

As Seen In

Long Island
BusinessNEWS

July 11-17, 2008

Paralegals see scope of job, responsibilities increase

Law firms use them to do almost everything but argue cases

By **CLAUDE SOLNIK**

Charles Cox has worked on some interesting cases over the years at Scully, Scott, Murphy & Presser in Garden City. He was part of the team representing Kodak in a patent infringement suit filed against Polaroid, resulting in a \$909 million settlement. He also worked cases involving patents for a bevy of inventions. But don't expect him to appear before a judge; he's not an attorney.



Bob Giglione

Charles Cox (foreground) is a paralegal with Scully, Scott, where Peter I. Bernstein is a partner.

Cox is a paralegal, a trained part of the legal team who conducts research, coordinates paperwork, does interviews and makes sure motions are filed by the deadline.

There were 238,000 paralegals in 2006, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. That's expected to rocket 22 percent to 291,000 by 2016. Firms are "trying to reduce costs and increase the availability and efficiency of legal services by hiring paralegals to perform tasks once done by lawyers," according to the BLS.

Peter I. Bernstein, a partner at Scully, Scott who started his career about 20 years ago as a paralegal, sees paralegals as a key component of casework.

"There are always fewer paralegals than you would love to have," Bernstein said. "Paralegals tend to be a cost-effective solution for many clients to achieve their goals and get work product done efficiently."

A study by the American Bar Association titled "The Economic Benefits of Paralegal Utilization" found using paralegals improves profits, client satisfac-

tion and retention, and lawyers' quality of life.

Relying on paralegals reduces legal fees and provides clients with "more accessible and familiar firm contacts," according to the study.

Chris Wittstruck, coordinator of paralegal studies at Hofstra University, said gone are the days when paralegals were glorified legal secretaries. They can do everything attorneys do except advise on law and argue cases in court.

"A paralegal is an individual who assists an attorney in an ever-growing number of ways," he said.

Paralegals, he said, interview clients, conduct research and do work that, in the past, were reserved for attorneys.

"There's tremendous responsibility for the paralegal," Wittstruck said. "A skilled bankruptcy paralegal understands [the process] from soup to nuts," he said. "They can file it in bankruptcy court."

"You have to be able to juggle a lot of things at once," Cox said. "You're not just dealing with the deadlines and attorneys; you

also have to deal with the court and its calendar."

Cox also said paralegals must work well with attorneys, not simply manage paperwork or electronic filings. "They key to this is communication," he said. "If the paralegal and attorneys have open communication, you won't find a lot of unexpected things."

Paralegal students develop expertise much the way attorneys do. But their training is practical rather than the more abstract understanding given at law school, Wittstruck said.

About 1,000 colleges and universities offer paralegal training programs, according to BLS.

Students in a seven-month full-day or nine-month evening program at Hofstra University study legal writing and research, introduction to law, civil procedures and disciplines such as criminal law, contract law, business organizations, bankruptcy, family law, wills, trust and estates.

"It gives you the opportunity to select the one you're interested in," Cox said. "It gives you a broader view of the different disciplines." ■

Scully, Scott, Murphy & Presser PC
400 Garden City Plaza, Suit 300, Garden City, N.Y. 11530 • 516-742-4343
intprop@ssmp.com
