

In the Middle — The Paralegal World

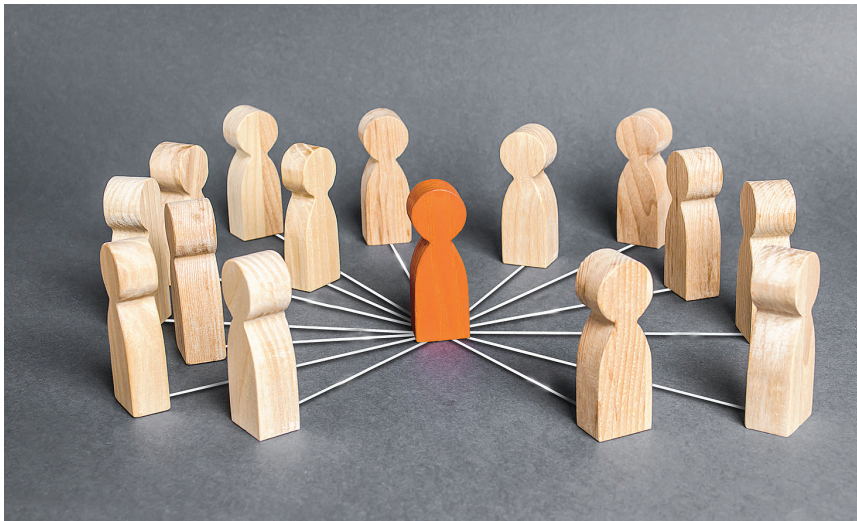
By Christina Babcock, Linda Sanders and Lynette Rocheleau

The Paralegal profession has always been a profession that is not only stressful but comes with additional and unique challenges that are quite different from most professions.

Being a Paralegal means that you are usually in the middle. You are the person who works directly with the attorney and is in charge of many things, including the intake of new clients, setting up the file; calendaring the dates, drafting and sending out the necessary documents (Interrogatories, Request for Admission, Request for Production, etc), preparing the response to opposing counsel to their documents, preparing trial notebooks and the list goes on. You are also the person the client calls to ask questions and raise concerns about their case. Paralegals are usually the one that is dealing with opposing counsel as well as the Court. Further, since we don't have the luxury of only working one case at a time, you are dealing with any or all the above at the same time for many different cases. On top of all of this, there are the rules that come with working in a law firm, especially those that still require billable hours each day.

At the end of the day, most people go home and discuss their work and days with their closest family members (such as a spouse or a significant other). However, as paralegals, we are not allowed to do that. We have confidentiality and ethics rules that we must follow.

As the Paralegal Division of the State Bar of New Mexico, an important question we asked and tried to answer is how do we not allow these challenges to affect us and, how do we handle stress and burnout in our profession.



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Part of our response was to find ways to allow paralegals to be able to communicate with others who have been through or are going through the same thing. We held events to give paralegals the opportunity to meet and learn ways to deal with these pressures.

Then, 2020 came along and we found ourselves in a pandemic.

Working as a paralegal during the pandemic was challenging. Learning to navigate Zoom while working from home, not to mention trying

to understand the new notary requirements, brought a different level of stress to the job. It also brought awareness to our mental and emotional well-being and how we are taking it for granted. The Paralegal Division recognizes it needs to do more for the well-being of its membership and is working diligently to accomplish that goal.

During the pandemic, the Division's focus was to help members alleviate the stress of finding and attending Continuing Legal Education (CLE) courses. The Division organized and offered free online CLEs for both members and non-members. In 2022, the Paralegal Division Board of Directors extended their decision to offer some CLEs at no cost and continue to make them available for self-study on our website. The Division offers monthly "Lunch & Learn" CLEs along with two half-day CLEs in April and September, and a full day CLE in December called "The Institute".

In 2021, the focus of "The Institute" was entirely on wellness. "Building Health & Wellness Practices Among Legal Professionals" was a reminder that well-being

should be a priority. During the full-day CLE, members learned the importance of setting boundaries at work and home while understanding that it's acceptable to say no. Members were also introduced to a resource known as the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), which helps employees with issues at work or home that affect their well-being. Resiliency, the decline in civility in the legal profession and mindfulness were also topics presented. The importance of self-care was stressed throughout the day. Feeling guilty about taking time to relax or enjoy time away is not selfish, it is a necessary component of self-care.

In addition to CLEs, the Division hosts networking opportunities throughout the year where members and prospective members are invited to meet the current Paralegal Division Officers and the Board of Directors. The Division encourages members to participate and attend board meetings via Zoom or in person, join a committee, and volunteer for pro bono events. The Division also has a private Facebook page where paralegals can ask for help from other paralegals on work-related issues. The Division will continue to keep members connected but plans to have more well-being resources available in the future.

The time is now to lay the groundwork for a well-being-focused (or at least balanced) future. What does this future look like? What are the challenges to making it a reality? The biggest challenge is that we as paralegals have limited control and input regarding our work. We don't control the workload, we don't control the work environment, we don't control the expectations (from either a client or firm perspective). This has always been the case. What has changed is the awareness of the effect of the pandemic to our well-being. Luckily, the entire legal community has also faced these effects and, the leadership of the legal community has done an exceptional job of bringing well-being to the forefront in an effort to reduce them. I have no doubt this focus will continue.

As a Division, we will continue to emphasize self-care by making our members aware of the programs and resources available to them. We will continue to offer well-being-focused CLEs and events. We will continue to keep our members connected through social media and in-person events. Most importantly, we will continue to work with the leadership of the legal community to further its awareness of the unique challenges faced by paralegals. This is the avenue that will afford continued focus and change. This is where we need to advocate for our members. We need to keep the momentum going through our active participation in the various

committees and events concentrated on well-being and with the leadership of the legal community by making our voice heard.

So, back to the original question: what does a well-being-focused future look like? The answer to this question is different for everyone. But I think we can all agree it involves a healthy balance between work and home, a focus on self-care without being made to feel guilty and a support system that understands the unique challenges faced by paralegals. ■

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