

Everything Your Paralegal Wants You to Know, But Never Told You

Did you ever wonder what is really going on inside your paralegal's head? In three recent *Time Mastery* workshops for paralegals, we asked them to write something that they wished their bosses knew. We collected approximately 100 responses. The results are instructive and sometimes poignant. Their direct comments speak most eloquently about what they want you to know. Following are the top ten responses. (The number after the category indicates how many responses were received in that category.) We include some time mastery tips for lawyers appropriate to each category.

1) I Have a Life Outside of Work (11)

- I don't have the same desire to work as much or as hard as you do. That's why I'm not a lawyer, and that's why I make a lot less than you.
- Telephone calls on weekends at home are not acceptable.
- I would like to go home on time and spend more time with my kids.
- My family is much more important to me than my job.
- When lunch time rolls around I need to take a break and to eat something. Otherwise, I'm unproductive, unhappy, and unfriendly.
- Work/life balance is extremely important. If you need me to stay late, give me a warning so I can arrange my life accordingly. Respect my time.
- Working 12-13 hours a day and working weekends is not normal or healthy.
- I have a husband and kids at home and my life does not revolve around the office.
- I have personal matters to attend to and do not like to feel guilty.

The reason many paralegals have work/life balance problems is that the lawyers they work for don't have a balance. There are many reasons for this, but the bottom line is probably that lawyers are afraid to say "no!" The simplest, and perhaps most difficult way, to learn to get a balance and to say "no" is to go "cold turkey." Pick a specific time to leave the office every

day and do it no matter what, even if it is only five minutes earlier than you now normally leave. Overwork is the reward you give yourself for inefficiency.

2) I Want You to Recognize and Appreciate What I Do (11)

- I do a lot of work that you are not even aware of.
 - Much of what I do is behind the scenes, things that you don't see.
 - Notice who actually does the work, and whether the "managers" are doing what they're paid to do. My boss has no clue.
 - I do my work well, and nothing is ever said until I mess something up.
 - I would feel more motivated to work if you said "please" and "thank you" once in a while.
 - I deserve a raise. I need encouragement.
 - I will work diligently for you as long as you treat me as a professional.
 - Show more appreciation.
- Fortunately, not all lawyers fail to show appreciation. Here is one positive comment:
- The fact that he shows me respect and recognizes my skills and abilities makes me loyal and hard-working.

Apparently many lawyers are so busy that they don't realize everything that their paralegals actually do. Often they are too time-stressed to pull back, notice, and show appreciation. Pick one specific thing a day to thank or acknowledge your paralegal for.

3) Give Me Clear Instructions (11)

- Give clear, concise instructions. It will save time for both of us.
- When you dictate, speak clearly.
- Ask for what you want and be specific.
- If you gave me clear instructions in the first place, it would save time for both of us.
- Know exactly what you want done and when.
- Take more notes in client conferences. Write clearly and explain diagrams.

Lack of clear communication is another result of caving in to time pressures. You have to decide who is going to run your business, you or your clients. Have a brief morning meeting with your paralegal to go over priorities and to answer questions. This would also be a good time to find out what they have been doing for you that you aren't aware of and to thank them.

4) Get Organized (11)

- Our department needs more structure and organization.
- How chaotic and dysfunctional things are sometimes.
- Communicate with me more effectively regarding the status of files and who is working on what.
- Lead by example. Good work habits and efficiency start with proper organization and management.
- Educate department staff on internal policies and procedures to ensure consistency and save time spent thinking about how to do things.
- Set realistic timelines for completion of a file
- Communicate with other lawyers when it comes to prioritizing our work.
- You think your work is important. So do the other ten lawyers I work for.
- We need to be able to locate files easily rather than dig through the piles in your office.

Besides a regular morning meeting, have a meeting with all staff specifically on office organization. Ask them what ideas they have to make the office run more smoothly. In that vein, you can also ask them, "What do I do that gets in the way of your efficiency?" Asking that question also opens the door for you to tell them what they do that gets in the way of your efficiency!

5) Stop Constant Last-Minute Requests and Interruptions (11)

- My biggest interruption is my boss.
- Don't call me every time you have a thought.
- If you ask me to concentrate on

a specific task, don't give me a multitude of other tasks due ASAP.

- Plan ahead so we can be more proactive. Reacting at the last minute requires rushing to finish a job.
- Don't talk so much. It wastes your time, my time, and everyone you interrupt.
- We can both leave earlier if we don't waste time during the day.
- Do not assign work at the end of the day and expect it will get done ASAP.
- When you give work to me at 3:45, it irritates me.

Interruptions will control your time if you let them. You then follow suit and interrupt your paralegal. Take a "priority hour" every day, a block of time when you allow no interruptions. Allow your paralegal to do the same.

6) Talk to Me; I Am Competent and Want to Help You (7)

- Let me help you look good. I can do so much more than you allow me to. Let me help you be prepared.
- I have skills that can make our practice more productive.
- Listen when I talk; I have good ideas. Be on my side.
- I have the ability to prioritize my workload and fulfill your requests in priority sequence.
- I have more knowledge of the court system than you realize.
- I would like to get more involved in the cases and learn from them.

The tyranny of the urgent not only fosters several of the complaints above, but it also prevents you from recognizing what a valuable asset you have in your paralegal. Recognize the competence of paralegals and, besides telling them things, ask them about things. Besides the morning meeting mentioned above, have weekly or bi-weekly meetings to be clear on priorities for the upcoming case load, and to ask if they have any advice for handling the office and the workload more efficiently.

7) Recognize That Things Take Time to Do (7)

- It takes a lot longer to do the tasks you give me than you think it does.
- It takes longer to execute instructions than it does to issue them.
- It takes three to four times longer to type, edit, print, and mail a letter

than it does to dictate one.

- You don't have to take every case. You can be more selective.

Once again, daily communication with your paralegal will allow you and her/him to get a better handle on the workload.

8) Talk to Me: We Need to Prioritize (6)

- I would be far more productive if we could meet once a week to go over my assignments. But you are always putting me off as you don't have time.
- You are always busy. It's hard to get you to commit fifteen minutes for me.
- I will be able to help you better if you spend more focused time with me on client files.
- Slow down and listen to me when we are working together.
- I have an agenda too. Let's compromise!
- My time is valuable too. I feel I'm always waiting for you.

Is the concept of communicating with your paralegal sinking in yet? One paralegal had a good suggestion in this regard: use joint working sessions as a teaching method. Commit time to walking your paralegal through a process until he/she learns it.

9) Stop Procrastinating (4)

- Don't procrastinate and wait until the last minute to give me a task.
- Follow through on actions.
- Take ownership for your part of the way things are going, for example, missed deadlines.

Perhaps this section gives us one clue as to why last minute assignments and constant interruptions happen—procrastination on the lawyer's part. Use the "worst first" technique every day. First thing in the morning, make a list of everything you have to do for the day. Ask which one you want to do the least. Do it first!

10) I Need Help (4)

- We need an assistant to help us with less complicated tasks until we are caught up in our work.
- Having an assistant would be the best way to get through the pile on my desk.
- I need an assistant to get work done more efficiently so I don't feel burnt out and want to leave.

- I have no incentive to stay—not enough money, no follow-through on promises.

Maybe your paralegal is overworked because you are. Maybe it is time for both of you to get help. Push work down to the lowest level capable of doing it. If you are not working on billable matters or higher priorities because you are stuck doing lower level or administrative activities, delegate them to your paralegal. But if they are already overworked, let them have an assistant, even part-time, to whom they can delegate their lower level activities.

In reviewing these comments, two themes seem to be glaringly evident if you want to maximize your paralegal's potential and your own:

1. For goodness' sake, talk to them!

Thank them and show appreciation for what they do. Trust them. Ask their advice. Help them prioritize. Have a set time to talk to them every day. Listen to their ideas.

2. Get control of your own time. Most lack of communication stems from poor time management skills to deal with the pressures that law firms and departments work under. Set priorities, start saying no, stop procrastinating, take time to get organized, manage your practice, and balance your work and personal life. Here are three ways to do this:

- Take a time management seminar.
- Set aside time each day to set priorities and manage your practice, including managing your staff.
- Ask your paralegals how to do things! They are knowledgeable, competent and willing to communicate if given a chance.

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