I AM MY OWN PARALEGAL: TIPS FOR HOW TO SURVIVE BEING A SOLO PRACTITIONER WITHOUT AN OFFICE STAFF

Let us be honest for a moment. Paralegals are the glue that holds our legal community together. Without them, ships would sink, planes would fall from the sky, and a mob of angry clients would be pounding on our doors demanding our heads. Okay, so that might be a slight exaggeration, but the truth is they make the firm run like a fine-tuned dream car rather than a rusty clunker on its last leg. So imagine the struggle of the solo practitioner having to perform without the safety net of an experienced paralegal.

So, how do solo practitioners juggle being both attorney and paralegal until they finally afford to hire someone?

1. Be Upfront with Your Clients

I often joke that being both attorney and paralegal is like being a surgeon who acts as doctor and nurse during a major operation. Can you imagine finding out right before you have heart surgery that your doctor will be working by herself? I would probably run out of the room screaming in that oh-so-attractive hospital gown with tubes and wires flying everywhere. So, imagine how clients feel when they think they hired a militia to handle their battle only to learn later it is just a lone soldier.

The key to avoiding an upset after the client contract is signed is to be upfront in the initial consultation. While you do not need to go into great detail about your limitations as a one-person show, you do need to set the guidelines for correspondences, court appearances, and scheduling constraints. Your clients want to be reassured they are hiring a fully capable attorney to handle their legal matter. So, give them that assurance.

2. Acquire an Intern

You have been an associate for several years and decide it is time to hang your own shingle. Funds are limited, so you use your wife and children as free labor. However, you realize your wife does not take instructions very well and your children used the contents of your trial notebook to make paper snowflakes. What do you do?

Acquire an intern.

It is a win-win situation. The student receives class credit and invaluable working experience, and you receive free or relatively inexpensive, knowledgeable assistance. Not to mention, you take part in mentoring and assisting one of the next great minds of the legal community. You might one day see your former intern’s name in the newspaper for her game-changing victory in a high profile case, and you will have the satisfaction of knowing you played a vital role in her success. The interns need the work, and you need the help. Match made in heaven.

3. Find a Mentor

This section is specifically for the attorneys fresh out of law school (like me) who are solo practitioners by choice or because of circumstances related to an unfavorable job market. No matter how many internships, externships, and law clerk positions you held during law school, you are not going to know all the legal procedures when you graduate. You took the MPRE and the bar exam, so you know competence is mandatory. The learning curve is steep for sparkling-new associates in large firms who have access to paralegals. Imagine how much steeper it is for the solo practitioner with no experience as a practicing attorney and no staffing support. The fact that you “didn’t know” will not save you.

Yet, have no fear. There are several legal organizations with mentoring programs available for new attorneys. While I could give recommendations, it is best you do your own research, read what each organization has to offer, and pick the best fit for you. The best place to start is your search engine.

Also, the KBA has a program called “Mentor for the Moment.” If you just need some advice on a certain legal issue but feel like you have a good grasp on everything else, this is the perfect option for you. The attorneys in the program volunteer their time willingly and want to assist you in any way they can. So why not take advantage?

4. Develop a Tough Skin

Not everyone will be accommodating to your limitations. In fact, there are attorneys who will use your lack of assistance as a trial strategy. It may not seem fair, but unfortunately, it happens. Develop a thick skin and show them it does not take an army to defeat a giant, just a little determination and skilled aim.

5. Micromanage, Micromanage, Micromanage

Because your time is precious, you have to obsessively control your schedule. Specifically, you must dedicate time each day to clerical work. Failing to schedule your time means missing deadlines and landing into easily-avoided messes, which could result in sanctions with nasty fines you cannot afford. Personally, I reserve my mornings for attorney tasks, my afternoons for clerical work, and whatever else needs attention in the evenings.

Each person is different, and a little experimentation is required, but find your plan and stick to it.

6. Take Time for Yourself

Remember you are just one person. You can only handle so much. Make exercise and family time a priority in your life. The work will still be there tomorrow. However, if you neglect your family and put your health on the backburner, you will find yourself unhealthy and with no one to share your success.

This is not an extensive list, and I make no guarantees that following my advice will lead to a happier life. I only write this to say I am there, I understand the struggle to keep it all together, but it is possible to be a one-person show and maintain your sanity. Have faith in yourself and your abilities, and the rest will come together in time.

1 TRPC Rule 1.1.