Seeking a Career as a Professional Investigator

By Linda Montgomery

The Positives and Negatives

It is a commonly held belief that being a professional investigator is a very exciting job. In this investigator's experience, that is very true. The job definitely has excitement and even high drama. Just the process of "seeking and finding" by itself results in a feeling of exhilaration. Additionally, if the investigator works with attorneys on cases that go to trial, the drama can be intense, especially when very serious issues are at stake.

In addition to the excitement that goes with the process of discovery, another advantage to this type of work is that the investigator is in the position to be constantly learning something new. Indeed, the investigator even "learns how to learn." By finding answers and information for others, the investigator becomes aware that the answer to whatever it is you want to know is likely to be out there somewhere. The experienced investigator becomes very good at seeking and finding, a skill that is helpful in all areas of life. The investigator is in the enviable position of being able to help others and at the same time help themselves by adding to their own knowledge and learning more about what is really going on in the world.

On the other hand, I must caution that there is a downside to this profession, as with everything in life. Perhaps, I might add that when anything has a very definite upside, the downside can be just as strong. While investigating can be (and is) exciting, there also can be long periods of boredom, especially when conducting surveillance. Additional frustrations include the tedium and the difficulty in finding some of the answers sought, and in pleasing the client. Clients often have very high expectations of investigators and it can sometimes be difficult to live up to those. To become an excellent professional investigator is not easy. Time and hard work are required, just like with any other profession.

This is a job for people who love challenges and love learning.

Desirable Qualifications of Investigator Applicants

To be a good investigator you will need to have, or will need to develop, a variety of traits and skills, including the following:

- Desire and ability to learn
- Good writing and grammar skills
- Keen curiosity re: who, how, what, why, when, where
- Analytical mind
• Prefer variety over routine
• Computer literacy
• Ability to communicate in a relaxed, friendly manner
• Perseverance
• Flexibility
• Willingness to work odd and/or long hours

While the above traits are desirable and important, few people have all or even most of these when they first begin their careers as professional investigators. You do not need to have all or even most of these traits as long as you have the two most important ones, these are: #1) the desire and ability to learn; and #2) perseverance. If you have these key traits, you can acquire the other traits needed to be successful as an investigator.

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**A Growing Profession**

Prior to 9/11, The investigative business had traditionally been a "cottage industry" serving a small number of clients, usually related to security matters or fraud. With the ongoing "Information Age," (thanks to the creation of the internet) there is such an abundance of data that has become available that, more and more attorneys and businesses are turning to investigators to sort through the wealth of information available to us and come up with the reliable and specific information they need to solve a variety of problems. Added to this, the increased concern with security since the increased threats and instability in our communities has resulted in significant growth for PI agencies since 2001. More and more businesses and individuals are using PI’s for all type of information needs and especially for background investigations.

Thus there are more opportunities to begin a career as an investigator but it is still somewhat of a challenge, and like any job, you will have to "pound the pavement" to find a suitable investigative agency that has a full-time position available. Many agencies are still very small and many with "one person shops" operating out of their homes; and even agencies with several employees do not often have full-time positions available. Larger agencies that hire more investigators tend to specialize in certain areas, such as surveillance.

You will save yourself time and energy if you can decide what particular area of investigation you prefer. Do you want to do insurance fraud and related cases, which would involve mostly surveillance with some background and witness interviews, or does working with attorneys in cases going to trial appeal to you? There are other areas of specialty as well, such as high level background investigations, corporate fraud, arson, safety investigations, due diligence, etc. An agency that handles a variety of investigations may be ideal for you if you are not sure which specialty you prefer. Check out the agencies in your area and find out what they specialize in. You may need to consider looking into other areas or other states for employment opportunities. As you might expect, large cities have the most PI agencies and therefore the most employment opportunities.
Your First Investigation

Before you start looking for the job, make your first investigative assignment an investigation of the profession itself. Attend classes, read books, go to P.I. association meetings and conferences, and research PI’s on the Internet. This will give you a wealth of information and a good idea of what you can expect in this profession as well as enable you to meet people in the business and develop leads to finding possible employment. The better you understand what investigators actually do, the better choices you will make regarding your own career path.

Check out the licensing requirements in your state. The internet, of course is the fastest source of information now and after you begin your career.

Getting Hired

As with any other job, you will need to convince a prospective employer that you are the right person for the position that he or she has available. You will need to do all of the usual things that are recommended for applicants applying for any kind of job, such as having a professional looking resume accompanied by a cover letter. Make sure that your grammar and spelling are perfect. Remember that during the initial screening process, the employer doesn’t know you, or anything about you (other than what is written down on your cover letter and resume), therefore even a small mistake can eliminate you from consideration.

Do not be discouraged by your lack of training and/or experience as an investigator, as many agency owners prefer an inexperienced investigator because it is often easier to train a new person than to un-do previous training that may not be compatible with his or her own business and investigative style. There is not yet a standard of training within the industry, nor any kind of formal education specific to professional investigation other than a few private schools and a few courses offered at community colleges and universities. Therefore, agencies vary greatly in their methods of investigation. On the other hand, training a new person is a big investment for most employers. They will want to be confident that you are worth their time and money. In other words, they want to feel that you can handle the job and are likely to stick with it after the training period is over.

Many people think they want to be investigators but are not really suited for this type of work. Agency owners know this and therefore may prefer to try out a new person on a part-time basis before they consider them for a full-time position. Accepting part-time employment with an agency is a good way to get your foot in the door.

Your computer and research skills are very important. Even "good to slightly above average" computer skills can give you the edge over other applicants, since most investigative agencies use databases and computers in all types of investigative work.

If you are applying to a company that does a lot of surveillance, the vehicle that you have is very important. If you already own a vehicle that is suitable for surveillance, you will be more likely to get hired. If you think you want to do surveillance, you should do research to learn about
surveillance and what vehicles are most suitable. If you already have some good video camera equipment, this will also give you "the edge" over other prospective employees applying for jobs that mainly involve surveillance.

Above all else, you should decide if this is the career that you genuinely want to pursue. Then be willing to make the necessary sacrifices to become an investigator, which may include working odd hours for a low hourly rate in the beginning (to get the training and experience that you need) and to prove your worth to the agency with which you hope to become established.

If you have great difficulty in finding a full-time investigative job and are not able to make yourself available for part-time work, another alternative would be to find a job in a related field such as claims adjusting or paralegal work in a law firm. Many agency owners recognize this type of prior experience as being valuable and relevant to investigative work and it can be another factor that gives you an edge over other applicants.

Since perseverance is a key trait of a good investigator, you will want to demonstrate to the prospective employer that you have this trait during the application process wherever possible. Many opportunities should come up, such as being available for an appointment on short notice or at odd hours, calling back to ask about your status, keeping in touch with the prospective employer regarding future opportunities if you are not hired immediately, etc.

If you find an agency that you feel is right for you, do not be put off if they do not have a position available at the time you contact them. Even if you do not get the job when they do have an opening, go back again, even months later and let them know that you are still interested. That will demonstrate your persistence and determination to become an investigator and that it is not just a whim. This should make a good impression on most potential employers, unless they have definitely ruled you out as a prospect. If that seems to be the case, try to get them to tell you why they do not think you are suitable. This should be helpful feedback for you in your future attempts at landing a job.

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**Working as an Independent Contractor**

While many agencies are small and may not have full-time positions open very often, a number of agencies in the State of Washington do use "independent contractors" from time to time. This is another way to get your foot in the door and possibly obtain a full-time position with a desirable agency at a later date. It also gives you an opportunity to work for a variety of investigative agencies and decide which one you would like to work for as a full-time employee. In order to be an independent contractor, the State of Washington requires that you obtain your own agency license. This is more expensive than working as an investigator employee for an agency. In addition to higher licensing fees, you will also have to get your own insurance and business license. For these reasons, most agencies pay independent contractors more than their employee investigators.

For more information about becoming licensed as an investigator in Washington State, please call the Department of Licensing at (360) 664-9071 or write them at P.O. Box 9045,
Being an Investigator vs. Being a Business Owner

Do you want to be an investigator, or do you want to be a business owner, or both? Do you know how to do either? Being a business owner requires very different skills from being an investigator. In fact, there are many excellent investigators who never learn how to run a business effectively and as a result, they are always struggling to make a living. On the other hand, some of the most successful P.I. business owners are not the best investigators but have excellent business skills. Unless you already possess good business skills, you may be better off seeking a position with an investigative agency or working for an agency as an independent contractor and concentrating on learning how to be a good investigator.

Average Salaries for Employee Investigators

Trainee investigators typically start at $27,000 - 34,000 per year with national median salaries for experienced investigators at an estimated $44,570. Top salaries for experienced high level investigators range from 60,000 to 85,000. The salaries vary according to state and region. The salary may increase quickly depending on how fast the trainee learns the skills needed to do the job. Again, the salaries vary and may be higher with agencies that are able to charge a higher hourly rate.

Hourly rates charged by investigative agencies range from as low as $50 an hour to over $250 an hour, and again, vary according to state and region. The employee investigator should understand that a rule of thumb for any business (accountants, attorneys, etc.) is to keep the payroll costs (including taxes and benefits) to approximately one third of the "billable time." The remaining money billed is needed to pay the other costs of running a business (rent, office support staff, advertising, equipment, etc.).

Because it is very expensive and time-consuming for a business to train an employee, you should not expect to be paid a high hourly rate during the first couple of years of working as a P.I. During this time you will be learning a lot about the investigative business. Keep in mind that many professions require four years or more of college and specific courses to learn a profession. You should consider the early years of working as an investigator as a free education.

Good luck in the pursuit of your new career. In this investigator’s opinion it is a wonderful job, and whatever difficulty you have in getting started, it will be well worth the effort in the long run.
Linda Montgomery has been working as an investigator in the Seattle area for over 20 years. Her agency, Linda Montgomery Investigations, handles a large variety of civil and criminal cases and corporate investigations. She is also the instructor of a one-day seminar & certification class for the Washington PI employee license, offered in the State of Washington on a quarterly basis.