

PARALEGAL TODAY™

The Paralegal's Role at Trial The Unwritten Rules

Virtual Paralegal Internships

The Haitian Humanitarian
Parole Project

Database Search Strategies

Q3 July/August/September 2012

Volume 29 Issue 3

Opening the Door

A Guide to Virtual Paralegal Internships

Jan Hill, CP



What is time and billing? How do you open a file? What should you do if a client asks for legal advice? These are questions that commonly arise during a paralegal internship, an on-the-job training experience that usually takes place onsite in a law office or legal department. However, mobile technology, e-mail and the Internet have given rise to a new type of paralegal internship that is not constrained to a brick-and-mortar location: virtual internships.

A virtual paralegal internship is an internship that is designed to immerse a student in the law firm experience, minus one thing: the law firm. This type of internship can be completed remotely through the use of technology. For today's busy paralegal students who juggle full-time work, family and school, finding and completing a traditional internship can be a daunting task. Virtual internships provide paralegals with the flexibility to intern by logging into a computer as opposed to logging hours in a law firm, government agency or corporate legal department, enabling them to keep their day job, juggle an internship around a busy class schedule and spend more time with friends and family.

Why is an Internship Important?

Paralegal internships provide valuable work experience to students, and paralegal programs that have been approved by the American Bar Association are encouraged to include an internship in the curriculum. "A paralegal internship gives students a chance to gain actual work experience in real situations," said Diane Pevar, attorney and director of legal studies at Manor College in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania and a past president of the American Association for Paralegal Educators (AAFPE). "Today's employers are losing experienced Baby Boomers to retirement, and they want to be able to replace those workers with experienced new employees," she said. "It's important for every paralegal graduate to hit the ground running by demonstrating excellent communication, problem-solving, and time-management skills."

Finding a Virtual Paralegal Internship

Finding a virtual internship is similar to locating a traditional one. The first place you should check for internship opportunities is your school's career center or the chair of the paralegal program. You can also conduct Google searches to research organizations that you may be interested in interning with, and contact the human resources department of those companies directly. Job boards such as Simply Hired, Monster, and Indeed.com also list internships.

Some internship-only job boards that include virtual opportunities have recently surfaced, including Youtern, Internships.com, Intern Web and InternQueen.com. Lauren Berger, CEO of InternQueen.com, explained that employers began offering virtual internships a few years ago, and their availability has greatly increased over the past several years due to a rise in small, start-up companies and entrepreneurs who

do not work out of traditional offices. Likewise, the popularity of virtual internships with students has also increased. "Virtual internships are flexible, often don't require transportation as they can be done out of a dorm room or computer lab, and allow students to look for internship opportunities outside their local area," said Berger, who completed 15 internships herself during four years of college. "Everyone has a dream of scoring this amazing, life-changing experience, and I started my company to help others do this."

InternQueen.com works with over 1,000 employers worldwide and reaches over 80,000 students, parents and employers each month. Berger advises students seeking internship opportunities to follow all directions in the job posting, meet deadlines, and include a cover letter that showcases their talents. A familiarity with Skype, iChat, or Google Chat can be helpful when interviewing for a virtual internship in another city, state or country.

Internship-only job boards like InternQueen.com typically charge employers a fee to post internships, but allow students to apply for as many opportunities as they want, free of charge. Like a traditional internship, a virtual internship allows the student to refine and master vital paralegal competencies including written communication skills, research, organization, problem solving, time management and working as part of a team. "Just as important, the virtual internship helps the student gain the confidence needed to go out into the real world to work," said Pevar.

How do Virtual Internships Work?

Similar to traditional internships, virtual internships may be paid, unpaid, part-time or full-time. Berger, who accepts two or three virtual interns into her own company every year, said full-time interns are typically paid and part-time interns who work

12-15 hours a week may not be.

Virtual internships are usually run one of two ways. Either the employer gives the intern a set of projects and meets with them at least once a week, or the employer makes the virtual intern's experience as similar to a traditional office as possible. Berger requires her virtual interns to have set schedules, sign on to Skype at the beginning and end of each shift, participate in staff meetings via conferencecall.com and communicate throughout the day using social media, text messaging, telephone and e-mail. Her goal is for virtual interns to become more detail-oriented and professional during their internship experience. "It's so important for interns to ask themselves every day, 'what can I do to get the most out of this opportunity?'" she said.

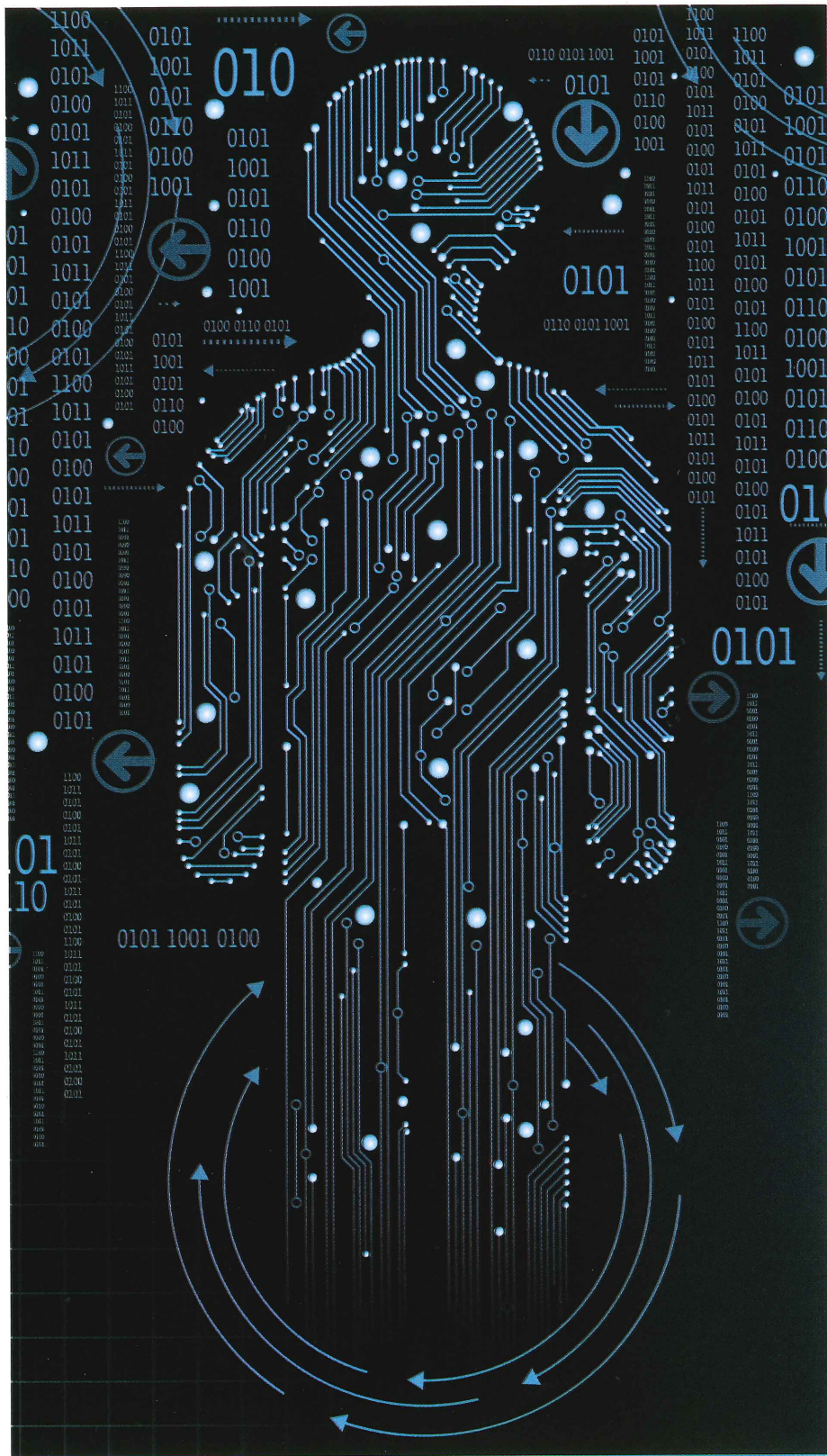
Legal studies student Sherry Jordan earned her bachelor's degree from Wilmington University in Wilmington, Delaware in 2009, and a virtual internship called Senior Legal Studies Seminar was a required part of the curriculum. Though Jordan's internship did not offer a simulated law office environment, she still found the internship beneficial. "We logged into Blackboard, downloaded our assignments, and were given our deadlines," she said.

Jordan and her fellow interns handled a personal injury case, writing business letters to the client, his treating physicians and insurance company representatives. They were required to draft a complaint and a motion for protective order, locate expert witnesses, draft interrogatories and participate in settlement negotiations. "My class of students was among the first to complete a virtual internship at my school," said Jordan. "It involved lots of hands-on experience, but I didn't feel like I was in a law firm. I think being put in a law firm environment, even a simulated one, would have allowed us to get more of a feel for what paralegals do."

Simulated Internships

Diane Pevar's paralegal students at Manor College will soon have a chance to intern in a simulated environment designed to feel like a real workplace. "A simulated internship tries to create a realistic work environment in which a paralegal student can practice

the skills he's begun to develop while being educated to perform paralegal work," said Pevar, developer of *The Law Simulation Series: Paralegal Law Practice Experience*, a simulated law office environment set to launch this year. "When I designed my simulated law firm, I used a very deliberate plan



PROS AND CONS OF COMPLETING A VIRTUAL OR SIMULATED PARALEGAL INTERNSHIP

Pros

Minimizes scheduling conflicts that students with another full-time job might have.

Ability to log in anytime, anywhere.

Great way for a student to "get their feet wet" and gain experience.

Opportunity to refine technology skills.

Students who are nervous about doing a real-world internship can build confidence through a virtual one.

Cons

Virtual and simulated internships can't duplicate everything that happens on a given day in any law firm or legal department.

Traditional internships are often a "get your foot in the door" opportunity for a job offer, while virtual internships may or may not directly result in a job after graduation.

Simulated internships may qualify only as a pre-internship, depending upon each individual school's curriculum requirements.

Virtual internships may require a greater degree of self-discipline on the part of the student than an onsite internship.

Securing a virtual internship can be as competitive as obtaining a traditional one.

SKILLS GAINED THROUGH A VIRTUAL INTERNSHIP

Ability to analyze and form solutions to client problems.

Effective time management skills
Understanding of law office policies and procedures.

Basic understanding what personnel work in the law office and their functions and duties.

Case file maintenance.

Listening and note-taking skills.

Ability to draft correspondence, pleadings, motions, pre-trial and trial documents.

Capacity to perform factual and legal research.

Ability to summarize medical records and depositions.

Source: *The Law Office Experience* Preface

for bringing an internship experience to someone who works 40 hours a week and is possibly also raising a family, making it impossible for them to go into a traditional 9-5 internship," said Pevar.

Pevar first considered the idea of a virtual internship 10 years ago when one of her part-time paralegal students, who had only an internship left to complete her degree, became ill and housebound, making traveling to an internship site out of the question. To help her student finish the program, Pevar developed a virtual law office based on a single client file involving a complex personal injury case. The student was required to complete 10 research and writing assignments and communicate via e-mail with outside entities, including the courts. "Over the years I developed more complex versions of the law office, adding more client files and a multi-tasking timeline, but I always wanted to place the work into an environment that allows the student to see what happens in a law firm, and in some way be able to respond to that environment," said Pevar. "*The Paralegal Law Practice Experience* is the result."

Although *The Paralegal Law Practice Experience* will be a valuable resource for paralegal students, it will never anticipate or duplicate all of the opportunities or occurrences that take place in a real law office on a day-to-day basis. "But it does give the student some experience and confidence by previewing what a law office environment is like," Pevar said, adding that her program is not necessarily a replacement for the traditional paralegal internship. "A traditional internship is something that can benefit every student because on-the-job training provides the ability to apply what you learn in the classroom out in the real world. A traditional internship can be scary and confusing, so being able to work in a simulated experience first is a great way to pre-train." The students who complete Pevar's simulated internship will receive school credit upon completion, either for a paralegal class or internship credit that is required by their paralegal program.

A New Approach to Virtual Learning

The Law Simulation Series: Paralegal Law Practice Experience is an interactive

form of experiential learning developed through a cooperative effort between Pevar and publishing company Wolters-Kluwer. Students access a remote site by using a registration key (password), and log into a workstation through which they meet and work with law firm personnel represented through the use of video and audio files.

To create a cast of legal characters to interact with students virtually, Pevar worked with a Los Angeles production company, hired actors and wrote a script. Some of the avatars interns will encounter at Murphy, Miller & Dorn, Pevar's virtual law firm, include a law partner, an office manager, a paralegal and an administrative assistant. Students will sit in and take notes during a new client interview with the attorney (notes they'll use in a later assignment), meet with the administrative assistant to learn how to open a new file, and receive a lesson in digesting a deposition from one of the firm's paralegals. The atmosphere mimics that of a law firm as closely as possible, and the interns get the feeling that they "come and go, just like in a regular office," according to Pevar. The 120-150 hour program will take 30 days to complete.

The Paralegal Law Practice Experience will be offered to other schools and organizations on a subscription basis, similar to the legal research software *Westlaw* and *Lexis*. Pevar hopes that the program will not only be used for paralegal internships, but also as a learning tool in individual paralegal classes, in law schools to provide practical experience to law students and for in-house training of law firm personnel.

The first edition of *The Paralegal Law Practice Experience* contains a litigation group, a transaction group and five case files in various stages of development, including a personal injury case "just walking in the door" to another that is nearing trial. Students will have a daily calendar of tasks, and the workstation will include links to various resources including a phone, research sites, the office policies and procedures manual, an extensive form bank of the firm's sample documents, and the client files that interns will work on throughout their time at Murphy, Miller & Dorn. Interns will have access to audio and video files for replay to reinforce lessons and, similar to a traditional internship, tasks assigned at the beginning will be rela-

tively simple and will gradually increase in complexity as the student progresses. "My goal is to bring the student from introductory work to a mastery level throughout the process," said Pevar. "They'll begin with simple tasks and move into things like trial memoranda and heavy duty research."

The paralegal program director or instructor will monitor the student's progress by evaluating the work the student completes, much like an employer or traditional internship supervisor would, and conference times are built into the timeline. These conferences are designed to be flexible, occurring one-on-one, via e-mail, or even during class time to allow the entire class to work within the law office environment. "In our simulation, the student must maintain all assignment deadlines and use a drop box shared with the instructor to pass on all work product," said Pevar. "Like any employer, the student's paralegal program director or instructor (known in the simulation as the supervising attorney) will review and critique the work, sending it back to the intern for necessary revisions."

Virtual is the Future

Both Berger and Pevar believe that virtual and simulated paralegal internships are the wave of the future. "With more people working in non-traditional office environments, and students wanting experiences outside of their local area, virtual internships will continue to grow," said Berger.

"People are so immersed in game play these days," said Pevar. "Educating people in a simulated environment is going to be a huge step toward giving them the confidence to succeed in their careers. I see no downside to giving students a realistic experience. They might not be able to put 'interned at Murphy, Miller & Dorn' on their resume, but at the end of the day the student will have experience, better skills, and a portfolio of writing samples he developed while working at the simulated law office." □

Jan Hill is a freelance writer and a certified paralegal for the Office of General Counsel of National American University. She enjoys writing on legal topics as well as education and careers for newspapers, magazines, websites, and on her personal writing blog, www.raisedwrite.com.