

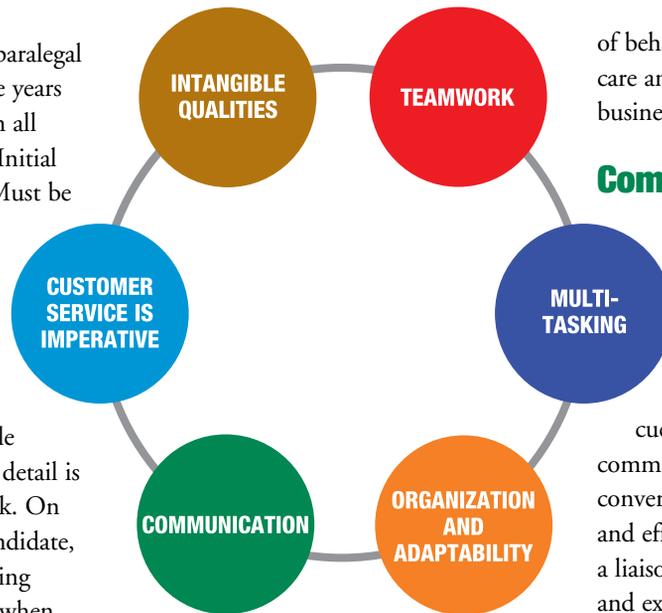
Wanted: Soft Skills

By Kimberly A. Grabbe, ACP, FRP

Wanted: A litigation paralegal with a minimum of five years experience, familiar with all facets of litigation from Initial Complaint through to Jury Trial. Must be flexible, goal-oriented, an excellent communicator and must have a sense of humor. Wait, a sense of humor? Based on your resume, you are a top notch researcher and writer. A master of office technology, organization, document and file management and your attention to detail is impeccable. Check, check and check. On paper, you appear to be a prime candidate, fully capable of adequately performing your job. So you think to yourself, when did having a sense of humor become so important? What kind of circus are they running?

Intangible Qualities

Core skills and experience in our industry are only a fraction of what an employer is looking for, that means “soft,” or intangible qualities, such as leadership skills, a sense of humor or being able to “play well with others,” can be a strong competitive advantage. Employers tend to demand the moon and stars these days, but what they are really looking for are candidates who will be easy to work with. The hard (core) skills, such as legal research, writing, etc., can be taught in school. Employers are looking for the whole package in a candidate. That perfect mix of personal qualities, habits, attitudes, and social graces, or



soft skills will complement any candidate's core skills. In addition, employers want to make sure all candidates know that going the extra mile is part of the job. These soft skills are essential components in the success of a firm. When a search comes down to two candidates with similar backgrounds and core competencies, the one who may be a better “team player” or who can “wear many hats” is more likely to get the nod.

Customer Service is Imperative

You are the first impression of your firm. Up to 80% of your day is spent communicating with someone, whether it is your client, a potential new client, vendors, experts or your attorney. You are expected to act to a higher standard

of behavior, conduct, competency, client care and general ethics than the average businessman or woman.

Communication

Good communications skills are essential for this role whether it is face-to-face, over the phone, or in writing. Speaking on the phone will require special attention to the tone of your voice. Body language cues are an essential part of face-to-face communications. Email and other web conversations can't convey tone, so clear and effective writing is important. You are a liaison, you are the lawyer's right hand, and expressing your thoughts clearly is essential.

Organization and Adaptability

Sometimes, being organized means managing different personalities at once and going outside your comfort zone to fulfill all aspects of a job. If your job is document intensive, it is vital to classify and catalog, categorize and organize everything your attorney needs. Change is inevitable. To stay organized, paralegals must be able to quickly adapt and change priorities at the drop of a hat. However, organizing well is time-intensive. A successful paralegal sets aside great amounts of time to make his or her work flow smoother by organizing and making detailed duty lists.

Multi-Tasking

Very rarely are paralegals assigned to a single case or task. Paralegals must juggle multiple tasks and simultaneously balance priorities. For example, a paralegal may interview a witness, email a client, train a coworker on a new database and research a legal issue within the same one-hour block of time. The most successful paralegals are able to think flexibly, prioritize assignments and balance the demands of multiple supervisors and clients.

Teamwork

Above all, the most important characteristic of an ideal paralegal is teamwork. Since rules regarding the unauthorized practice of law require paralegals to work under the supervision of a lawyer, teamwork is critical to paralegal practice. Paralegals are part of a larger legal team within their organization that may include

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associates, partners, fellow paralegals, legal secretaries and others. It is vital to realize that groups like these may include people with more or less experience than a paralegal may have. Paralegals must also work collaboratively with outside parties including clients, opposing counsel, experts and vendors. The delivery of legal services is complex where a team with multiple skills is necessary to provide quality and cost-effective service.

Kimberly A. Grabbe, *ACP, FRP*, is the senior paralegal within the vaccine department at Maglio Christopher & Toale P.A., in the Firm's Sarasota office. She is a member of the Paralegal Association of Florida Suncoast Chapter, Editor of the chapter's newsletter, "In Re: Suncoast Review" and editorial co-chair for the Paralegal Association of Florida, Inc., newsletter "In Brief." Kim Grabbe is also a member of the State College of Florida Paralegal/Legal Assisting Program Advisory Committee. Prior to joining the firm, she spent eleven years working for the Sarasota Sheriff's office, primarily in Public Safety Communications (911 dispatch) as a supervisor, Emergency Medical Dispatch Quality Assurance officer and training officer.



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Family Law:

Division of Property and Spousal Support APC Course

The NALA Advanced Paralegal Certification Board has released Family Law - Division of Property and Spousal Support. The second of four advanced programs for family law paralegals, this course concentrates on practice and procedure in the area of alimony and property division.

Modules in the course cover the general topics of the legal framework through which alimony and property division obligations are imposed and enforced, and:

- property and support during marriage
- identification of property for agreements and litigation resolution
- premarital and marital agreements
- basic principles and particular issues in property distribution
- alimony awards and agreements
- discovery issues and alimony and property distribution
- income tax consequences to awards
- modification and enforcement of alimony and property division agreements and orders.

Upon successful completion of this course, including all course

requirements, qualified Certified Paralegals will receive an Advanced Certified Paralegal (ACP) credential in Family Law – Division of Property and Spousal Support.

The APC Board has determined that an ACP designation in Family Law will be awarded to Certified Paralegals who complete the following courses:

- Child Support, Visitation and Child Custody
- Division of Property and Spousal Support
- Adoption and Assisted Reproduction
- Dissolution Case Management

Successful completion of all 4 courses will lead to an advanced certification in Family Law.

Visit the NALA web site: Certification/Advanced Paralegal Certification to learn more about Family Law - Division of Property and Spousal Support.



Certified Paralegals who successfully complete this APC course, and all requirements, are entitled to earn 20 hours of CLE credit, in addition to award of the Advanced Certified Paralegal credential.