How to:
Get and Stay Competent

GET TRAINING AND EDUCATION

There are many different opinions about the need for formal legal education. As you’re reading this book, you’re probably enrolled in a legal training program. No one has ever said that education is bad, but hands-on training is also necessary. If your program has an internship or externship program, get involved. Get into the law office or corporate setting and see what the real world of law is all about.

If you’ve gained your knowledge through work, and not school, consider going to school to get a degree or certificate. You may gain knowledge that you did not have and you will be a great asset to your classmates because of your real-world experiences.

READ, READ, READ

Just because school ends doesn’t mean your education should. Read your local legal newspaper and bar association magazine to stay current on the law in your state. Read seminar and continuing education program materials in your specialty area.

CONTINUE YOUR EDUCATION

Attend seminars on the law. It is most important to stay current on the areas of law in which you practice, but it also important to stay current in the law in general. Of course, it is also important that you stay current in professional responsibility.

There are both attorney-oriented seminars and seminars which target paralegals. Your local and state bar associations (which may have a membership status for legal assistants) offer seminars of interest to local practitioners, and the American Bar Association (which has paralegal membership) offers seminars. Your local paralegal association offers seminars as well. These should be interesting and inexpensive. If you’re working, ask if your employer will help absorb the cost of continuing education. Your knowledge serves to benefit the employer as well as yourself.

TEACH

If you want to know if you really know something well, try to teach it to someone else. The greatest gift you can give to the profession is to take your work-related experiences back to your school and teach those who will follow you. This will not only help you gain a better understanding of your areas of practice, but it will help future paralegal students gain insight into the real world of law and law-related fields.

TEST YOURSELF

NALA offers the Certified Legal Assistant exam and specialist exams. Once you pass these exams, you can use the “CLA” and “CLAS” designations. These designations are
widely recognized as symbols of excellence. Preparing for and taking the CLA exam will also keep your knowledge of the law fresh.

NFPA offers the Paralegal Advanced Competency Exam which affords you the Registered Paralegal “RP” designation.

Your state or local bar association may also offer “specialist” exams in your area of law. These exams ordinarily allow the person who has passed to use a designation such as “Family Law Specialist” in advertising.

**RECOGNIZE AND ADDRESS ALCOHOL AND DRUG ABUSE PROBLEMS**

Law is a stressful profession. If you, or someone you know, have a drug or alcohol abuse problem, get help.