

Note on Paralegal Training and Careers for Paralegal Minor Students From the Department of Political and Global Affairs, MTSU

The following was compiled from answers provided by MTSU instructors who are full-time lawyers practicing in middle Tennessee. Last updated 12/19/2024.

Certification in paralegal studies is NOT required to be employed as a paralegal.

Some job postings request “bachelor’s degree and/OR paralegal certificate required.” Having a minor in paralegal studies may be looked at by employers as the equivalent of a certificate. It is up to the employer/hiring staff.

In obtaining a paralegal position, experience is most helpful, especially practical experience. Specifically, employers will look for experience in drafting documents, litigation, advanced legal writing, filing documents with the court, and conducting research.

Firms sometimes view certificates as evidence that a paralegal can do these tasks, but experience is given more weight.

Depending on the area (i.e., rural with less supply of paralegals, versus an urban setting with larger firms and a greater supply of paralegals), having certification may not mean a higher salary.

Having certification may help in obtaining a job at a law firm, especially larger ones which sometimes require a paralegal certification.

One reason some firms prefer certification is that they then feel comfortable having that position billed hourly to the client. The reason is that only substantive legal work that benefits the client can be counted as “billable” hours (i.e. money that the paralegal would charge to the client, rather than part of a salary paid by the employer). Firms, both large and small, may benefit from this because (a) it means less money they have to pay for the paralegal because the client is paying them, and (b) the paralegal who has billable hours is taking work that a lawyer would otherwise do and that lawyer can now spend time doing other things.

Some paralegals start off in smaller firms, then once they have experience, apply to larger firms with better pay and benefits.

Becoming a notary public might also help give someone both knowledge and experience.

Courses at MTSU that are most likely to give you experience in writing documents, researching, and understanding concepts important for the paralegal job: (1) PS 3530 Legal Writing & Research; (2) PLEG 3010 Litigation; (3) PLEG 3420 Torts; (4) BLAW 3430 Commercial Law. Internships are also highly encouraged, especially those that will give you a chance to do real work and shadow both attorney and paralegals.

The median salary for paralegals and legal assistants in the United States was estimated at \$60,970 as of May 2023. From one analysis, the lowest 10% of paralegals earn less than \$39,710, and the highest 10% earn more than \$98,830. In Tennessee, paralegals earn an average of \$54,213 per year, or \$26 per hour. (Data taken from different sources. Expect there to be a range of \$1,000-3,000 for averages depending on the source).

The highest paying cities for paralegals in Tennessee as of December 2024 include:

- **Franklin:** \$72,204 per year
- **Clarksville:** \$56,365 per year
- **Murfreesboro:** \$55,921 per year
- **Brentwood:** \$52,484 per year
- **Memphis:** \$49,560 per year