

Current Comments®

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From Scribes to Secretaries in 5,000 Years; From Secretaries to Information Managers in 20

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Were I to classify the many *Current Contents*® (*CC*®) readers who have written to me over the years, one of the largest categories would be secretaries—those administrative assistants, aides, general factotums, and confidants of research scientists who do so much to make work a pleasure rather than drudgery. This does not mean, of course, that secretarial work is drudgery. We all "assist" others, in one way or another, to be more efficient at what they do best. As in any occupation, a good secretary aspires to high standards of performance.

My contacts with the secretaries of *CC* readers have been varied. Often, these secretaries are quite outspoken. In the early days of *CC* they were the first to suggest that we provide authors' addresses so they could write for reprints without going to the library. Then, when we added addresses, they informed us that they needed zip codes or pointed out that the print was too small. Nowadays secretaries more often write to me about the substance of essays rather than the mechanics of using *CC*. However, I do hear from them when they believe we have omitted a term in the index. Many of them regularly check the indexes for one or more research scientists.

I know from personal experience the value of an efficient assistant. Here at ISI® I depend on a staff of five persons with varied secretarial skills and experience to manage the flow of paperwork in and out of my office. Their activities include reading and sorting mail,

filing and photocopying, placing and receiving telephone calls, scheduling appointments, making travel arrangements, doing library research, accessing computer and online databases, and, yes, typing and taking dictation.

Simply listing these duties, however, does not fully convey the nature of the secretary's role—at ISI or elsewhere. There is an intangible aspect to the secretary's contribution, a value that goes far beyond the sum of the activities mentioned above. The secretary frequently functions as a surrogate for the executive, preparing memos and reports that the boss will merely sign. In this way the secretary becomes a kind of ghostwriter.¹ Furthermore, secretarial work involves organizing and controlling that most precious of commodities in any office: information.

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), the word "secretary" can be traced to the medieval Latin word *secretarius*, a term applied to scribes, notaries, and other confidential employees. It is derived from the Latin *secretum*, meaning secret.² One of the *OED* definitions for secretary, although listed as "obsolete," describes an important characteristic of the secretarial assistant: "One who is entrusted with private or secret matters; a confidant...."² Certainly discretion, sensitivity, and trustworthiness are qualities that the most prized assistants bring to their jobs.

The foregoing definition reminds us that modern secretaries have their predecessors in antiquity. The scribes of an-

cient Egypt, for example, recorded the particulars of business transactions, handled correspondence, and performed other tasks that are plainly secretarial. With skills in reading and writing, they were among the best-educated men of their time. All men born to high position in administration, the priesthood, and even royalty received their first training as scribes.³ Their schooling included work on practice compositions that extolled the virtues of the scribe's calling. "Set your heart on being a scribe," concluded one writing, "so you can direct the whole earth."⁴

Egyptian scribes had their counterparts in the *scribae* of ancient Rome⁵ and the *grammateis* of ancient Greece,⁶ who handled many clerical functions, including record keeping and correspondence. In the Middle Ages, secretarial tasks were performed primarily by clergymen. According to the *OED*, in fact, the word "clerk" is derived from "cleric," meaning "of or pertaining to the clergy."⁷ In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, notes sociologist Mary Kathleen Benét, the clerical profession moved away from the church. Such new skills as double-entry bookkeeping allowed clerks to achieve a measure of status and security in serving the rising merchant class.⁸

The proliferation of secretarial occupations occurred during the nineteenth century, in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. In *Woman's Place Is at the Typewriter*, a history of women in the clerical occupations, Margery W. Davies notes that offices were small, cheerless, and staffed entirely by men prior to the 1860s.⁹ (p. 9) Male clerks worked at various jobs, including drafting letters, bookkeeping, and delivering letters to other businesses. They were knowledgeable in all aspects of their employers' businesses. Davies compares these clerks to craftsmen. In most cases a clerkship was an apprenticeship that enabled a worker to learn a business from top to bottom. A clerk who distin-

guished himself could realistically hope to become a manager or owner someday.

In the US, women were excluded from office work until the Civil War, when 1,500 women were hired to fill clerical positions in the Treasury.¹⁰ In the latter half of the nineteenth century, businesses expanded rapidly owing to improved manufacturing methods and the development of regional, national, and foreign markets. With this expansion came a surge in paperwork and a consequent need for more clerks as well as office mechanization.⁹ (p. 28) Not surprisingly, the typewriter came on the scene at about this time. The first practical typewriter was invented by Christopher L. Sholes in 1867 and was introduced by the Remington company.⁹ (p. 33)

Employers increasingly hired women to fill clerk-typist positions, developing the rationalization that a woman could operate typewriter keys more easily than a man could, because a woman's fingers are more dexterous.⁹ (p. 55) More in point was their greater literacy. In the US more women than men were graduating from high schools.⁹ (p. 56) But the most important reason for the large-scale acceptance of women into the clerical professions, according to Elyce J. Rotella, Department of Economics, Indiana University, Bloomington, was their apparent willingness to work for lower wages.¹¹ (p. 162)

Between 1870 and 1930, clerical work became firmly established as a female occupation. By 1890, women made up 64 percent of all workers classified as typists or stenographers. By 1930, that figure had grown to over 95 percent.¹¹ (p. 125)

Early in the 1900s, according to Davies, researchers endeavored to distinguish the secretary from typists, stenographers, and other clerical workers.⁹ (p. 130) In 1924, for example, W.W. Charters and Isadore B. Whitley, University of Pittsburgh, published their

Analysis of Secretarial Duties and Traits, a survey examining the responsibilities and characteristics of successful secretaries.¹²

In a subsequent study in 1934, Frederick G. Nichols, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, noted that the term "secretary" was being indiscriminately applied to general typists, stenographers, and other clerks.¹³ Nichols pointed out that there was a considerable distinction between these workers and the *private* or *personal* secretary who worked closely with one executive. While many clerical workers were subject to increasing regimentation and monitoring on the job, the private secretary had comparative freedom and was entrusted with a variety of responsibilities. These included such tasks as organizing schedules and appointments, composing letters, and generally insulating the boss from distractions.⁹ (p. 129-62)

Today, there is evidence that the private secretary, who works closely with one employer, may be giving way to the "team" secretary who works for a group of people within an organization. Rosalie Silverstone and Rosemary Towler, City University Business School, London, compared results of surveys of London secretaries taken in 1970 and 1981. They noted that the percentage of secretaries who worked for an individual fell from 70 percent to 50 percent, while the percentage of secretaries working for six or more people rose.¹⁴ One implication of this change, according to the authors, is that it disrupts the secretary's traditional career progression. A secretary's status and progress depend largely on the status and position of the boss for whom she or he works. Working for a group of people of mixed status presumably curbs this progress.¹⁴

It is unfortunate, especially for large numbers of unemployed men, to think of secretarial, stenographic, or data-entry work as strictly for women. For a motivated, well-placed individual, a

secretarial position can be a good spot in which to learn how to run a business. My favorite example is the show-business impresario Billy Rose (1899-1966).¹⁵ I mentioned him in my discussion of stenographic systems.¹⁶ Rose, a champion writer of Gregg shorthand, served as personal stenographer to the financier Bernard Baruch and used the position to learn much about the workings of the business world.

A recent article by Mary Joy Breton in the magazine *Working Woman* proposes strategies for secretaries who seek to move up the corporate ladder.¹⁷ Breton recommends, among other things, that secretaries study every aspect of their company, read books on management theory, and seize all opportunities to demonstrate their talents. The article includes profiles of successful executives who began their careers as secretaries. Breton also mentions the book *The Managerial Woman*, by Margaret Hennig and Anne Jardim,¹⁸ which describes the careers of 25 female executives. Twenty-three of these managers started out as secretaries.

Office Automation

Related to advancement of secretaries is the issue of office automation. Improvements in computer technology have brought a proliferation of automated equipment to the office, including word processors, data-entry terminals, and personal computers. A recent report on office automation from the US Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, estimates that as many as 7 million workers in the US are using computer-based display terminals on the job.¹⁹ (p. 1) The report distinguishes between two different scenarios in office automation. In so-called "low tech" settings, where data- and word-processing operations are centralized in pools, conditions are highly regimented and prospects for advancement are unpromising. In other offices, however, automated systems are decentralized, allowing secretaries to spend

less time on monotonous, repetitive tasks and to play a more integrated role in the functioning of the office.¹⁹ (p. 6)

One significant trend in office automation, according to Barbara Hurley, director of placement development, Katharine Gibbs School, New York, has been the replacement of single-function, "dedicated" word processors by personal computers that can perform a variety of tasks.²⁰ This permits secretaries, in some cases, to expand their roles in the office. For example, secretaries who have the opportunity to learn to use spreadsheet software can assist in planning budgets, according to Larry Hirschhorn, Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.²¹ He also notes that computer systems can now integrate what used to be divided tasks—including word processing, information

retrieval, and graphics—reducing the division of labor in the tasks performed by managers and secretaries. Furthermore, advances in computerized "desktop publishing" technology may soon permit secretaries to move into paraprofessional careers in the dissemination of office documents. These new paraprofessionals will combine skills in word processing, graphics, and electronic layout.²¹ Many of the secretaries at ISI use our *Sci-Mate*[®] software regularly. The staff in my office, for example, uses *Sci-Mate* to sort and retrieve data from a database containing information on more than 5,000 correspondents. In addition, many other software packages are used regularly.

For the time being, however, office automation raises questions about career mobility that are not yet resolved.

Table 1: A list of professional secretarial and stenographic organizations.

Association of Secretaries in Asia c/o Hong Kong Association of Secretaries G.P.O. Box 6255 Hong Kong, Hong Kong	National Association of Rehabilitation Secretaries c/o National Rehabilitation Association 633 South Washington Street Alexandria, VA 22314
Association of Secretaries of French-Speaking Faculties of Medicine and Odontology c/o A. Gouazé, Dean Faculty of Medicine 2 Boulevard Tonnelé, BP 3223 F-37032 Tours, France	National Association of Secretarial Services 240 Driftwood Road, S.E. St. Petersburg, FL 33705
European Association of Professional Secretaries c/o Shirley Stuart International Wool Secretariat Wool House, 6 Carlton Gardens London SW1Y 5AE, UK	National Collegiate Association for Secretaries c/o Professor Ann Swafford Office Administration Department University of South Carolina Columbia, SC 29208
Independent Professional Typists Network 924 Main Street Huntington Beach, CA 92648	National Shorthand Reporters Association 118 Park Street, S.E. Vienna, VA 22180
Inter-American Federation of Secretaries c/o Rhina de Torres Apartado Postal 50 San Salvador, El Salvador	9 to 5, National Association of Working Women 1224 Huron Road Cleveland, OH 44115
National Association of Executive Secretaries 3837 Plaza Drive Fairfax, VA 22030	Professional Association of Secretarial Services 2200 East 104th Avenue, #103 Denver, CO 80233
National Association of Government Secretaries 5143 Summit Drive Fairfax, VA 22030	Professional Secretaries International 301 East Armour Boulevard Kansas City, MO 64111
National Association of Legal Secretaries 3005 East Skelly Drive Suite 211 Tulsa, OK 74105	Society of Architectural Administrators 1220 West Sixth Street Cleveland, OH 44113
	Visually Impaired Secretarial/Transcribers Association 337 South Sherman Drive Indianapolis, IN 46201

According to the Women's Bureau report, some researchers are concerned that automation may reduce the number of lower level managerial and professional positions, thus blocking one of the secretary's upward paths.¹⁹ (p. 11) To keep their skills current, secretaries must invest considerable time and effort in training on automated office equipment. This training, however, does not always bring compensation in the form of promotion and an increased salary.¹⁹ (p. 13) According to H. Gerald Moody, Battelle Columbus Division, Columbus, Ohio, personnel departments are not keeping up with technological changes in the secretary's job and have been reluctant to restructure job descriptions and salaries.²²

Table 1 provides a list of organizations that have been formed to promote the

interests of professional secretaries. Table 2 lists publications related to the secretarial profession.

The Secretary and Information

As I mentioned earlier, there are intangible qualities to the secretary's contribution. One aspect of this is the secretary's role in organizing and retrieving information. Sociologist Joy Carol Charlton, Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania, points out that one of the key components in the boss-secretary relationship is the knowledge and information shared between the two.²³ The secretary's grasp of various kinds of information is often so complete as to be indispensable, says Charlton, so that the employer may be significantly handicapped when the secretary is absent. It is undeniable that the secretary functions

Table 2: A list of periodicals related to secretarial work and word processing. The year each periodical began publication is given in parentheses, if available.

Australian Secretary Institute of Private Secretaries 234 Collins Street Melbourne, Victoria 3000 Australia	National Educational Secretary (1934) National Association of Educational Office Personnel 1902 Association Drive Reston, VA 22091
Canadian Secretary MacLean-Hunter Ltd. Business Publication Division MacLean-Hunter Building 777 Bay Street Toronto, Ontario M5W 1A7 Canada	Office: Magazine of Management, Equipment, Automation (1935) Office Publications, Inc. 1600 Summer Street Stamford, CT 06904
From Nine to Five Dartnell Corporation 4660 Ravenswood Avenue Chicago, IL 60640	P.S. for Professional Secretaries (1960) Bureau of Business Practice 24 Rope Ferry Road Waterford, CT 06385
HKAS Quarterly Bulletin Hong Kong Association of Secretaries G.P.O. Box 6255 Hong Kong, Hong Kong	Personal Report for the Professional Secretary (1972) Research Institute of America, Inc. 589 Fifth Avenue New York, NY 10017
International Information and Word Processing Report (1975) Wharton Publishing Ltd. 12 Eton Street Richmond, Surrey TW9 1EE, UK	Secretary (1942) Professional Secretaries International 301 East Armour Boulevard Kansas City, MO 64111
International Word Processing Report Geyer-McAllister Publications, Inc. 51 Madison Avenue New York, NY 10010	Word (1972) Office Technology Management Association 9401 West Beloit Road, Suite 211 Milwaukee, WI 53227
Journal of the Institute of Qualified Private Secretaries Institute of Qualified Private Secretaries 126 Farnham Road Slough, Berkshire SL1 4XA, UK	Word & Information Processing (1978) MacLean-Hunter Ltd. 30 Old Burlington Street London, W1X 2AE, UK
	Words (1972) Association of Information Systems Professionals 1015 North York Road Willow Grove, PA 19090

as a gatekeeper, a key element in the information transfer that is crucial to any organization.

In the future, I believe, secretaries will be trained not only in word processing, shorthand, and business correspondence, but in information science as well. The beginnings of this trend are evident in institutions like the University of Strathclyde Business School, Glasgow, Scotland, which recently merged its Departments of Librarianship and Office Organisation to form the Department of Information Science. According to department cochairman Blaise Cronin, Strathclyde offers the only graduate-level program in secretarial science. The program includes course work in information science and emphasizes training in the latest software for communications and text retrieval.²⁴ I am confident that the Strathclyde program will serve as a model for other schools. I fully agree with Cronin that in the future the secretarial profession will

include such skills as information retrieval and database, network, and communications management. Cronin, incidentally, is the author of *The Citation Process*.²⁵ He was also chosen to deliver the Samuel Lazerow Memorial Lecture in information science for 1985-1986 at the University of Indiana.

Clearly the term "secretary" covers a large variety of positions. Whether designated Confidential, Personal, Executive, Private, Staff, or other combinations, the professional secretary is not just a person who uses the tools and skills of the typist-stenographer or information manager. The secretary as "assistant to" must manage people successfully with tact and diplomacy. As a surrogate, the secretary can ghost many functions for the employer, saving valuable time and boosting productivity.

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