

## **The Coming Paralegal Job Boom**

By Chere B. Estrin

Sept. 2, 2003

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Perusing the paper this morning in an attempt to make the most of my precious 15 minutes before rushing out the door, I happened upon an article that caught my interest. While I'm not necessarily looking for a new job, I found something I was sure must have been created specifically for me. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that to make the sequel to the movie, *Bridget Jones Diary*, Renee Zellweger is about to be paid \$112,000 to gain 30 pounds. She has three months before the movie begins filming.

Now, let's address this situation for just a moment. I really felt they hired the wrong person. At \$3,733.33 per pound, I am quite certain that I could be persuaded to apply for the job. In fact, at that rate, they could skip consideration of any other candidates. I wouldn't need three whole months. Heck, with my proven track record, I could accomplish the goal in say, 30 days – tops.

And that brings me in a roundabout way to this column's main topic, jobs. That is, specifically, the coming job boom for paralegals. (OK, so it's very roundabout way of getting here. Give a gal a break.) According to a recent article in *Time* magazine, there is about to be a critical demand for job seekers who have the right skills or are willing to learn them in certain industries where burnout and early retirement are common. This is due, in part, to the 76 million baby boomers heading toward retirement over the next three decades and only 46 million Gen Xers waiting in the wings. Corporate America is about to face a potentially mammoth talent crunch.

To the millions of laid-off workers still pounding the pavement, this may seem like wishful thinking. However, any time the economy grows, the job market usually lags by at least a few months. To land a job, record numbers of workers are taking pay

cuts or switching industries and yet others are starting their own businesses. But hard as it is to believe, employees should be in the driver's seat in a relatively short period of time.

How does this affect the paralegal field? Profoundly. Part of the baby boomer segment that will be retiring are lawyers and paralegals. Given the overall acceptance in recent years by consumers for paralegals, it stands to reason that the demand for paralegals will only increase. Will there be enough paralegals to replace retirees and fill the increased demand? Not if the same ratio of baby boomers to Gen Xers in the outside world applies to the legal field. The one thing that could skew the ratio is that the paralegal field tends to attract an "older" worker rather than a Gen Xer. (The average age of student is about 38.) Yet, at some point, the "older" worker retires as well.

In addition to the coming baby boomer/Gen Xer void, the crunch has already arrived in fields that are currently hot. Anytime a field is deemed "hot", a need for more specialized legal services is created. More need for legal services equates to – you guessed it – more need for paralegals. Here are just a few of the fields *Time* has pinpointed as hot industries for the next decade:

**Drugmakers:** Firms that create wonder drugs are in one of the few industries that continue to hire in droves. Abbott Laboratories hopes to fill 5,000 new positions this year alone including positions for sales reps whose primary responsibility is to drive product launches. Here's an opportunity for more positions for paralegals in IP, trademark, patent, pharmaceutical issues, litigation, corporate, and technology to name a few.

**Biotech:** Finally starting to deliver on its promise, this industry is creating more jobs from lab work to medical writing. Genentech, based in South San Francisco, is increasing its head count each year by 6%. This company represents only one of the many firms seeking to increase its staff.

**Military:** Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> ushered in a new era of respect for government. The Army, Navy and Marines all have needs for paralegals. Paralegals in the military have exciting, interesting careers and certain job security for a specified length of time. If you want to see the world, here's your chance.

**Law enforcement:** Did you know the FBI, the Department of Defense, the Justice Department and State departments not only hire paralegals, they are revving up their head count? (I can just see myself on a covert mission somewhere in the Middle East. Hot, sweaty, and craving a Frappuccino, I'm quite sure I would not have volunteered for isolation, desert sand and a thirsty camel. They should have known when I said I'd go east, I meant the Bahamas.)

**Construction:** The industry needs to attract 240,000 workers in the next year just to compensate for its retiring employees. This is a strong indication the field remains highly energetic. Of course, this means more lawsuits in construction defect, asbestos, mold and more.

**Computers:** Computer-related jobs will be among the fastest growing in the next decade. Law firms are not left out of the onslaught. Paralegals can move into the daunting tangles of technology, from electronic evidence discovery to system analysts and litigation support specialists to database administrators and directors of technology.

**Lawyers and paralegals:** Thousands of lawyers have become casualties of the latest round of corporate downsizing. According to *Time*, the long-range picture looks better. As baby boomers scale back their time at the office to concentrate on other activities, from golf to philanthropy, corporate America will be desperate to find qualified managers and executives as well as support staff, from administrative assistants to paralegals.

**Finance and Accounting:** The Sarbanes-Oxley Act has set the scene for increased litigation in accounting practices. Despite their role at Enron and in other corporate scandals in recent years, accounting and auditing are hot fields, expected to grow nearly 20% in the next decade.

**Energy:** The oil, gas and utility sector graduates needs help in navigating deregulation. Companies such as TXU, Exxon Mobil and Koch Industries are still hiring. Deregulation, continuing pollution problems and the problems in the Middle East create more opportunities in the legal field for paralegals.

**Engineers:** Companies like Texas Instruments are hiring electrical engineers for product-design, sales and marketing departments. Other engineers--software, mechanical, aerospace, civil and structural--are also hot properties. Many of these larger engineering

companies have legal departments that in turn need paralegals in IP, litigation, corporate, and more.

**Healthcare:** If lately you have had to wait forever to get an appointment with your doctor, had an energy draining experience with your HMO or tried to get your doctor on the phone, you know why no industry holds more promise than health care.

Nurses and pharmacists aren't the only ones being snapped up by hospitals. All across the country, sonogram operators, who make a median salary of \$42,000, and radiology technicians are being hired. The people who help patients get back on their feet are also hot properties. Over the next decade, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there will be 255,000 openings for all manner of therapists, including physical and respiratory therapists and speech pathologists. Meaning to paralegals? More malpractice cases, healthcare legal woes, mergers and acquisitions, regulatory issues, compliance, nursing home care issues, and more.

There are increasing opportunities today in arenas you've probably never considered. The choices become overwhelming. You can't fault someone for fantasizing – even about accepting a job for \$112,000 to gain 30 pounds. <sigh> Knowledge about your field plus fantasies of pursuing new opportunities gets your juices flowing, your brain thinking and your body moving. Exactly what we need for creating better jobs and maintaining human capital.

*Chere B. Estrin is the CEO of Estrin Professional Careers, a Los Angeles based seminar and training company for legal professionals. She is the author of eight books including The Paralegal Career Guide 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition and The Successful Paralegal's Job Search Guide. A national seminar speaker, Chere has been interviewed by Newsweek, The Los Angeles Times, The Chicago Tribune, Working Woman and more. She is a co-founding member of the Legal Assistant Management Association and winner of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce Woman of Achievement Award. She can be reached at [CareerCoaches@aol.com](mailto:CareerCoaches@aol.com), [www.CareerCoachesInternational.com](http://www.CareerCoachesInternational.com).*

