

You Bet I Would Do It Again “From Paralegal to Legal Vendor”

By Theresa Webster-Hurst

Changing my career track from being an employee, working for a law firm, to an entrepreneur “servicing” a law firm was a very big step. The rewards can be great, but it is not without challenges.

Don’t get me wrong—there are many similarities. I did wear many hats in my paralegal role. There were some days I felt like a psychologist, mother, teacher, librarian, event coordinator, computer technician, and paralegal all in one hour. As a business owner, I still wear many hats, and I do a wider variety of tasks that I may not know or even like to do (but unfortunately I have to do). Generally, I find the dynamic nature of entrepreneurship is a far cry from the steady routines of employment.

I took the leap because it was something I always wanted to do. My career started in graphic design. While attending college, I worked as a legal secretary for a large plaintiff law firm. I was surprised to realize that I really liked the legal field. When I graduated from college, my plan was to work at an advertising agency. I took my portfolio on many interviews, and like many new graduates, I had to start out in the mail room for a salary at minimum wage. At that time, I had very good benefits and a wage double what the ad agency would pay. Not to mention, I was intrigued by the legal system. My career plan immediately changed focus. I decided I would pursue a legal career and freelance as a graphic designer. It was then that I received a paralegal degree and later my national certification. I worked 15 years as a paralegal and loved it. My freelance company was really more a hobby than a career. Something inside kept nagging me; I wanted that creative outlet that I wasn’t able to reach at my present position. Then an opportunity opened as a creative director for a major defense law firm. Timing is everything.

Fate is indeed the hunter; this position was the perfect transition into owning my own business. After working four years as a creative director, the owner of Evidence Express, a company devoted to providing visual aids for the courtroom, had mentioned to me that he was considering retirement and asked me to take over the business. The rest is history!

It’s a great business and something I truly love doing. But it wasn’t the easiest transition for me—that is, the transition from working for someone else to working for myself. The tricky part was to actually see myself as the boss. I have to keep reminding myself that I am now responsible for everything from paper towels to accounts receivables! This can be a little daunting at times, and I believe that being a mother of three was a huge help with that. A business is like having a newborn baby: you have to nourish it, love it, pay attention to

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MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

I'm Happy to be Your New Chair

That sounds so cliché, doesn't it? And yet, it is the way I truly feel. The other day, driving home from a particularly long day at work, I saw a sign in the front of a business that read, "Happiness is liking what you do." I have to tell you – I laughed out loud when I read it, because the company posting the sign is one that processes and sells liquid fertilizer (think cow manure in liquid form).

It was not too long ago that I was perfectly content going to work, putting in my time, and coming home each day. At the time, my kids were young, and I had more pressing responsibilities. But a few years ago, with the kids getting older, and with me going through not so much a mid-life crisis as a mid-life awakening, I realized I wanted *more*. And one of the things in life I wanted was more satisfaction, more happiness, in my profession.

A wise young friend of mine once told me that she tries very hard to live her life deliberately. Those words have stuck with me a very long time, and I have been trying to live them, too.

The way I chose to live my professional life deliberately was to become more involved in the State Bar Legal Assistants Section. By putting in just a few hours a year as a council member, I gained so much *more* in return: more professional contacts, more knowledge, more friends, and even more self-confidence. Therefore, when I was approached about possibly running for the chair-elect/chair/ex officio three-year term last year, it took all of about five minutes to talk me into it. I haven't regretted that decision for a moment.

Serving you makes me happy. It's a decision I made deliberately, and I'll do the best job I can for you because, in so doing, I'll gain the most possible personal benefit. If you'd like *more* out of your profession, too, then please call or send me an e-mail because, in this section, there's always room for... *more*.



Cheryl Nodarse

Disclaimer

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Editor's Note

The newsletter is published quarterly.

Newsletter submissions (Calendar Events/Items, Letters to the Editor, Section News and Business, Section Committee News/Reports, National and International News, State and Local News, and Advertising) should be sent to the attention of Denise Gau at gau@butzel.com.

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2007 ANNUAL MEETING

By Kathy Ann Blunck, Annual Meeting Coordinator



Views of DeVos Place,
Grand Rapids

The 2007 annual meeting of the Legal Assistants Section was held on Friday, September 28, 2007, at DeVos Place in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The meeting was held in conjunction with the State Bar Annual Meeting and ICLE Solo & Small Firm Institute.

At the annual meeting, the Legal Assistants Section:

- Held officer elections. Please check the section's website at www.michbar.org for council members and information regarding the section.
- Awarded scholarships to Holly Hetzner, Sheri Pregano, and Piper Smith.
- Voted to change the name of the section to Legal Assistant/Paralegal Section.
- Chair Elaine Gau passed the gavel to new Chair Cheryl Nodarse.

Sponsors for the annual meeting were Proassurance Corporation, the Legal Assistant Section of the Grand Rapids Bar Association, Esquire Depositions, Prism Technologies, and Xact Data Discovery. We want to extend a hearty "thank you" for their generous sponsorship, which subsidized a portion of the lunch cost.

This year, the State Bar combined the ICLE Solo & Small Firm Institute with the Annual Meeting, giving us two days of really interesting seminars and top-notch speakers. The Institute was well received as evidenced by the following quotes:

The ethics seminar was a wonderful addition to the legal assistant track. Ethics is extremely important for paralegals, and Ms. Voisin was highly motivated, informative, and entertaining. I will definitely be attending again!

Kelly A. LaGrave, ACP
Legal Assistant
Foster, Swift, Collins & Smith, P.C.

While I was unable to sit in on many of the seminars, I found the "Finding an Extra Hour Every Day: Time Management Tips and Tricks for Busy Professionals" helpful. "Dealing with Difficult People" was also a nice reminder to everyone. It had been many years since I had attended the Annual Meeting. By attending this year, I was reminded how important networking is within our profession. It also was nice to see old faces and meet many new faces. I look forward to attending again next year.

Julie A. Schumacher
Legal Assistant
Foster, Swift, Collins & Smith, P.C.

The SBM Annual Meeting was organized and well done. It was well worth my time. It was refreshing to get away from the daily grind to learn something new. The speakers were diverse and professional. If you didn't walk away with at least a tip or two to improve on what you do, you weren't paying attention. I look forward to 2008.

Toni R. Blanken, CLA
Certified Legal Assistant
Foster, Swift, Collins & Smith, P.C.

Vicki Voisin's "Critical Ethics Issues Legal Assistants Face: A Case Study Approach" was very beneficial to paralegals no matter where they are in their careers. Vicki's experience and

approach to her topic are well-suited to our paralegal profession. Barron K. Henley's "Getting the Most Out of Microsoft Word for Lawyers Parts 1 and 2" made working with Word look effortless. He is familiar with his topic, and the ease with which he presents makes you want to get to know the program more enthusiastically. The Legal Assistants Section council meeting was very well done, and it is a privilege to meet and get to know section members and nonmembers across Michigan. Participation is vital to the continuation of our section's growth and purpose. Next year should be even better.

Ida Rose Farhat, ACP
Legal Assistant
Foster, Swift, Collins & Smith, P.C.

The State Bar of Michigan Annual Meeting and ICLE Solo & Small Firm Institute will be held **September 17-19, 2008, at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, Dearborn, MI.** Please mark your calendars because you will not want to miss the next meeting. Planning for the meeting is in full swing. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or suggestions. It is not too late to recommend topics or speakers.



2007-2008 Legal Assistant Section Council
Denise Gau, ex-officio; Cheryl Nodarse, CLA, chair; Jeanne Nyhuis, secretary; Elsie Morren, council member; Becky Opipari, council member; Brian English, council member; Ida Farhat, ACP, council member; and Vanessa Lozzi, council member. Not pictured: Nicole Cook, vice chair and Marianne B. Delaney, CP, treasurer



Some of the council (and a couple of friends) at the Access to Justice reception at the Gerald R. Ford Library Left to Right: Denise Gau, Christi Redmond, Cheryl Nodarse, Linda Jevahirian, Vanessa Lozzi; Janice Harmon, and Peggy Murray.

STATE NEWS

Detroit Metropolitan Bar Association

On November 8, 2007, the Paralegal Section hosted its Fourth Annual Salute to Paralegals and Vendors at the Atheneum Hotel in Greektown. This distinctive event brought together legal vendors, paralegals, and students from around the tri-state region and Canada in an enjoyable evening comprised of guest speakers, awards, and, of course, networking. The Paralegal Section of the Detroit Metropolitan Bar Association presents educational meetings regularly. More details and registration can be found at www.detroitlawyer.org. Contact Karen Ziemiecki, section chair, at ksz@krwlaw.com or (313) 965-1608.

Grand Rapids Bar Association

The GRBA Legal Assistant Section is open to legal assistants and paralegals meeting its membership criteria who are employed and sponsored by an attorney member of the GRBA. The section is currently led by Renee J. May. She can be contacted at rjmay@choiceonemail.com or (616) 243-3331.

Oakland County Bar Association

Scott Patterson, a prominent labor attorney from Butzel Long, will be speaking about what's new in employment issues on Wednesday, January 16, 2008, at noon at the Butzel Long office at 41000 Woodward Ave., Stonebridge West, Bloomfield Hills, MI 48304.

The OCBA offers legal assistant membership to those who are qualified through education, training, or work experience and employed or retained by a lawyer, law office, governmental agency, or other entity in performance of legal services not primarily clerical or secretarial under the ultimate direction and supervision of a licensed attorney. Must be sponsored annually by an OCBA member who certifies as to the above. If you are not on the OCBA mailing list, please contact Kristen Bennett at cle@ocba.org or (248) 334-3400. The OCBA Legal Assistants Committee is currently lead by Millie Sloan, msload@jaffelaw.com or (248) 351-3000.

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The Michigan Paralegal is going paperless.

The *Michigan Paralegal* will be sent to you electronically beginning with the next issue.

If you do not have an e-mail address, please contact Denise Gau at (313) 983-7402 or write me c/o Butzel Long, 150 West Jefferson, Suite 100, Detroit, MI 48226 to continue to receive a paper copy of the *Michigan Paralegal*.

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it, and never stop believing that you are, with the help of others, responsible for its growth.

The decisions I make for the business affect many people. A business owner has to start each day with the confidence that whatever he chooses to do today is going to be the right thing to improve his business, to expand his knowledge, and to make a difference in the lives of his customers, regardless of how he feels that day. That means rarely slacking off. As an employee, I couldn't think much beyond my actual tasks at hand or how I could assist the firm because those decisions were being made for me. As a business owner, I have to make sure there is enough money in the account before I take a paycheck!

Owning your own business can be fun, rewarding, and financially lucrative. (Well, at least that is the plan!) Making the transition from employee to business owner can be very challenging, sometimes impossible, and always unpredictable. Skills in accurate fortune telling may be a desired talent for almost everyone considering self-employment. There are never any guarantees, but I know that if I had never tried, it would be haunting me for the rest of my life.

I am very pleased that for the last three years, my business has thrived. I'm very proud of the work we do for all of our legal clients, and I wouldn't have it any other way. I certainly did have an advantage working in the legal field, and being a paralegal helps prepare you for a lot of different careers. In my situation, it helped me empathize with my customers and understand the dynamics of a law firm.

Starting a business in this economic climate can be very scary at times, but I believe that with the help from our great customers, we will succeed. The bottom line is that there's nothing as rewarding as being an entrepreneur. And, yes, I would do it again in a heartbeat.

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