

## A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AND CHALLENGES FOR SECRETARIAL PROFESSION

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### **Abstract**

Secretary is centuries-old profession which had contributed to the development of human civilization since the ancient time. It performs both clerical and administrative functions in the government, church, and business as well. As a profession, it has evolved as the business and work environment change. Today the title administrative professional has redefined the roles and responsibilities of the office secretary to a wider and broader management function as partners of the executives and the CEOs, not merely as subordinates that follow instruction but as partners to assist them in the process of decision making.

*Keywords: secretary, office professional, administrative professional*

### **Abstrak**

Sekretaris adalah profesi yang berusia berabad-abad yang telah memberi kontribusi pada perkembangan peradaban manusia sejak zaman dahulu. Profesi ini melaksanakan baik fungsi klerikal maupun administratif pada pemerintahan, gereja, dan juga bisnis. Sebagai sebuah profesi, sekretaris telah berkembang bersamaan dengan berubahnya lingkungan bisnis dan pekerjaan. Sekarang ini posisi ahli administratif telah mendefinisikan kembali peran dan tanggung jawab sekretaris kantor menjadi fungsi manajemen yang lebih luas dan umum sebagai partner dari para eksekutif dan CEO, bukan hanya sebagai bawahan yang mengikuti instruksi tetapi sebagai partner untuk membantu mereka dalam proses pengambilan keputusan.

*Kata Kunci: sekretaris, ahli kantor, ahli administratif*

The word *secretary* comes from the Latin word *secretum*, meaning secret (Shulz, 2013), a highly respected profession of well-educated men who took dictation as 'scribes' and often times acted as trusted advisors. Tools used for scribes ranged from chisels used upon stones and styluses used on clay, woods, or wax tablets. Evidence also shows that the presence of secretaries, dating back to the ancient Egyptian scribes, comprised of men entrusted with private and confidential matters. Penmanship and shorthand became part of the preparation and training of ancient secretaries (Buseni, 2013; Evans, 2014).

During the middle ages, secretarial work was mostly carried out by clergymen. The word *clerk* is derived from the word *cleric* which means of or pertaining to the clergy. During this period, clerical tasks expanded into record keeping and bookkeeping. As the merchant class began to rise, secretaries were in very high demand, and they gained a higher status in society. During the Renaissance, clerical roles moved away from the

church to trade and commerce, where men usually occupied the profession (Evans, 2014). From these two perspectives comes today's title **clerical secretary**.

As commerce and trade expanded, people of wealth and power needed secretaries as confidants and trusted agents to handle correspondence on private or confidential matters. Men continued to dominate clerical and secretarial roles. They maintained account books, in addition to performing stenographic duties, and were known for their exemplary penmanship skills. Many labored long hours, with their 'secretary' desks serving as their files and workstations (Shulz, 2013).

In the 15th and 16th centuries, as world trade and commerce expanded, secretaries attained an elevated status and held prominent positions. Secretarial status titles frequently included 'personal' or 'private'. Men continued to dominate the secretarial field until the late 1880s. According to Shulz (2013), in early modern times, members of the nobility had secretaries, who functioned quite

similarly to those of the present day. They were always men; most had command of several languages including Latin and were required to have what would be considered today as a broad, generalized education.

The industrial revolution at the turn of the 20th century marked the beginning of global trade and commerce. The invention of printing and typewriter or adding machine transformed the scribes' way of recording into what was called modern office records and filing system, which required more and more paper work. Speed and accuracy in typing and adding machine replaced skills in penmanship and scribes. Women began to enter the office workforce in various clerical roles, and they adapted well to the new technologies such as the adding machine, telephone, and typewriter. Many women held, or aspired to hold, position as secretaries. They attended secretarial schools and worked to attain superior skills (Evans, 2014).

In the 1930s, the number of men with the title secretary dwindled, and women dominated the office workforce. Some were promoted from steno pools; some were graduates of business colleges or secretarial schools, but all were seeking the professional status and pay previously enjoyed by their male counterparts (Shulz, 2013). As secretaries began to take on various levels of responsibilities, researchers in 1934 determined a need to distinguish between different clerical roles, namely secretary, clerk, typist, stenographer, and personal assistant (Evans, 2014).

The 1960s-1970s marked the beginning of a more distinguished specialized secretarial profession such as medical office secretary who managed doctor's office, legal office secretary who worked in law office, public relation officer, and event organizer (Ali, Burcu, & Murat, 2012).

In 1980s though there were more job openings than secretaries to fill them, more and more women aspired to become secretaries. Women attended business colleges and secretary schools to refine their clerical skills and attain higher professional credentials well beyond being just 'typists for the boss' and also learned how to plan meetings, organize data using spreadsheet and database management software, interact with clients, vendors, and the general public, supervise the office and other staff, handle purchasing, and even train other workers.

By 1990s the internet transitions into a commercial enterprise and offices began integrating web-based practices such as e-mail and web browsing. Microsoft released an updated operating system "Windows 95" which integrated computer networking with administrative support services, and was quickly adopted by office professionals around the world (Evans, 2014).

The 2000s social media began in 2003, giving administrative professionals a new potential area for growth in their office, online marketing, and e-commerce. Blogging also rose in popularity, giving office staff more opportunities to assume more creative roles (McLuhan, 2012).

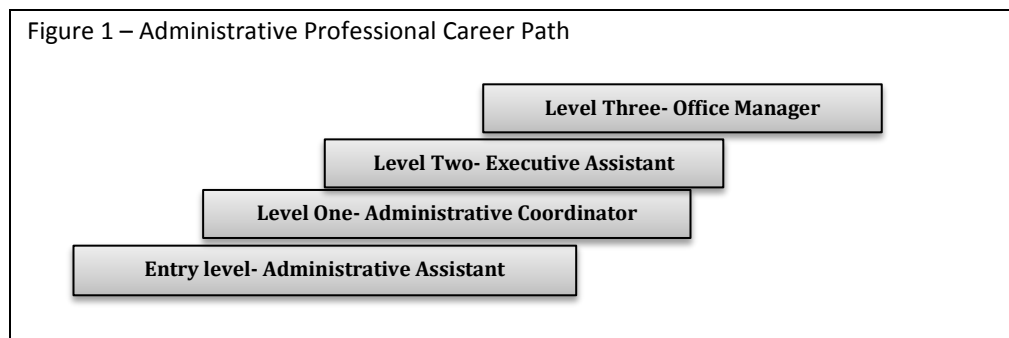
Today the 21st century office secretaries have transformed their titles, roles, and responsibilities into what is called Administrative Professionals—administrative assistants, office coordinators, executive assistants, office managers, and various other titles—and taken on roles and responsibilities which require skills in management functions and technology, including: (1) project management, (2) integrated computer software applications, (3) organization and scheduling, (4) internet/intranet communications and research, (5) document preparation, storage, and retrieval, with emphasis on electronic recordkeeping, (6) customer service, and (7) public relations (IAAP Editor, 2014).

Administrative Professionals or admins are handling a wider variety of duties beyond strictly clerical roles. Today's admins often purchase office equipment and supplies, plan meetings and special events, work closely with vendors and suppliers, create presentations and give them as well, interview, orient and supervise other staff, write and edit documents, schedule events and facilities, coordinate direct mailings, maintain multiple schedules and calendars, handle messages and correspondence (with voice mail, e-mail, and regular postal mail), and maintain computer files, directories, and databases (Bogenschneider & Slack, 2011).

There are several models of job descriptions and career path in Administrative Professionals proposed by different scholars and practitioners. Bumgarmer (2008) and Education Portal (2014a) proposes some examples of the Administrative Professionals career path and job descriptions. The career path of Administrative Professionals consists of four levels:

- |                |                            |
|----------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Entry level | Administrative Assistant   |
| 2. Level one   | Administrative Coordinator |
| 3. Level two   | Executive Assistant        |
| 4. Level Three | Office Manager             |

Each level has its own job requirements, job description, as well as the duties and responsibilities as shown in figure 1



(Education Portal, 2014b)

### Entry Level-Administrative Assistant

#### Administrative Assistant Job Description

Administrative assistants perform clerical duties in nearly every industry, managing and distributing information within an office, maintaining filing system, doing business correspondence, doing bookkeeping, and planning scheduling. Some administrative assistants, like those in the legal industry, may be more specialized than others.

#### Work Environment for Administrative Assistants

Administrative assistants provide office support to executives, managers, and other professionals. Assistants may work in a variety of settings from distribution centres to law firms. Assistants often work from a desk and use a computer and the Internet throughout the course of their day.

#### Administrative Assistant Duties

Most administrative assistant duties revolve around managing and distributing information within an office. This generally includes answering phones, taking memos, and maintaining files. Administrative assistants may also be in charge of sending and receiving correspondence, as well as greeting clients and customers.

**Bookkeeping.** Administrative assistants in some offices may be charged with monitoring and recording expenditures. Duties may range from creating spreadsheets to reporting expenses to an office manager. As such, some administrative assistants may be required to be knowledgeable in office bookkeeping software, such as Microsoft Excel.

**Planning and Scheduling.** Planning events like board meetings and luncheons may also be the responsibility of administrative assistants. This may require researching vendor prices or inquiring about participants' availability. Other duties may

include scheduling appointments and preparing presentation materials.

**Documentation.** Administrative assistants may also help office members with documentation. Aside from storing, organizing, and managing files, assistants may need to type, edit, and proofread documents. Some assistants may need to take dictation or record the minutes of meetings.

#### Specialized Administrative Assistant Duties

Administrative assistants in some fields may be required to have extensive professional knowledge. Accordingly, duties for these assistants may be more specialized. For example, legal administrative assistants may need to have a thorough understanding of legal terminology and procedures, while medical assistants may need to be well versed in dealing with insurance companies and reading medical reports.

### Level One-Administrative Coordinators

#### Administrative Coordinator Job Description

An administrative coordinator provides office services by implementing administrative systems, procedures, and policies, monitoring administrative projects, and maintaining suggestion program.

#### Administrative Coordinator Job Duties

An administrative coordinator:

1. Maintains administrative workflow by studying methods, implementing cost reductions, and developing reporting procedures
2. Creates and revises systems and procedures by analyzing operating practices, studying utilization of micro-computer and software technologies, evaluating personnel and technological requirements, and implementing changes

3. Develops administrative staff by providing information, educational opportunities, and coaching
4. Resolves administrative problems by analyzing information, identifying, and providing communication solutions
5. Maintains rapport with customers, managers, and employees by arranging continuing contacts, researching and developing new services and methods, setting priorities, and resolving problem situations
6. Maintains suggestion system by directing and controlling administrative technical aspects in accordance with management directives
7. Provides information by answering questions and requests
8. Maintains continuity of work operations by documenting and communicating needed actions to management, discovering irregularities, and determining continuing needs
9. Guides employee actions by researching, developing, writing, and updating administrative policies, procedures, methods, and guidelines as well as communicating developments to management
10. Completes administrative projects by identifying and implementing new technology and resources, redesigning systems, and recommending re-deployment of designated resources
11. Accomplishes department and organization mission by completing related results as needed

### **Administrative Coordinator Skills and Qualifications**

The skills and qualifications are: organizational astuteness, process management, process improvement, reporting skills, change management, coaching, client relationships, supporting innovation, developing standards, hiring, and administrative writing skills.

### **Level Two-Executive Assistance**

#### **Executive Assistance Job Description**

Executive assistants are advanced administrative professionals who work with top-level executives in various industries. Employers often look for executive assistants with experience and education in their specific industry as well as strong communication, organizational, and

computer skills. Executive assistants may answer phones, file and manage paperwork, mail letters and purchase office supplies; however, their duties go far beyond these administrative tasks. They often coordinate meetings, prepare reports and other confidential materials, arrange travel, manage expenses, and train other support staff. Executive assistants may be authorized to make business office decisions in the occurrence that executives are unavailable.

#### **Executive Assistant Qualifications**

Bachelor's degrees and three or more years of administrative experience specific to the business industry are the required qualifications for this position. Organizational, computer, and interpersonal skills are also necessary for this profession. Executive assistants must maintain a professional demeanour in all situations and be able to withhold confidential information. They may also be required to work nights and weekends.

### **Level Three-Office Manager**

#### **Office Manager Job Descriptions**

Office manager's job descriptions can vary significantly based on the size and type of the organization of employment. For example, managers working within a small dental office may be required to greet patients, set appointments, and handle billing, while managers working within a corporate office may focus exclusively on one aspect of business, such as insurance processing. In addition to overseeing personnel, office managers ensure the smooth functioning of businesses. For example, office managers within a healthcare facility may be called upon to order general supplies like paper, pens and toner, as well as medical supplies, such as syringes, medicine, or vaccinations from specific vendors. Accordingly, managers may be required to research several vendors for pricing, delivery dates, and other terms of sale.

#### **Office Manager Duties**

Duties also might include evaluating office procedures and looking for more efficient ways of conducting processes.

**Supervising personnel.** Office managers must be adept at supervising other employees in a fair and consistent manner. They must have the ability to motivate others and encourage them to increase both the productivity and work quality. Supervisory duties may also include hiring and firing employees, as well as resolving disputes or other issues that arise among the employees. Within sales offices, office managers may track the

sales force, report monthly sales numbers, and note areas in need of improvement.

cohesively. In small offices that do not have their own computer to support personnel, office managers may need computer systems troubleshooting skills. In larger offices, managers may oversee the work of technical specialists, record frequent problems, and research potential solutions.

Some office managers may take on accounting responsibilities. In these cases, office managers may be required to oversee payroll expenses, send invoices, and process paperwork. For example, an office manager may be required to monitor overtime and ensure that the expenses remain as low as possible, while another manager may be called upon to follow-up unpaid invoices.

### Office Manager Job Qualifications

**Education and experience.** According to the Association of Professional Office Managers [2013], individuals who wish to become office managers should earn a degree in business administration. Larger companies might require an associate or bachelor's degree, while smaller firms might accept candidates with a high school diploma and office experience. A business administration degree program offers courses in accounting, business writing, customer service, communications, business ethics, business practices, computer applications, and other subjects that relate to office administration.

**Skills.** People who wish to become office managers must be organized individuals who demonstrate common sense and negotiation skills. They must have the ability to monitor the work performed by the staff so that it is completed on time, within budget, and meets high quality standards.

Office managers must handle stress well since they confront a variety of problems throughout the day. They might be subsequently blamed for any unresolved problems or issues within the workplace. For this reason, office managers must be adept at assigning responsibilities to the staff and meeting deadlines. They must be able to motivate employees in order to increase productivity and sales. Office managers should have strong decision-making skills as well.

Office managers are usually required to be familiar with various computer software packages, including Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Outlook, and Excel. Since they often are responsible for writing proposals, presentations, and memorandums, they should also possess strong written communication skills. Overseeing other

**Managing systems.** With the increasing use of computer systems, office managers may also be responsible for ensuring that the systems operate. Employees requires them to be effective oral communicators as well as to interact with many different individuals in a professional manner.

### Conclusion

As the global demand for highly skilled labor continues to grow, and jobs will structurally change and so do the skills needed to do them. The old clerical secretarial jobs have transformed into Administrative Professional. Gone are the manual typewriter, stenography, and filing cabinet. Computer and Microsoft Office have become an essential training for administrative professional.

Talent mismatch will become a challenge, as those who are trained to do *conventional clerical secretarial jobs* cannot perform to do the *work of administrative professional* which required complicated extensive IT skills for the 21st century office, whose jobs include publishing platforms and power point, coordinating senior leadership figures in multiple locations, arranging online web-seminars and conference calls with multiple nationalities and regions, solving problem ability, and having critical thinking (Education Portal, 2014b; Bogenschneider & Slack, 2011).

Technological developments transform the professional knowledge and skills and the professional setting into an information processing environment rather than instruments such as paper, file, and pen. The electronic communication and management skills of secretary gradually gain more importance. The requirement that secretaries should follow technological innovations regarding their profession and gaining information about psychological and working techniques is felt every day. Particularly, the requirement that rapid developments in computer technology should be followed up enriches the meaning of being successful in the philosophy of continuous professional education. The general trends in sectors where secretary profession is present should be considered in terms of the employment status of the work force, changing professional qualifications and innovations regarding technology, organization, and customer demands (Ali, Burcu, & Murat, 2012).

This is a challenge for those who are pursuing career in Secretarial and Office Management as well as for the institution that offers program in Secretarial and Office Management to provide students with a curriculum based on integrated academic and technical content and strong

employability skills. Therefore, it is not an absurd idea if the idea of ‘investing for the future’ proposed by the US Department of Education is adopted—a program which according to the US Office of Vocational and Adult Education, should provide work-based learning opportunities that enable students to connect what they are learning to real-life career scenarios and choices (US Department of Education, 2012).

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