

THE UNIQUE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARALEGALS AND THEIR ATTORNEYS

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HMPA President 2009-2010

There exists a unique relationship between paralegals and their attorneys that is often overlooked, or is at least, unspoken. Most paralegals have quite beneficial, interdependent professional relationships with their attorney supervisors that are often sustained throughout many years of practice. The reasons for these distinctive partnerships are many, a few of which we will examine in this article.

There are many dynamics within a law firm or legal group, all just as important one to the other. There are, however, distinctive differences - each coloring the nature of the relationship in a different hue, thereby rendering them unique. Between attorneys who are both partners, for instance, there exists a bond derived from shared visions, practice history, and the overall fraternity or alliance that is the natural product of such a relationship. But along with that bond a certain detachment can also exist due to competition. Competition over clients, points, or promotions. It is the same for associates who work together. On the one hand, who better to understand one another and stick together more than a peer, but on the other, competition may prevent full disclosure on a variety of issues. This nuance in the relationship is not necessarily due to a lack of trust, but instead may simply be a matter of discretion. Regarding attorneys and their administrative assistants, many times a bond exists that, while professional, is more familial in nature. It naturally evolves from the inherently personal ties that are developed from having daily exposure to calls, calendars, mailings, expenses, and shared stories (and yes, sometimes personal errands). Again, equally as important as the other dynamics of the firm, but different. That brings us to paralegals.



CITGO paralegal supervisor Valerie Rucker, with her Legal Department team “The IncrediBowls”, who recently participated in the charity event MDA CITGO Flamingo Bowl 2009. CITGO had 35 teams bowling, raising a total of \$125,000 for MDA.

Back Row (from left) - Dean Hasseman (General Counsel), Arnaldo Arcay
Middle Row - Angela Daniels
Front Row - Chris Garza, Judith Colbert, Valerie Rucker

Paralegals are often the unsung heroes of the firm or legal group. They work the same long hours as the associates, are reliable around the clock and are the most devoted, loyal team members. But yet I say unsung, as too often the celebratory client dinners, summer clerk functions and lavish birthday or holiday presents don’t generally flow their way. Even still, they are the go-to person when attorneys reach out.

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The lack of competition between paralegals and their attorney supervisors generally allows for fuller disclosure and less detachment. Additionally, beyond fulfilling the role of confidant, tactician, sounding board and worker bee, paralegals are usually so intertwined with the attorney's practice that they are usually the first to volunteer with pro bono and other community service projects that their supervisor is involved with. Due to the nature of this unique relationship, many times a very strong and lasting bond develops over the years. Attorneys who do not, or have not yet, seen the value of such a relationship are unfortunately not much of a visionary. A growing client demand due to economic necessity has only served to highlight the intrinsic value the paralegal can bring to any attorney or practice group, including their professional contribution to our legal services industry as a whole.

Clients have become wise to the economic value of paralegal inclusion. They realize paralegals can perform virtually all the tasks that an attorney can perform, under the direct supervision of a licensed attorney, save the setting of fees and other tasks that attorneys *only* may perform, with one important difference - THE COST! In turn, paralegals have an important responsibility, a mandate if you will, to strive toward the highest level of professional and educational development and keep their skill set so substantive in nature that their attorney supervisors can delegate almost any legal task without hesitation. Only by providing consistent, professional, highly specialized work product will the rewards of such a unique relationship come.

In closing, many paralegals out there (including the ones we've highlighted in this article) are treated with great respect by their employers, in ways that make them feel vital, necessary and included in the day to day decisions that affect clients. They earn substantial fees for their firms, and real weight is given to their ideas and opinions. They are included in strategic meetings and conference calls at the outset of deals and cases, a move that saves both time and money and where creative ideas are born from experienced minds. Unfortunately, many still are not treated in this way. These are areas where too many firms and practice groups today fall short, at their clients' expense. To this end, HMPA continues to be a vocal advocate for the advancement of our profession and the realization of the overwhelming potential of the special attorney/paralegal relationship discussed in this article. Of course, the paralegals in our association make the task easy. We are inspired daily by your talents, grit and work ethic, and we thank you for that. It makes the task of inclusion that much easier!



Member Teri Sain with her attorney supervisor, Mickey Davis. Teri works in the Tax Section of Bracewell & Giuliani LLP and has been with Mr. Davis for 2 1/2 years. Their practice consists of wealth transfer planning and offers sophisticated strategies for maximizing assets, minimizing taxation and preserving wealth for future generations. Teri recently worked alongside members of her section at the Will-A-Thon sponsored by the Houston Bar Association in May.

Mel Glina is a TBLS and NALA certified paralegal in the Energy, Finance, Infrastructure and Real Estate Section of Bracewell & Giuliani LLP in Houston, Texas specializing in all phases of commercial real estate and energy transactions. She is currently President of HMPA, Texas' largest local paralegal association and has been published in and interviewed for various national and state publications such as Texas Paralegal Journal and is a frequent guest speaker at many paralegal CLE programs and forums on the topics of ethics, commercial real estate, and the role of paralegals in today's economically conservative legal market.