

CURRENT ISSUES AND BEST PRACTICES IN SECRETARIAL PROFESSION

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Abstract

As technology continues to expand in offices across the world, the role of office professional has greatly evolved. This paper will therefore be presenting current issues and best practices in the Secretarial Profession as office automation and organizational restructuring have led secretaries and administrative assistants to assume a wider range of new responsibilities once reserved for managerial and professional staff. Secretaries are aided in these tasks by a variety of office equipment, such as facsimile machines, computers, scanners, printers, photocopiers, and telephone systems. Best practice is required therefore to maintain quality as an alternative to mandatory Secretarial Profession standards and can be based on self-assessment or benchmarking.

Keywords: technology, automation, administrative assistants, self assessment, Benchmarking

Introduction

Secretaries and administrative assistants are responsible for a variety of administrative and clerical duties necessary to run an organization effectively. They serve as an information manager for an office, schedule meetings and appointments, organize and maintain paper and electronic files, manage projects, conduct research and provide information via the telephone, postal mail and e-mail. They also may prepare correspondence and handle travel arrangements. Many secretaries now provide training and orientation for new staff, conduct research on the internet, and operate and troubleshoot new office technologies.

In the midst of these, however, their core responsibilities have remained much the same, although changed from manual to electronic - performing and coordinating an office's administrative activities, storing retrieving, and integrating information for dissemination to staff and clients. Secretaries increasingly use personal computers to create spreadsheets, compose correspondence, manage

databases, and create reports and documents via desktop publishing, and using digital graphics – all tasks previously handled by managers and other professionals.

At the same time, these other office workers have assumed many tasks traditionally assigned to secretaries and administrative assistants, such as word processing and answering the telephone. This paper will help Secretaries learn how to create a mutually effective working relationship that is productive and successful. It will also give you the opportunity to work on any weaknesses and to uphold best practices.

Current Issues

There is no doubt that the modern technology has thrown some secretaries out of job and the trend will continue for some time. The innovations and inventions in computer and its facilities have made the office to reduce the number of secretaries. The jobs which the secretaries perform in the office and the errands they run have been taken over by the computer. This is no doubt that any secretary who studies the use of computer beside his/her secretarial duties cannot be afraid of losing his or her job. According to Brill (1992), a professional secretary has many administrative duties. Traditionally, these duties were mostly related to correspondence, such as the typing out of letters, maintaining files of paper documents, etc. The advent of word processing has significantly reduced the time that such duties require, with the result that many new tasks have come under the purview (i.e. responsibilities) of the secretary. These might include managing budgets and doing bookkeeping, maintaining websites, and making travel arrangements. Secretaries might manage all the administrative details of running a high-level conference or arrange the catering for a typical lunch meeting. Often executives will ask their Secretaries to take the minutes at meetings and prepare meeting documents for review. Work assigned to secretary positions may range from very routine and procedural duties, such as providing receptionist, phone, and typing services, to very responsible work, such as developing information for use in large, complex, and critical conferences.

Generally, a secretary can provide assistance in the more procedural aspects of general office work for several staff members without difficulty. There is no hard, fast rule as to the number of people a secretary can serve. However, the number of people to whom a secretary can provide higher level, more responsible assistance, is limited because of the demands such duties place on the secretary in terms of awareness of the activities, views, programs, and commitments of the person assisted. It is also unreasonable to expect a secretary to provide clerical support, e.g., typing, to a large number of people and at the same time provide higher level administrative support.

Understand yourself before you try to understand others

In order to build excellent effective relationships and understand others, it is important that you understand yourself first. Sue France (1988): To find out your strengths and weaknesses, you can assess your Personal strengths which will show

the overall picture of how you perceive yourself. You can pat yourself on your back for the areas where you are confident and competent, and you should plan to concentrate on any weaknesses by attending trainings, making research and setting goals. you will have to learn how to set 'SMARTER' goals and objectives by applying a pro-forma for goal setting. This 'Personal development' plan can help you to understand yourself better, and can also help you focus on your personal development/learning and training requirements. It can help you identify gaps in your skills and experience, and find ways to fill them. You will be able to reflect on past experiences and focus on learning outcomes; the end product will be that you will be motivated, your self-confidence will be boosted and your self-esteem will be much higher. This will hopefully lead to a satisfying and successful career as well as excellent working relationships. You can use this personal development plan in your appraisal meetings and to help you in career management. To set a Personal Development Plan, you will need to consider your strengths and areas for development, your opportunities and threats, your action plan, also reflecting back to the pass, and consider your values and any other thoughts, and then goal setting and commitment statement are things that you most work on to make a successful Personal Development Plan.

Dealing with difficult people and managing problem

When people are asked why they left their last job, the answer often involves a difficult boss. Some are really bad and no one finds it easy to work with them, whilst others simply have some very annoying habits. Sometimes a Secretary and a boss have a personality clash. If you do consider you have a difficult boss you should try to find out whether the problem lies with you, your boss, or a combination of the two. Think about whether you seem to have more problems with your boss than your colleagues do. If so, maybe your work styles do not match. If everyone finds the boss challenging, then you are most likely working for someone difficult. Often the way people treat us says more about them than it does about us. Think about what lies behind their thoughts and actions. Do they chase, bully, react the way they do because they are feeling out of control or inadequate and insecure of themselves? Are they being bullied and under pressure from their own boss or clients? Try to empathize with their situation. While some people may handle disagreements better than others, our natural reaction to problem is the fight-or-flight reflex.

In a problematic situation, the fight reaction can translate into confronting, arguing, yelling, and even shoving or hitting. At the other end of the continuum, the flight reaction causes us to quickly give in to others, leave uncomfortable situations or avoid bringing up difficult issues. Neither fight nor flight behaviours are likely to result in solving the problem that's causing the conflict. The Secretary must have the strategies that can help him move from conflict to problem resolution.

Problem-solving technique

Wang (1999), as a secretary, one must provide a problem-solving technique

that helps you to be objective and systemic when solving any problem or conflict. You will use the technique as many times as you need to evaluate the solution and the outcome. Nearly all of us, at some time in our working lives, have to deal with difficult situations and difficult people. We therefore need to learn how to manage difficult people to make sure that we continue enjoying going to work and building effective and efficient working relationships. Problems can at best cause unproductive work days, and often leads to stress-related issues that result in sickness and absence from work. There is even a possibility of it ending in your losing or resigning from your job. According to the 2007 UK Chartered Management of Personnel & Development (CIPD) *Absence Management Survey Report*, management styles are the number-one cause of stress at work. Problem some time is likely to be due to bad communication, personality clashes, conflicting interests, jealousy, competition, personal agendas, deadlines and time constraints, aggressive personalities, having different immediate goals (needs), or different values and things that are important to us, having a different approach to situations (eg work styles), incorrect perception of situations and people.

Bear in mind that what one party perceives as problem may not be seen as such by the other party. Remember too that some people may seem 'difficult' because of the way we interact with them. We may have created the difficulty in the first place, or they may have personality issues and difficult characteristics.

The following problem-solving techniques can help the secretary be objective and systematic when dealing with difficult people and any kind of problem to be solved.

- Describe the perceived problem as briefly as possible:
- Disengage your emotions from the problem and give objective, relevant facts.
- Give specific examples if possible:
- List all possible reasons and causes of the problem you can think of:
- In your Objective, describe positively and concisely what you want the outcome to be:

What bosses should know to work effectively with their assistants

Leaman, (1995), the Boss or the Chief Executives should empower their secretaries with project works that can take some works away from them and free up their time to do other things. This would allow development; it makes the job more interesting and satisfying and raises self-esteem and morale.

Bosses should think about what would help to relieve them of pressure and at the same time broaden the experience and skill set of their Secretaries and Personal Assistants. Most bosses want to give their Secretaries power, authority, decision-making capabilities and control over areas of their jobs. So Secretaries need to take it

– ask for it, demand it and grow with it! Secretaries should take action to obtain empowerment – empowerment is an attitude. If you have the attitude that you are willing to accept empowerment then you will be given it. That has significant effects on your self-esteem and morale as it encourages you not only to continually develop by formulating your own ideas and follow them through. For empowerment to happen, a secretary requires *permission power* and *protection*:

The boss has to agree and give permission to empower the secretary, although the request can only come from a proactive secretary. That gives you, as secretary, the power to make decisions and then you exercise the power, but you also have to know that if something goes wrong you will be protected by your boss as the overall accountability still lies with him/her. If permission, power or protection is missing, then empowerment cannot occur.

The true value of a Professional Secretary

According to the results of a survey of 454,000 CEOs conducted by Reed.co.uk and Total Jobs in 2009, Secretaries contribute as much as 40% to their boss's productivity. This suggests that a good Secretary could be worth around ten times what they are actually being paid. Paradoxically, when it comes to training, Secretaries have a battle on their hands to convince the boss that they are worth the investment in training thus some organizations know the importance of training their secretaries. Keeping up-to-date with best practice and organization's standards is every Secretary's responsibility; therefore, identifying a suitable training course should be part of your preparation for the annual performance appraisal.

Best Practice

A **best practice** is a method or technique that has consistently shown results superior to those achieved with other means, and that is used as a benchmark. In addition, best practice is considered by some as a business used to describe the process of developing and following a standard way of doing things that multiple organizations can use. Best practices are used to maintain quality. A key strategic talent is therefore required when a secretary is to apply best practice in his/her profession to organizations in his ability to balance the unique qualities of an organization with the practices that are in common with others based on the management style of the organization.

Different types of Management styles

According to Sue (2009), whatever type of boss i.e. Chief Executive you work for there is one attribute you definitely need to cope with every single type of management style and that is humour!

The Commander Boss

The commander boss communicates in a direct, authoritative style, but is

actually open to input. The commanders genuinely believe that they know all the right answers and expect everything to be done their way. They will mention something that they want you to do – however vaguely or passing in the corridor and they will expect it done. They can never accept constructive criticism, no matter how you deliver it. They believe their way of doing things is always correct, and nothing you or anyone else can say will ever change their minds. *How to deal with the commander boss:* Acknowledge the value of your boss's ideas and approaches. Don't present your own opinions in a confrontational manner. Use questions to keep your boss from being defensive. Start your sentences with 'do you think we might...?' or 'could we consider...?' instead of 'we should...' or 'we have to...'

The Negative Boss

Use active listening skills until you are certain that negative bosses feel listened to and that you have heard them. Then decide whether they have legitimate reasons for their negativity and see where you can help them. Rephrase back to them what they have told you so they know you have understood and they don't keep repeating themselves. Know your limits and don't start trying to be your boss counselor (or you'll start feeling negative yourself!).

The Boss who is new to the Organization

Newly arrived bosses don't know much about their new environment but you should accept the fact that they will have new ideas to bring in. They do have a past and they may well have been at the top of their game – respect that. Though they need your help and support to settle in and learn the processes and traditions. As they are new to the environment they will be open to information, ideas, and suggestions. Make sure they don't make any decisions without informed knowledge and information and an understanding of the relevant policies and procedures. Do not be condescending and be sure to show respect for the knowledge or experience that they have from their past experiences.

The Bully Boss

The bully occasionally gets upset and yells, but then calms down, talks rationally and may even apologize. Bullying can take many forms, such as enjoying verbally abusing others, teasing, sarcasm and humiliation. Any prolonged behavior that makes it unbearable for you to work can be considered bullying.

How to deal with the bully boss: With mild bullies, avoid the natural fight-or-flight reaction and remain in a calm, rational mode. People feel stupid being angry by themselves, so the boss will usually calm down and may be willing to engage in a discussion. Don't take any mild abuse personally. If you're forced to deal with a boss who yells and is insulting, remember not to take it personally as this is just a boss with bad manners. You should always be assertive and remember you have rights. Bullies are adept at knowing and exploiting your weak points. Confuse them by behaving in

an assertive, strong manner, even if you don't feel that way inside. And no matter how hard they push, don't show them you're upset. It is no fun bullying someone who does not react, and so the bad behaviour often stops.

The Controller Boss

Controller bosses are people who are highly anxious about making mistakes. They are reluctant to give up control and therefore feel a need to be involved in every detail of your work. They will check up on you and keep asking you if something has been done, instead of trusting you to get it done when asked for. Sometimes they are only like this when you first start working together and they have not yet begun to trust you. *How to deal with the controller boss:* You need to make such bosses comfortable with your work style and gain their trust by always delivering on time. Be proactive and provide reassurance by reporting back to them the steps you've taken and where you are up to.

Regardless of which type of management style or combination of styles your bosses have, the best way to change their behavior is to talk to them and make them aware of their behaviour and how it affects you and makes you feel.

With time and patience the boss's behaviour will improve, but if not, you do have a choice!

Seven ways to become a better Secretary

In the opinion of United States Office of Personnel Management, (January 1979 and June 1982), moving effortlessly from the role of a not-so-senior Secretary to that of a senior-level Secretary role will require a certain degree of pro-activity as well as a thorough understanding of the Chief Secretary's goals, objectives and duties. The following 7 tips may represent the type of attributes you probably will find in the office of a senior or Chief Secretary's Job description.

- 1) Understanding your boss's objectives should be the most important goal for every Secretary because the Secretary's core objective is to help their boss achieve his/her strategic objectives. To achieve this, Secretaries need to understand their boss's standards and boundaries, as well as being familiar with their boss's targets and goals. The best way Secretaries can familiarize themselves with these issues is by asking the boss to explain his/her decisions and reasons for doing things in a particular way.

- 2) Prevent unnecessary meetings - when taking messages, use your questions effectively to drill down to the heart of the matter; asking questions that the boss can act on without needing clarification. Use "who", "what", "why", "where" and "when" questions as the basis for your questions. Seek comprehensive answers the first time round. Asking the right

questions will prevent time-wasting and unnecessary meetings.

- 3) It's essential that you understand the wider issues within your organization, such as the organization's goals and that of its main customers and competitors. Understanding these issues will help you to make decisions within the right framework.
- 4) Ask your boss to mentor you. This will encourage better teamwork and help the boss to understand the pressures and challenges that you are faced with. The boss is also more likely to explain why he/she has made a particular decision, which will give you an insight into his/her thinking and priorities.
- 5) Always provide a possible solution when approaching the boss with a problem. Make sure you have thought it through and can explain the pros and cons of the solution.
- 6) Be the boss's memory; a mind of useful information. Get clued up on personal things like the names of the wives of the boss's, know his friends and main people who deal with the organization. Understand the issues and peculiarities of less senior members of your boss's team so that you can advise the boss and fill in gaps in his/her knowledge.
- 7) Always have a plan for continuous development. Don't allow yourself to be overlooked for training and development or promotion. Set goals for your development and identify training courses you would like to attend. Be an active part of succession planning for your own role - if you don't prepare the boss to accept that you will move onwards and upwards by making the necessary preparation, he/she will imagine that all manner of horrors will occur if you move on. This could cause your boss to block your progress.

Choose Secretary/PA mentoring

In the view of Sue (1988), mentoring is an excellent developmental tool for quickly dealing with performance issues and for raising your games as a Secretary. The relationship between mentor and the junior Secretary can represent a type of apprenticeship where best practice and work-smart techniques can be explored. Our Consultant Secretary mentor should have the necessary time, life experience and

work experience to take secretaries and administrators to the next level of professional development and to significantly raise the profile of Secretaries, Executive PAs and Senior Administrators. People often seek a mentor at particular milestones in their career such as redundancy, a promotion, a new job, and issues with personal performance. There are clear benefits mentoring can provide to the Secretary and to the organization.

To the Secretary, it increased confidence, improved productivity, it better his focus on continued professional development and improvements in know-how and technical skills, also behavioural improvements and improved networking.

To the Organization, it increased productivity, better retention of mentored employees, helps change management, improved succession planning and increased job satisfaction.

Conclusion

Sutermeister (1979), Chief Executives and Bosses are looking for a super-efficient, effective and powerful partnership where you support each other and have fun working towards a common vision. It is the joining together of two people in a close partnership to combine complementary skills, knowledge and behaviours that creates the right chemistry to ensure success in working together towards joint objectives and goals in the most appropriate and efficient way.

With the particular issues mentioned above and the prevailing challenges, I will like to suggest that if not already, NAPSSON should establish mentoring centers in all the identified state chapters of the Association to provide an environment where Professional Secretaries even those who are not members of NAPSSON can register with a token fee and engage an expert from within or outside the body in a time-intensive programme where areas of weaknesses in their work style or processes can be quickly identified and dealt with, using a tailored-made solution. These will also serve as a source of revenue generation for NAPSSON. A Consultant Secretary mentors who should be a trusted and interested advisor and supporter of the Secretary's goals should be nominated in each chapter and could be a member of NAPSSON or hired from outside, and their aim should be to maximize the challenges of effectiveness and productivity of the Professional Secretary to suite best practices.

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