It generally works like this: At the lowest end of the ranking system is the first tier of entry-level paralegals, who may be known as “document clerks” or another title. In time, top performers in this group might be promoted to a higher tier of experienced, more highly paid paralegals. In addition, there may be a paralegal manager whose job it is to hire, train, and manage other paralegals. This hierarchy creates exciting opportunities for promotion which small offices can rarely offer.

The pros and cons of a large or medium-sized firm can be as follows:

- A high degree of specialization among lawyers and paralegals
- Well-defined tasks and job expectations
- High hourly-billing quotas for paralegals
- A tradition of professional respect for paralegals
- Reluctance to hire the inexperienced
- Very high expectations for paralegal competence
- Strict educational requirements (a four-year degree may be the minimum)
- Top salary levels and a wide range of benefits

- High levels of formality in conduct and appearance
- Significant opportunities for promotion.

The Publicly Funded Law Office

Found in every state, these offices generally come under two categories. One is the public defender, which provides free legal representation to criminal defendants whose income is below certain levels. The other is legal assistance or legal services, which also serves indigent clients but in civil, not criminal, matters. These offices are funded, in large part, by taxpayers through the federal Legal Services Corporation (LSC) and usually carry the name of your state, such as "Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation." Only about 1 percent of practicing lawyers work in these settings but the proportion of paralegal and other non-lawyer personnel tend to be somewhat higher here than in many private law firms.

Legal assistance offices should not be confused with Legal Aid Societies, which are private, charitable organizations providing free legal services in a few metropolitan areas such as New York, where donations are sufficient to support them.

Interns who work in publicly funded offices often find such pros and cons as the following:

- Coworkers tend to be very dedicated to making the legal system work for everyone
- Prestige is not an issue — unpretentious realism prevails
- Proficiency in a second language may be a plus
- Appearance and conduct in the office may be comparatively relaxed
- Furnishings, equipment, and systems might not be up-to-date
- Interns might have much more client contact than elsewhere
- Students quickly learn to be resourceful and self-reliant.

The Corporate Setting

Professionals in this setting don't serve private clients so comparisons to law office environments are difficult to make. Nevertheless, for-profit corporations are the second largest employment category for paralegals, according to some reports. Working for general counsel or the corporation's legal department, paralegals serve a wide variety of the business' own

A Unique Program

By John J. McCork

Paralegal student: Erica West

Paralegal program: South University, West Palm Beach campus

Internship: Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office

South University, established in 1899, offers a paralegal studies program at four of its five campuses — Columbia, S.C.; Montgomery, Ala.; Savannah, Ga.; and West Palm Beach, Fla. While the program provides typical paralegal internships, which it calls "externships," in traditional settings such as law firms, it also offers unique internships tailored to interests of its largely nontraditional students.

"It's a matchmaker business," said Doris Rachles, chair of South's legal studies and paralegal studies programs. "Most of my students work full time. They cannot quit their job to do an externship. I have learned how to work with them and think of things that are a little off the beaten path so that I can give them something that would be interesting and useful and work in their lives."

Rachles said that even when students take more traditional externships, they often don't work normal hours, citing the state attorney's and public defender's offices as examples. "Students who work [other jobs] Monday through Friday go to the courtroom in the county jail on the weekends," she said. "They work the first appearances and see all of the people who have been arrested within the last 24 to 36 hours and have to show up in court. Very often we have students on both sides — one sitting at the state attorney's desk and one sitting at the public defender's desk."

Flexible hours aside, the variety of externships South offers make its program unique.

"We had somebody once at Palms West Hospital who worked in the risk management department," Rachles said. "We have had [an extern] work as an investigator at a private law firm. We have had [an extern] work as a judicial assistant, and I even had [an extern] work for the mayor of Lake Worth, Fla." Other unique externships include the following.

South Florida Water Management District. "[The externs] might work in the litigation section to investigate facts, prepare motions, pleadings and discovery, that kind of thing," Rachles said. "Or some of them have worked in the environmental law unit doing contract work, real estate, those kinds of issues."

Florida Department of Children and Families. "DCF gets involved a lot of times with the termination of parental rights," Rachles said. "So [the externs] may have to deal with children, social workers and guardians *ad litem*. Sometimes they have to go to court" to assist in testifying on how DCF handles a particular case, she added.

Florida Guardian *ad Litem* Program. This is a separate organization from the DCF, which provides legal and volunteer resources to help advocate for neglected, abused and at-risk children. Rachles said some externs have become guardian *ad litem*s by taking a course taught by judges, social workers and attorneys.

Erica West currently is completing a unique externship through the South program. Her longstanding fascination with law enforcement prompted her to pursue an externship with the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office.

West began her externship in September by participating in weekly "ride-alongs" in patrol cars with sheriff's deputies. "[One day], our first call was an elderly lady who was exploited by one of her caretakers," West said. "Then we went to a home burglary where somebody stole a safe out of a house, and then we went on a false alarm. Then we did a DUI."

West said that in the later stages of her externship, she did more office work. She observed two murder trials in West Palm Beach, Fla., by working with the clerk of courts. "The cases were very interesting and it showed me how the attorney [and] paralegal work to prepare for trials," she said. She also went to the narcotics division and was involved in a drug sting. In November, she completed the 120-hour requirement for her externship.

"As far as becoming a paralegal, [the externship] will give me a better understanding of how cases get to an attorney," West said. "I will be better able to work with an attorney and law enforcement because I will know firsthand what their job is. Criminal justice would be my main focus, but I am flexible."

This kind of flexibility is important in the paralegal profession, Rachles said, which is why South offers such a variety of externships. "There are so many different things you can do with a paralegal degree, and I think it's fun and interesting for [our students] to learn about all of these different things," she said.

legal needs. Applicants who research their target companies carefully and present a knowledgeable internship proposal often are well-received, even by companies not advertising internship opportunities. The experience gained in the corporate setting also can lead to in-house hiring, promotions, or perhaps future employment in law firms that serve corporate clients.

Corporate paralegals assist with such activities as:

- Leases, purchases, and sales of land and buildings
- Compliance with employment regulations
- Employee benefits
- Contracts administration
- Franchising
- Trademarks, copyrights, and patents
- Environmental compliance
- Securities transactions
- Annual meetings and annual reports
- In-house litigation support.

*S*tudents and career changers seeking non-law office placement need to keep in mind that paralegals have many different job titles.

Other Non-Law Office Internships

Employment settings that value paralegal experience are by no means limited to law firms. Title companies value paralegals with prior real estate experience; the insurance industry benefits from paralegals with litigation experience; trust departments at financial institutions often use paralegals from estate planning backgrounds; federal and state government agencies often value someone with experience in the fields they regulate; and nonprofit groups might

welcome the expertise of someone with regulatory and litigation experience. In addition, court offices, legislative offices, and even the military often appreciate volunteer paralegal assistance, particularly if the intern has a relevant educational or employment background.

Students and career changers seeking non-law office placement need to keep in mind that paralegals have many different job titles. Because the law today reaches into virtually every form of human endeavor, career changers in particular should remember that paralegal skills might be highly relevant even though the word "paralegal" doesn't appear in the job description. And students should bear in mind that there hardly is a business or undertaking anywhere in which a paralegal education is not of value and a law-related career can't be forged.

Paid Versus Unpaid Internships

Wanting compensation for your internship work is only natural. Depending on their schools' policies, students might not have a choice in the matter of payment. For career changers with family

responsibilities, compensation in some form might be crucial. Nevertheless, all interns need to consider that being a paid employee often has serious costs of its own. The "price" of a paid internship might include:

- Less freedom to request the experience you desire
- Greater likelihood of repetitive tasks or clerical work
- Less tolerance for mistakes
- Inadequate instruction and feedback
- Greater pressure to produce

- Less freedom to ask questions or seek advice
- Less power to shape your own internship experience.

For interns who bravely choose an unpaid internship to ensure more control over the experience they get, there are alternatives to the hourly wage — other forms of compensation to which many offices are receptive. To gain some degree of compensation for their otherwise "unpaid" work, prospective interns might propose one of the following compromises:

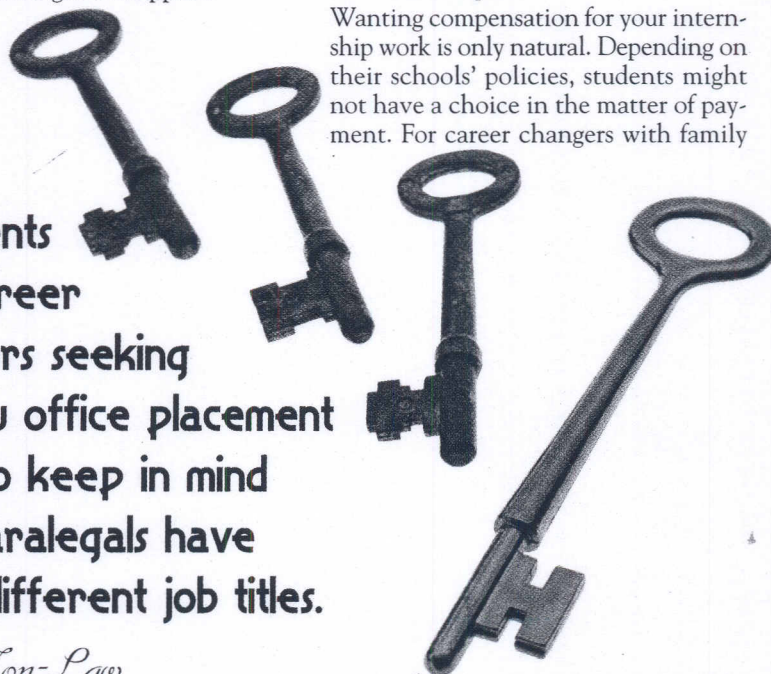
- An unpaid trial period of several weeks, followed by a performance review for the purpose of determining an acceptable compensation level;
- Combining paid work (perhaps routine, high volume, but not intellectually challenging) with unpaid, newer, more educational internship work — all at the same office;
- A long-term job proposal that you make after a couple of months of interning, when your skills level and the needs of the office are more clearly evident to everyone;
- An end-of-internship bonus based on what you have produced for the office, evidenced by the hourly client billing that you generated for the firm or calculated by some other measure of productivity.

It's not unusual for interns to combine their internship hours with paid part-time work elsewhere. Sometimes a competing employment schedule can be modified to accommodate a part-time internship. Occasionally, an off-hours internship can be found, which allows full-time employment elsewhere, although this option severely limits your internship choices.

In a more perfect world, we would find a way to pay all interns a livable wage. But until that happens, whatever financial sacrifices your internship requires are as worthwhile as the career change you are making. The key is to make this short-term hardship serve your larger, long-term goals with real effectiveness.

Make Your New Skills Pay Off

When the time comes to update your résumé with a good description of your internship experience, unaided memory



will not serve you well. Key skills and achievements easily will be overlooked. As the internship draws to a close, recounting your many newfound skills to prospective employers will be haphazard at best unless you have documented your new expertise along the way. Here are several ways to keep track of new skills as you progress through your internship so you can use them to make a strong impression on future employers.

Use a daily log. Keep a log of the tasks you perform each day, with a brief description of each new or different task, to review later when you prepare for job interviews. Some of these items will also make an impressive addition to the "Achievements" or "Skills" section of your new résumé.

Keep copies of your work. With your internship supervisor's permission (and redaction of clients' names and identifying information), accumulate copies of your best work in a portfolio to offer prospective employers as tangible evidence of your abilities.

Obtain an evaluation. Have your internship supervisor complete an evaluation form midway through the internship, and again at its conclusion, to demonstrate your achievements and the important strides you made. Check with your school or an internship handbook for forms you can use, or create one yourself based on the learning objectives you identified prior to taking the internship.

Ask for letters. Request testimonial letters (similar to letters of recommendation) from internship coworkers and supervisors, asking them to comment on specific projects or skills areas that you identify for them in advance.

Make a list of contacts. Keep a running list of every professional contact you make during your internship experience, including basic personal data for each. These can be useful for future job references, job search advice and life-long professional networking.

Keep conflicts of interest information. Maintain a confidential list of your clients' names and the nature of your internship service to each in case a future employer requests this information to check for conflicts of interest. Don't share this list with anyone until you are actually employed, and then only if requested for the purpose of conflict-checking.

The Career Changer

By John J. McBurk

Paralegal student: Wakako Yasunari

Paralegal program: California State University, Los Angeles

Internship: Securities and Exchange Commission, Los Angeles

In 2000, Wakako Yasunari suddenly found herself with no job and grim employment prospects. A Japanese native who worked for The Walt Disney Co. in Southern California from 1978 to 1988, she helped the company open Tokyo Disneyland in 1983. Multiple Japanese companies soon entered the theme park business, and Yasunari spent the next 12 years managing Dyflex Creation, Inc., an American subsidiary of a Japanese company. Then the Japanese parent company closed the U.S. operations in order to focus on its business in Japan.

"I specialized in the theme park business, which is a very narrow industry," Yasunari said. "I had to think, 'What can I do?' I was freelancing as a Japanese business consultant, but I couldn't rely totally on that." In 2004, she found a new career.

"I saw an ad looking for Japanese paralegals in the intellectual property area, and that caught my interest," she said. "I found a school nearby (California State University, Los Angeles) and took one paralegal class to see if I liked it, and I liked it a lot. Right after I started the program, I discovered the internship at the Securities and Exchange Commission."

Yasunari's previous employment experience piqued her interest in the SEC. "Because of my years in business at Disney and in the entertainment field, I always followed corporate news," she said. "To me, the SEC seemed like good people. I didn't consider any law firms [for an internship]. I only wanted to work for the SEC."

Yasunari worked two days a week in the SEC's mid-Wilshire Los Angeles regional office from August 2004 to June 2005, three months of that time for school credit and eight months without credit. While her internship lasted much longer than most, "I didn't do it [just] for credit," she said, citing her enjoyment of the internship and her desire to gain as much paralegal experience as possible.

Yasunari said that during her internship there were six paralegals, several contract paralegals and about 70 attorneys in the Los Angeles SEC office. "I assisted the paralegals in litigation in the Division of Enforcement," she said, and "I did whatever they wanted me to do." And on her first day, they invited her to go on a picnic.

"It turned out to be their annual picnic day at the SEC," Yasunari said. "They invited me to join, but I didn't want to. I wanted to work." She wound up working with the only attorney who remained in the office.

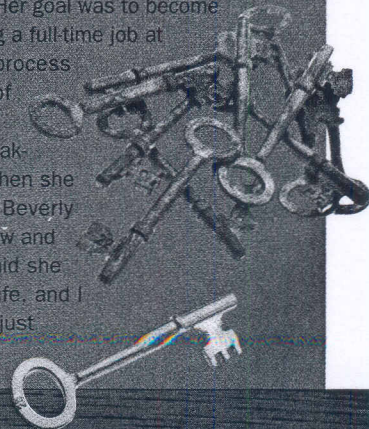
Despite her unusual first day, Yasunari thoroughly enjoyed her SEC experience. "They taught me how to summarize depositions. It was fun," she said. "They'd also ask me to review documents and search certain documents using their litigation software. Sometimes there was privileged information that we had to sort out or redact. Sometimes there was clerical [work], because it [had] to be done."

Yasunari said that her work involved "a number of major fraud cases dealing with CEOs and/or CFOs" and that the legal software she used most often was Concordance and CaseMap.

"I learned from the paralegals that we're there to assist the attorneys, and whatever they need done should be the top priority," Yasunari said. "One [paralegal] told me that you really need to impress the attorneys, and then they'll give you the good jobs, not just the mundane ones."

Yasunari earned her certificate in paralegal studies from CSULA in June 2005 and ended her internship upon receiving her certificate. Her goal was to become a litigation paralegal, and she initially looked into landing a full-time job at the SEC, but found the requirements and application process daunting. "I checked to see if there was any chance of getting a job there, but it's so difficult," she said.

Yasunari started working for legal staffing agencies, taking both litigation and corporate jobs, until July 2007, when she found a permanent home at Ervin Cohen & Jessup in Beverly Hills, Calif. While her workload veers toward corporate law and not the litigation track she originally envisioned, she said she is enjoying her new career as a paralegal. "It's a new life, and I love it," Yasunari said. "Particularly this firm I work for, I just feel that I am at the right one."



The Small Firm Experience *By John J. McCurk*

Paralegal student: Anita Michalec

Paralegal program: Institute for Paralegal Studies, Loyola University Chicago

Internship: Scandaglia & Ryan, Chicago

After graduating from Western Illinois University in 2005 with a bachelor's degree in political science, Anita Michalec faced a career dilemma. "I was interested in government and law, but I didn't know how to apply it," she said. But she soon found the answer after attending an open house held by the Institute for Paralegal Studies at Loyola University Chicago. "They had paralegals who had graduated the program come talk to you," she said. "I decided to give it a shot."

Michalec enrolled at Loyola in fall 2005 and obtained her certificate in paralegal studies in May 2006. As part of the program, she completed an internship at Scandaglia & Ryan, a Chicago litigation firm that employs 10 lawyers, two paralegals and a project assistant.

"At Loyola, you have core classes you have to take, and there is room for two electives," Michalec said. "One of them can be an internship. If you have no legal experience, you would be crazy not to do an internship."

When discussing possible internships with Loyola paralegal program director Jean Hellman Ryan, Michalec expressed a preference for a small firm. "I felt that being in a large-firm atmosphere would intimidate me," she said.

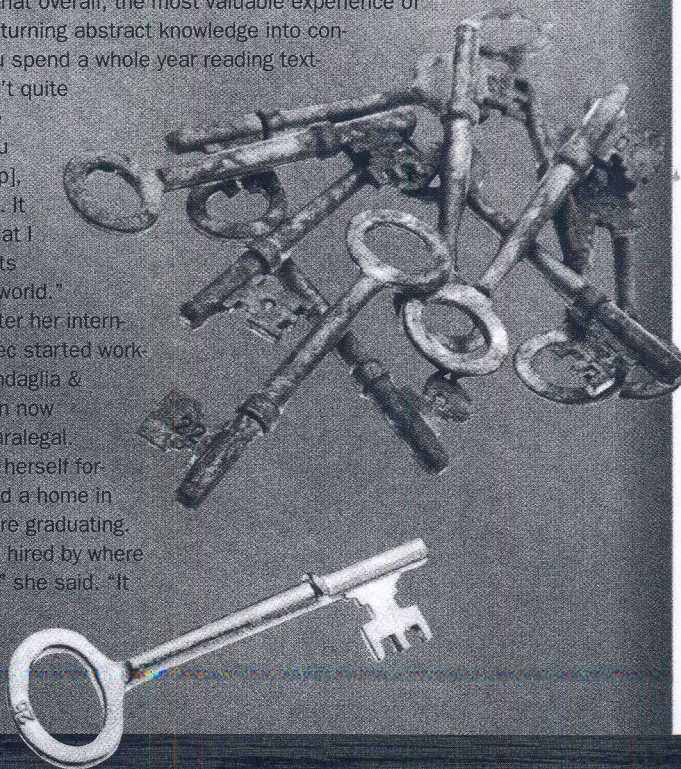
Hellman Ryan suggested Scandaglia & Ryan where paralegal and Loyola graduate Danielle Duncan could be her supervisor. Michalec said that during the first week of her two-month internship, which began in March 2006, Duncan showed her how the firm worked. "I wasn't thrown into a large firm where they say, 'Start indexing something,'" she said. "I got a chance to see how everything is run."

"I did production logs and a research project for an attorney. I also got sent with the project assistant to court a lot to file things," she said. "I know that's not mainly what a paralegal does, but it really helped me understand everything. ... We are generally a commercial and trademark [firm], but we have every kind of case. I got a lot of exposure to many different types of law."

In addition to being exposed to various areas of law, Michalec said she learned another aspect of small-firm paralegal work. "We use a trademark program called Saegis," she said. "[Duncan] was meeting with the [software] representative. She took me on a business lunch with her and introduced me to the representative. At school, I never realized that if I'm a paralegal in a small firm, I'm the one dealing with the vendors."

Michalec said that overall, the most valuable experience of her internship was turning abstract knowledge into concrete practice. "You spend a whole year reading text books, but you don't quite understand it," she said. "But when you start [the internship], it all starts clicking. It was seeing how what I learned in class gets applied in the real world."

Three weeks after her internship ended, Michalec started working full time at Scandaglia & Ryan, where Duncan now serves as senior paralegal. Michalec considers herself fortunate to have found a home in the profession before graduating. "I'm lucky that I got hired by where I did my internship," she said. "It was nice already knowing the attorneys and the environment."



Build a Great Résumé

Employers look for relevance in a résumé, plus concrete examples of the particular skills they need in a paralegal. When you put together your log of tasks performed, your file of work samples, your co-workers' testimonial letters, your supervisor's letter or evaluation forms, and the completed items on your original list of learning objectives, you have a rich gold mine of solid achievements and skills you can now highlight. Review all of the records you have created, extract the items and phrases most likely to meet the needs of each prospective employer, and emphasize the most relevant ones for great effectiveness. Be prepared to discuss examples of the achievements and skills your résumé cites. As long as everything you report is truthful, you can selectively tailor your résumé to the needs of different employers for a well-targeted employment campaign.

To leverage an internship into the substance of a real career, a wise intern doesn't count on luck. Smart students and careful career changers choose their work setting carefully, interview each office just as diligently as the office interviews them, and structure the experience from the outset to get full value from the time and effort they will invest in it. By consciously shaping this experience before it begins, you too can put your internship to work for you and turn your career aspirations into reality.

Portions of this article are excerpted from "Paralegal Internships: Finding, Managing and Transitioning Your Career" 1st edition by POST, 1999. Reprinted with permission of Delmar Learning, a division of Thomson Learning: www.thomsonrights.com. Fax (800) 730-2215. ■



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