

Richard Stevens '06

Paralegal Specialist |
Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and
Customs Enforcement, DC



Major: History

Briefly describe your position, organization and industry.

I am a Paralegal Specialist in the Freedom of Information Act Office (FOIA) at Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). ICE is a bureau of the Department of Homeland Security. Specifically, ICE focuses on human and drug trafficking across our land and coastal borders, child exploitation, and the deportation of illegal aliens. My job as a FOIA paralegal specialist is to process requests from the public for information regarding investigations of illegal aliens, background investigations for ICE staff, personnel investigations for misconduct, contracts for various government services, and ICE correspondence with Congress.

Please specify your job responsibilities, including a typical day on the job.

Upon receipt of a request for ICE records from the press, a legal office, or the public, it is forwarded to a specific program office within ICE. The request is then assigned to a paralegal, such as myself, for review. I then analyze the records for confidential information that is withholdable pursuant to one of the FOIA's 9 exemptions. This involves looking information that is business confidential, internal and pre-decisional (deliberative), or personally identifying. I also try to point out investigative information that could cause harm to an individual or leak the agency's investigative methods if released.

How did you break into your career field? What, if any, obstacles did you face?

Applying for federal government jobs can be a journey. A majority of federal jobs are posted on www.usajobs.gov. Although the process seems to be grueling, it is easier than it looks. The applications are made up of a resume, a number of short answer questions relating to your education and/or prior experience, and, if needed, a copy of your academic transcript. The questionnaire is the most important piece, as it allows both you and the hiring office to learn whether you have the desired skills and experience for the position.

Another obstacle was the time and cost involved in traveling to Washington for interviews. This can be a challenge for anyone who wants to work far from home. However, the experience showed me that doing interviews in person whenever possible makes a good impression on the potential employer and allows you to experience the office culture.

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Indicate any previous experiences and how that led to your current position.

I started off my public service career with a summer internship in the Consumer Protection Unit at the Office of the Connecticut Attorney General. I became very interested in the field, and this inspired me to apply to a position in the FOIA office of the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which also handles consumer protection issues, upon graduation.

Following nearly two years at the FTC, I was ready to learn about a new agency and deal with other issues. As I was already a FOIA specialist, my qualifications were a good match for the position at ICE. Once you are an employee at the federal level, it is easy to move around, so securing the new position was less grueling than the original application process.

What does it take to succeed in your field? Please specify any important trends.

Success in the government takes a lot of patience! Entering any field where you have little to no experience can be very frustrating and requires a willingness to learn and to take direction and criticism well. It's all part of the learning process! I did not know what the Freedom of Information Act was until I applied for the FTC position.

Good communication skills are also essential to your success. This is not just a matter of being able to write or speak effectively in public, but simply being understanding and able to get along with different types of people with widely varied working styles and backgrounds.

Furthermore, you need to become well-versed in the specific rules and regulations associated with your new job, as well as the culture, functions, and administrative procedures of your office in order to do your job well. At DHS, one of the most important things is understanding how the agency operates. In order to do that, you need to learn how each bureau (ICE, FEMA, Customs & Border Protection, Transportation Security Administration) and each office within each bureau functions.

How can students prepare themselves while still in college?

Because the job market is getting more competitive every year, I would highly recommend an internship or two during your college career. Having these on your resume displays your interest in a field and your desire to learn, the most important part of a new job. I believe my internships contributed greatly to my selection at the Federal Trade Commission.

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How important is a graduate degree or other training? Specify preferred degrees, programs or certificates.

Whether a graduate degree is necessary is on a case-by-case basis. It all depends on what your long term goals are. However, I believe a year or two of experience in the working world can only have a positive impact on your options for a graduate degree. In addition, you will most likely receive various training and certificates on the job that you can bring with you into the educational realm.

What entry career areas would provide the best experience for students aspiring to your field? What strategies or resources would you recommend for landing an entry-level position or internship?

Entry-level positions in the federal government cover every area of study imaginable. This ranges from natural science, medicine, foreign policy, defense, international and domestic trade, immigration, agriculture, transportation, aviation, etc.

For my particular field, try to find a position with your local government. The feds love to see previous public service!

What resources or websites would you suggest for students interested in your field?

Positions available at all government agencies are posted at www.USAJobs.gov. You can then do an advanced search for positions in specific locations or at particular agencies of interest.

For internships, as I mentioned earlier, search the web! If you want an internship in a particular location, try searching the local university or college websites. Or, consult with PC's career services. They may be able to direct you to even better resources.

How did your Providence College education and experience help to prepare you for success?

Between PC's coursework and the social environment, I felt very ready to get into the working world. My courses in international relations, law, business, and philosophy (ethics) prepared me well for government work, and the connections between them all certainly had an impact on my critical thinking and analytical skills.

These areas of study especially apply to my current work in immigration. Every deportation case or investigation can have a huge impact on an individual's life and that of his or her friends, family, or coworkers. A case could also affect our relations with a foreign country depending on the allegations at hand. Additionally, immigration has an enormous impact on our economy. There are both legal and illegal residents that take up positions at every level. Every case is unique. My liberal arts education helps me to analyze the critical information upon which I base my opinions and recommendations and to communicate them effectively both verbally and in writing to my attorneys.

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