

**WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A SECRETARY AS PERCEIVED BY
FIRST-YEAR INFORMATION SPECIALIST STUDENTS
The Changing Work Force
The Changing Curriculum**

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ABSTRACT

This study surveyed students preparing for a secretarial career to determine whether they were aware of the new responsibilities of secretaries in today's business office. The role of the secretary has changed over the past decade as management philosophies in the business world have changed. Technical advances, new business procedures, and global markets are only a few of the forces which have contributed to the new demands on today's secretary. Data from the initial survey indicated that students' perceptions were based on an outdated stereotypical image and also that many high school counselors also had this outdated image.

The changes that have affected secretaries in the work place also affect curriculum changes in programs training individuals for the secretarial profession. The aim of office education is the development of marketable office skills that will enable a person to secure employment. While the aim of office educators has remained unchanged, the objectives have drastically changed. The study looks at skills taught in the one-year Office Assistant program at Lethbridge Community College. After completion of the one-year

program, Office Assistant students were administered a second survey to determine whether their perception had changed. The second survey indicated that the students had a more accurate perception of what was required of them in today's office.

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INTRODUCTION

The role of the secretary has changed as management philosophies in the business world have changed. Are individuals who choose a career as a secretary fully aware of these changes and the skills needed in today's business office? How do they perceive their role? The changes that have affected secretaries in the work place also affect curriculum changes in programs preparing individuals for the secretarial profession.

The stereotypical picture of the secretary with notepad and pencil is fading and the image of the professional secretary is emerging. Technical advances, new business procedures, and global markets are only a few of the forces which have contributed to the new demands on today's secretary.

To fully understand the evolving role of the secretary, a historical look at the secretarial profession is helpful--a look at the changes in the work place and what that means to the secretarial support staff in terms of necessary skills.

History of the Secretarial Profession

The word 'secretary' comes from the Latin word 'secretarius' meaning a person entrusted with secrets. An employer must be able to 'tell all' to his secretary, knowing what has been disclosed in strictest confidence will not become part of the daily office gossip; and the higher up the corporate ladder, the more important this becomes. (Snelling, 1974, p. 2)

To further reinforce the importance of this necessary quality, Angell Day comments in his 1599 book, *The English Secretarie*, on qualities of a 16th century secretary:

This vertue of ordring and keeping the toungue is vnto our Secretorie not the least of manie other points wherewith he ought especiallie to be charged, in him that is disposed to speake much, it cannot but ensue that his often babbling must needes at one time or other, giue prooffe that hee hath in himselfe a little secrecie as silence. (Hildebrandt, 1979, p. 3)

At this point in time, men occupied the role of secretary and women did not qualify as secretaries. Defense of their superior or lord went beyond their secretarial skills. Since subservience was common during the Renaissance period, it was the norm for a secretary to be under the absolute and autocratic control of a superior or lord. "The Secretorie, as hee is a keeper and conseruer of

secrets, so is hee by his Lorde or Maister, and by none other to bee directed" (Hildebrandt, 1979, p. 3).

Day also wrote:

Thus one achieves secretarial preparation by possessing the following: A knowledge of Latin and Greek. . . A good memory: to retain matters quickly given him. An understanding of history: to be aware of history and antiquity, thereby being familiar with situations, customs, manners of men, cities, countries. . . A natural inclination: to use common sense. . . By inference, a secretary should be adaptable to every occasion, many of which cannot be determined beforehand. (Hildebrant, 1979, p. 4)

Before 1880, offices were filled entirely with males, predominantly educated middle-class men. The executive "either wrote his own letters in longhand using pen and ink, or summoned a young man to take shorthand dictation and transcribe, later, in longhand" (Bliven, 1954, p. 6).

At the end of the day, the office boys took all the originals, and by wetting them with evil-smelling felt cloths and then pressing the damp letters against the pages of a book, made one copy of each for the records. Then they quickly folded them, put them in envelopes, and raced with them to the post office, hoping that no one would have time to notice that the copy press had turned the originals into illegible smears. (Bliven, 1954, p. 6)

Women Enter the Profession. In 1881, 1 200 typewriters were manufactured in the United States and that same year a branch of the YWCA in New York started to teach eight young ladies to type. Previously, there had been a few young ladies that knew the skill but they used their skill to demonstrate the machines. These original eight ladies were quickly hired in business offices, and the YWCA received hundreds of requests for typewriter operators. Women were now appearing in the office as **typewriter operators**. It was thought that women had an aptitude for work requiring finger dexterity.

Because the YWCA could not train enough typists to keep up with the demand, the Remington Typewriter Company opened their own schools. The students were mostly females. Other private schools opened with the key components of the curricula consisting of shorthand and typewriting. The first Stenographer's and Typewriter's Union was formed in 1904 in the belief that typists should provide "professional services" and not "companionship."

At the end of the 19th century, there were also a large number of educated women needing work. More women than men had completed high school ready to find jobs that required literacy

skills. The office had become very routinized, and women's passivity suited them to jobs that required carrying out endless routine tasks without complaint. This trend that started in the late 19th century continued throughout most of the 20th century. (Goldberg, 1983, p. 14)

In the early part of the twentieth century, there were fewer and fewer men employed as secretaries. "Yet for at least two generations after the first secretaries went to work, the nation, for obscure reasons of its own, preferred to pretend that sex had nothing to do with the sensational popularity of female typewriter operators" (Bliven, 1954, p. 12). Women were said to have an aptitude for work requiring finger dexterity, and to be more conscientious than men and better able to keep business matters confidential.

With a vast number of men enlisting in the military in World War I, more women were entering the labor force. Women were also cheaper labor than men. Women now dominated the office as secretaries. Though secretaries have been jokingly portrayed as blond, curvaceous, sitting on the bosses' lap with pad and pencil in

hand, the view of the secretary hired for her efficiency in the office has shown greater staying power.

Changing Role

Prior to the 1980's, secretaries handled all the typing, manual data entry, filing, scheduling and report generation. With the restructuring of organizations in the late 20th century, the role of secretaries is being transformed. Organizations have adopted a flatter structure and in many cases eliminated middle management. As organizations became flatter and leaner, secretaries took on greater visibility and assumed duties previously performed by middle managers. The secretary's role became more specialized, concentrating on software and equipment knowledge. As the ranks of middle managers decrease, secretarial positions take up the slack in manpower. Kathy Burroughs, International President, Professional Secretaries International feels, "This opportunity allows secretaries to demonstrate their abilities to perform tasks more demanding than traditional clerical assignments . . . Not only are secretaries taking on more responsibilities, they are doing so with

effectiveness and trademark efficiency” (Creative Secretary’s Letter 1997, p. 7).

Today 99 percent of secretarial positions are filled by women, but the scene is changing. By the beginning of the 21st century, studies indicate that substantial numbers of both men and women will be employed as secretaries. Stereotypes are slowly changing and discrimination toward non-traditional workers is minimal.

What’s in a Name?

In the early part of the 20th century, the National Office Management Association (NAOMA) wanted the business world to know that “secretary” is a specific job classification and that it should not be confused with “typist,” “junior stenographer,” or “stenographer.” A “typist” was someone that knows how to touch type but does not know shorthand. A “junior stenographer” knows shorthand as well as typing and can take and transcribe dictation. A “stenographer” is proficient in all these skills, knows proper letter format, and deals with various office routines. A “secretary” is capable of performing all the duties of a senior stenographer and can also relieve the boss of some of the routine work. A “private

secretary” works closely with an executive, with confidentiality a key trait.

A survey administered in the United States by Professional Secretaries International (PSI) in 1997 revealed that fewer than half (41%) now carry the word “secretary,” “executive secretary,” and “administrative secretary” in their job titles.

Job titles have changed because advancing technology has changed the image and the responsibilities of today's office workers. Professional Secretaries International defines “a secretary as an executive assistant who possess a mastery of office skills, demonstrates the ability to assume responsibility without direct supervision, exercises initiative and judgement and makes decisions within the scope of assigned authority.” It should be noted that nowhere in this definition does it narrow the profession to females only.

For the past several years, Professional Secretaries International has tried to find a more appropriate name to replace the title “secretary.” An appropriate name change cannot be agreed upon by the 400,000 some members, so a tag line has been added to all

written correspondence--Professional Secretaries International--The Association for Office Professionals.

New titles have been created to encompass the additional duties. Title such as "secretary," "stenographer," "clerk typist," etc. are being replaced with Office Assistant, Administrative Assistant, Executive Assistant and Information Specialist, etc.

SKILLS NEEDED FOR THE SECRETARIAL PROFESSION

Over the years, secretaries have received their training either in high school, post-secondary institutions or private training institutes. In the past, because many students had little or no hope of continuing their education beyond Grade 12, students were prepared for the secretarial work force while in high school. Private business schools recruited students who had completed only eight grades of schooling.

Traditional Skills

The skills required of a "good" secretary were the ability to take dictation using shorthand, type a business letter and answer the telephone.

Shorthand. Shorthand was first used in ancient Greece in the 17th century. U.S. statistics in 1882 revealed that 6,032 males to 2,904 females were trained in shorthand.

Pitman shorthand was the popular system used both in Canada and the U.S. from 1870 to the early 1940's. Gregg shorthand then became the popular system. Pitman and Greg are considered to be symbolic languages involving lines, curves, circles, used alone or joined to express sound. Pitman also used light and heavy strokes to distinguish between sounds.

Shorthand, probably more than any other office education subject, separated the serious secretarial students from the not so serious students. To learn this new language and to attain the speed that was required to take proper dictation, required hours and hours of practice. If one could take shorthand, one would be classified in the work world as a stenographer. Shorthand was looked upon in the secretarial profession with a high value. Students that excelled in shorthand were better spellers and had a better grasp of the English language. Stenographic positions also meant higher wages.

Because of the shorthand attrition rate, several authors devised a shorthand system based on actual letters of the alphabet. Forkner and Speedwriting becoming the two favorite systems because they were easy to learn but one was not able to reach the same speeds as a Pitman or Gregg writer.

Taking dictation is all but gone from today's office, and consequently, from most office education curriculum. Just because it is no longer part of the curriculum does not mean that it is a useless skill. Experienced secretaries with shorthand use the skill on a daily basis for jotting down directions, taking telephone messages, etc. Electronic transcription machines have replaced the one-on-one interaction of dictating a letter. Many executives draft documents into their personal computer and the secretary puts the document into proper format. Secretaries are still required to take minutes at meetings and the majority have turned to laptop computers and have invented their own form of note taking.

In order to entice students into shorthand courses at the post-secondary level, course names have been changed from shorthand to note taking. Regardless of what it is called, learning shorthand still

involves countless number of hours to be efficient and fewer and fewer students elect to take the course.

Typewriting. Office skills learned from the turn of the 20th century into the 1980's were skills that required repetitious practice in order to become efficient. Typewriting classes emphasized learning "touch typing" and developing speed and accuracy through drills. Typing competitions were popular at one time; with men holding the honor of champion typists. Typewriting has progressed from manual typewriters, where much pressure was needed in order to press the keys, to electronic typewriters where typists applied slight pressure to the keys, to today's sophisticated computers. Beginning typists still learn to touch type, but now are taught using software packages that allow drill practice paced at one's own ability. Typewriting is now referred to as keyboarding.

A popular keyboarding software used in Alberta's colleges today was developed by Cortez Peters Jr. The former and more traditional method of teaching typing was to have everybody in the class working on the same drills. Cortez's new method is intended to uncover individual weaknesses and to prescribe exercises to

eliminate them. Using an individualized method still requires a knowledgeable keyboarding teacher. The challenge for today's keyboarding teacher is that everyone is at a different level which means a close monitoring of each individual's needs. Regardless, of the method used to teach keyboarding, this skill remains the key skill needed in the secretarial profession.

New Skills

Filing, bookkeeping, typewriting, formatting of proper business correspondence, shorthand dictation and transcription, good English skills and office procedures were the basic skills taught in a commercial program. Over the years these courses have slowly been eliminated from most high school programs. In high schools, business courses are optional; therefore, young people do not receive sufficient business training to directly enter the work force upon completion of high school. Students intent on a secretarial career need to further their studies at the post-secondary level. Many of the skills needed to work in the office of yesterday are still used today, but they only make up part of the curriculum.

New tasks have been added to the secretary's workload that were once done only by management. Secretaries not only type

correspondence, but also compose, research and supervise other workers and projects. They engage in public relations through their extensive use of the telephone and in their interaction with co-workers and business clients. Busy executives need more than a typist or receptionist. Professional people travel a great deal and need someone who can make necessary travel arrangements and also need someone with administrative abilities to keep the office running during their absence--someone who can think and make decisions. They need individuals who are part of the office team--not someone who only types letters, makes coffee and answers the telephone.

Technology has reshaped the way information is created, stored and disseminated. Secretaries are assuming new administrative duties in the electronic office. This new role includes gathering of information, selection of relevant data, incorporating meaningful graphics and presentation of a final report to management. They must have the ability to make independent decisions and to deal with business internationally. Secretaries are becoming **information specialists**.

Technology is the driving force behind much of the change. Today's secretaries, in addition to word processing, are knowledgeable in dealing with fax, voice mail and electronic mail, local area networks, budgeting, computer maintenance, desktop publishing, spreadsheets and database applications. They also require skills in planning, organizing, communicating, time management and setting priorities.

GOALS OF OFFICE EDUCATION

The aim of office education is the development of marketable office skills that will enable a person to obtain a job and to be able to advance to higher level jobs. While the aim of office educators has remained unchanged, the objectives have drastically changed. As mentioned previously, office educators were mainly concerned with the development of high rates of speed and accuracy in typewriting, the ability of the students to accurately take shorthand and transcribe mailable correspondence and to learn basic office routines. In order to properly prepare a student for the demands of today's office, the curriculum has changed to include the following:

- Accounting (manual and computerized)
- Administrative Procedures and Technologies

Advanced Word Processing
Applied Computer Technologies
Business Communication
Business English
Business Math
Database Applications
Desktop Publishing
Introduction to Telecommunications and Networking
Keyboarding, Skill Building and Document Formatting
Office Resources Management
Personal and Professional Development
Records Management and Imaging Technologies
Spreadsheet Applications

The following lists of competencies are only a select few of the many new competencies that are incorporated into today's office education curriculum. These competencies are taken from the *PSI Model Curriculum for Office Careers*. The *PSI Model Curriculum* was compiled by a team of business educators in conjunction with Professional Secretaries International. Managers, educators and office professionals contributed to the research for this model curriculum.

Know the importance of administrative support in today's business environment.

Develop personal and professional skills necessary for securing and maintaining employment.

Manually and electronically apply organizational and time management principles.

Process mail, know the most appropriate method to use in sending documents, sort and select records from a database to create mailing lists, fax documents.

Possess knowledge of information communication systems.

Demonstrate knowledge of telephone systems and good telephone protocol.

Demonstrate knowledge of the processes involved in making national and international travel arrangements and also be familiar with other cultures.

Plan and conduct a meeting and organize a conference.

Demonstrate the ability to plan, research, organize and prepare written and/or oral presentation using appropriate media and technology.

Generate complex, multi-part documents such as newsletter and brochures using desktop publishing capabilities.

Design complex business forms.

Communicate using software telecommunications features.

Demonstrate effective listening skills.

Develop team work skills.

Develop communication skills for an international audience.

Possess excellent grammar, punctuation, and proofreading skills.

Demonstrate effective human relation skills and responsible work ethics.

Solve mathematical problems and have an understanding of business graphs and charts.

Develop an awareness of management styles and their relationship to a diverse workforce.

Possess an understanding of human resource management issues and procedures related to supervision.

Develop problem solving and critical-thinking skills.

Understand spreadsheet software and its applications.

With the added responsibilities placed on the profession, office educators are challenged to teach the above skills. We not only need to teach the basic office skills, but we are required to teach business management skills.

THE STUDY

“What it Means To Be a Secretary as Perceived by First-Year Information Specialist Students.”

Purpose of the Study

This study involved first-year Office Assistant students in the Information Specialist Program at Lethbridge Community College. The study was conducted during the Winter Term (January - April, 1997). It is the investigator's belief that students entering into the Office Assistant program see themselves preparing for a career

based on an outdated image of a secretary. The survey was administered to determine why students have chosen this particular career and also the survey was used to determine their perception of what it means to be a “secretary.” If the students have an outdated, traditional perception of the profession, then the curricula within the Office Assistant program needs to be such that this perception is updated.

Another reason for undertaking this study was to determine whether the students' perceptions had been influenced by others, such as school counselors, family, friends, and others working in the field. This information would help determine whether new marketing strategies should be employed to better inform those that are influencing the students. The survey data will also determine whether new marketing strategies are needed to reflect the image change and to better communicate and attract interested individuals in the program.

Background to the Study

The term “secretary” was used throughout the survey. The question of whether to use the term “secretary” was a stumbling

block in the survey construction. In a recent survey conducted by Professional Secretaries International, it was found that only 41 percent of office professional are using the title "secretary" in today's offices. Lethbridge Community College is also not using the term in the program name. So, should reference be made to "secretary?" In the end, it was decided to use "secretary" because students entering the program may not be familiar with the new terms and this may cause them confusion when answering the survey questions. Even if a percentage of the surveyed students were familiar with the updated terms, at least all of them would be able to make reference to the term "secretary."

The survey was administered to 66 first-year Office Assistant students. Sixty-four surveyed were female and two were male. The investigator surveyed the students in the first week of their second term. It was the belief of the investigator that surveying the students after one semester had elapsed would not influence the results because courses taught to the students in the first semester involved the traditional secretarial skills.

The students surveyed were enrolled in the one-year certificate program at Lethbridge Community College which is referred to as the Office Assistant program. After completion of the one-year certificate program, the students have the option of continuing on to the two-year diploma program which is referred to as the Administrative Assistant program. The Office Assistant program consists of core courses in:

- Document Processing I and II
- Effective Speaking
- English Techniques
- Effective Writing
- Office Procedures I and II
- Electronic Transcription
- Word Processing I
- Introduction to Management
- Bookkeeping
- (Total of 45 credit hours)

For those students continuing on into the two-year program, their course load would consist of 17 credit hours of core courses in:

- Computerized Bookkeeping
- Information Processing (Lotus, Paradox, Windows, LabelPro)
- Data Entry
- Desktop Publishing

The remaining 27 hours of second-year electives are selected from the business administrative curricula or specialty courses in

legal, medical or real estate office procedures. These electives are designed to enhance their opportunities in the job market.

INITIAL SURVEY

The students were administered the survey in an Office Procedures II class period during the first week of their second term. Students were given ample time to complete the survey and were encouraged to take as long as they needed in order to answer each question completely. Ample space was provided on the survey for them to write their comments. The survey first asked the students to provide information regarding age grouping, gender (male or female), high school attended and whether they had taken business education courses in high school. The data from these questions gave background information of the student group before asking questions that were core to the survey. There was no attempt made to separate male responses from the female responses.

Reason for Choosing a Secretarial Career

Before asking the students their perception of the profession, the investigator felt it was important to know why they had chosen a secretarial career. Their reasons for choosing a secretarial career

were varied. Many had previously worked in a secretarial position through high school work placements.

My experience in high school, which was working as a secretary/receptionist for my work experience class.

I did a job placement and enjoyed it so much that I checked into the program. I took the testing and was thrilled when I was accepted.

Many commented on liking the work involved and felt they had a natural aptitude for organizing, keyboarding and computer-related work. All of these skills relate to traditional skills required in the job.

The job requires organization, efficiency, reliability, responsibility, etc. These are my strengths. I've always enjoyed playing "secretary" as a child. I enjoy the human relations as well.

I am an orderly person. I enjoy organizing and working with information, so I assumed this would be a good choice.

Many chose the profession because they enjoyed working with people. Secretaries are seen as assisting and meeting the needs of others.

It is a profession that involves working with people and I am a major people person.

Another group of students saw the profession as a quick way to obtain a career but only a temporary career that would eventually move to other career options.

Two students commented that they chose this career because they did not have the academic skills to pursue other careers. This is a very archaic notion that should not be surfacing today. Their comments were:

Because I had low marks in science and math classes my career choice was limited so I chose the Information Specialist Program course because I still got to deal with people.

I felt that it was something I could handle because I am not very good at some math and sciences.

First Career Choice

Interestingly, of the 66 surveyed, 37 stated it was not their first choice. Many stated their first-choice careers were teaching, nursing, dental assistant, and hair dressing--very gender specific in nature. The remaining choices included retail sales, accountant, lawyer, commercial cooking, tourism, travel agent, etc.

Career Counseling

School Counselor. When asked about career counseling, only 28 indicated that they had received career counseling and the majority had received counseling from high school teachers and counselors and also government agencies.

When asked to comment on what the individual counselors had told them about the career, traditional stereotyping was evident. The following comments are examples of counselors' perceptions:

*Organizing a manager's schedule.
Typing, filing and answering phone.*

*It is repetitive work, so you have to truly enjoy it. You have to be well organized.
You have to like to work with people.*

They were also told that it could "lead to other opportunities," that their "personality fit the career," "a good 'starter' career," "skills can be used to organize own life." Many confirmed that working with computers would be a large part of the job, while others stated "you will learn to type fast and keep books." Other advice was more positive, such as, a rewarding career and good opportunity for employment.

Experienced Office Professionals. The majority (58) surveyed commented they knew someone that was employed as a secretary-- aunts, mothers, stepmothers and friends. Only eight did not. Of the 58 that knew someone in the profession, only 28 felt that this person had helped them make a career choice. Thirty stated "no" they were not influenced by someone else.

In what way, did these people already working in the profession influence their decision? Working secretaries that had a positive influence described the profession as enjoyable, very fulfilling, job satisfaction, ability to meet people, working on computers and interesting. Other comments related to working environment such as reasonable hours as opposed to retail mall hours.

A lot of tasks can be monotonous but the rewards far outweighed these tasks.

My stepmother and aunt both started as secretaries and over the years they were able to move up the "ladder." They said it happens a lot and they have great jobs.

Because I liked the way they did things and the nice clothes they wear!!!

Those that answered “no” they were not influenced by others, commented that it was always something they wanted to do.

Perception of the Secretarial Profession

What was your perception of a secretarial career when you entered the Information Specialist program in September.

Through work placements in high school, counseling by school counselors, friends and family, what was their perception of a secretarial career when they entered the Information Specialist program in September and had their perception changed over the last four months or one semester of courses? If their perception had changed, how and/or what had changed their perception?

Twenty-four stated their perception had **not** change while 38 felt their perception had changed. One reason given for no perception change was that previous work experience gave them a good indication what was expected of them.

Having been in the work force (and in an office) I had a pretty good idea of the wide range of skills necessary to be a good secretary. I think my perception was that you have to be a pretty versatile person in order to be good at your job.

The remaining comments from students that indicated “no” their perception had not changed varied from being hard work, to

describing the traditional duties, to being underpaid and under appreciated for contribution to the office. There were comments that related to the effectiveness of a smooth running of an office and this effectiveness was contributed to the secretary and being the first impression of the company.

Someone who is neat, and tidy, well organized, a positive attitude and professional in an office.

Thirty-eight answered that “yes” their perception had changed in the four months since beginning the program. Those whose perceptions had changed had a very traditional image of the profession coming in. It is interesting to note that even though they felt their perception had changed, their comments reflected that they still held a traditional view of the profession. The following statement is an excellent example of the kind of comments made by the majority of the students describing how they saw a secretarial career before entering the program in September:

A secretary was someone who just sat at a desk all day and worked non stop, answering phone, filing and taking messages.

Someone who could type, do what her boss said, be friendly.

The secretary is one who runs the office and keeps everyone else organized. I also thought they were just the "gophers" of the company. Giving out coffee. Without a secretary an office cannot run.

One student commented, "I was a bit disappointed in myself because I thought I was meant for bigger things. I thought that a secretarial position wouldn't be very well thought of." After four months, she now realizes that a secretary has a very important role in an office. As a receptionist she states, "We are the first person a customer may see. Our written work must be very well presented to clients. Because of us the company can lose or gain customers--get sued or avoid such legalities."

Another student commented "I thought it would be just a practical program to take--I entered not thinking of it as a career--but now I want to be a secretary."

Those that felt their perception had changed realized there was more to the job, but this same group of students still wrote comments that indicated they did not have a good grasp of the changes within the profession and the skills needed. Twenty-four students did not have a clear picture of the profession they were

entering. If the first semester did not change their perception, the curriculum in the second semester had to accomplish this goal.

Perception of Skills Needed for the Secretarial Profession

Even though they felt their perception had changed, the initial survey data indicated they were still expecting to do the traditional secretarial tasks. The survey asked the student to list some of the duties that they would expect to perform in a secretarial position.

The following duties were listed with those ranking the highest listed first:

- Typing of correspondence (letters, memos, etc.)
- Answering the phone
- Filing
- Dealing with customers, public enquiries, etc. (receptionist duties)
- Bookkeeping, accounting, payroll
- Working on a computer and handling in-coming and outgoing mail
- Setting up appointments
- Scheduling for their boss
- Public relation duties

This list of skills further supports their outdated perception.

Faxing, photocopying, notetaking/dictation, setting up meetings, data entry and making travel arrangements were stated

by only four students. Desktop publishing and e-mail were listed by only one student.

A very small number of students made comments such as, keeping the company running smoothly, being professional, making people happy, research, watering plants and making coffee, keeping an organized and tidy office, and confidentiality, etc.

CURRICULA IN OFFICE ASSISTANT PROGRAM

First Semester Courses - Pre-survey

The responses to questions asking them to list the duties they expect to perform as a secretary are influenced by the courses taken in their first semester of course work (September - December):

- English Techniques
- Office Procedures I
- Document Processing I
- Word Processing
- Introduction to Management

The above courses prepare the students to be skilled in the traditional secretarial tasks, for example, in their Document Processing I course, they deal with proper formatting of business documents. Office Procedures I covers receptionist skills, such as, processing of incoming and outgoing mail, dealing with the public,

filing and records managements, etc. Learning computer software applications takes up a large percentage of their time. Students also take an English Techniques course that covers grammar, spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, etc.

Introduction to Management goes beyond the basic office skills and gives them an introduction to management. The Office Assistant students do not enjoy this course and often have difficulty understanding why they need a management course if they are going to be a "secretary." Several have commented that "it is a waste of time."

Several sections of this course are offered in the Fall semester and it depends on the particular instructor as to whether the secretarial role is looked at in regards to management. One particular instructor that had a majority of Information Specialist students covered content that included leadership styles, how a boss' attitude and approaches affect them, how difficult it could be to work with someone with poor management skills, and the importance of a secretary's role in working with management. This particular course also covered how to handle the pressures of

dealing with different supervisors and expecting different things, and how issues have a major impact on the future and direction of a company and its people. Professional work ethics was dealt with, issues were presented with a view that everyone in an organization has a very important role, that one's position or salary does not really reflect their value. Examples were given of how secretaries and any new employees can only expect to be "hand-held" for a short period of time after the training and that manager's expect them to use their skills and abilities.

Many complaints are heard about this particular course. The consensus is that it is a course for Business Administration students, which it is. All Business Administration students take this as a core course in their first year. A preference toward learning the basic or traditional secretarial skills is evident. Their attitude toward this management course further reinforces that they do not fully understand the skills required of them in today's office.

After one semester (four months of study) and learning the skills listed above, the initial survey was administered. This initial survey was administered at the beginning of their second semester. The

second semester courses provide them with skills that go beyond the traditional skills.

Second Semester Courses

Students were administered the **initial survey** in the first week of their second semester. Students were administered the survey before taking courses in the second semester that include the following:

- Effective Writing
- Effective Speaking
- Document Processing II
- Electronic Transcription
- Bookkeeping
- Office Procedures II

Effective Writing provides them with the ability to compose and write successful business correspondence. Effective Speaking gives the students practical applications to give oral communication in the areas of interpersonal and nonverbal communication, public speaking, assertiveness and interview skills. The Document Processing II course builds on Document Processing I and provides the students with more challenging assignments related to preparing business correspondence. The introductory bookkeeping course emphasizes basic principles of double-entry bookkeeping.

Office Procedures II is the capstone course of the Office Assistant Program. The course description for Office Procedures II reads as follows:

Concepts include an overview of career planning to determine professional qualifications necessary to fulfill various office positions. For career development purposes, students will assess their qualifications. Presentation of material provides practical experience simulating on-the-job situations. Students will process mail, organize business meetings, outline procedures for travel arrangements, become familiar with resource material, create and format special documents, and understand and prepare office reprographics. Students will learn effective time management, workload organization, office and interpersonal skills in order to prepare them for employment with confidence. Students will prepare resumes to assist in their job search.

This particular course pulls together all the skills learned in the other courses within the program and more. This course is crucial in preparing the students for the office of today. It reinforces the traditional skills and provides them with necessary skills for the modern office.

Students are expected to apply these learned skills to real-life situations and make sound judgement calls using problem-solving, troubleshooting and time management skills. Students must recognize that they may be required to be independent workers not

just an extension of their employer. They will be managing the information responsibilities of several managers. In this particular course, students come to realize that they will be taking on the responsibilities that were formally assigned to middle management and will be actively involved in team projects. They may be working without direct supervision and may also be dealing with individuals on an international level. Having access to privileged information and knowledge will give them a position of influence and power in the office.

They must think of themselves as “professionals” and not “just a secretary.” In order to give that professional image, they must consider their personal appearance, be knowledgeable and use ethical behavior. They are office professionals. Their responsibilities can range from inputting data into a computer to dealing effectively with human relation types of situations.

In the Office Procedures II course, the first week was spent talking about and discussing the skills needed that go beyond the basic secretarial skills. Students were required to watch for job advertisements to identify the skills they would need in order to

compete in the job market. They were each required to interview someone working in the profession to again determine the skills needed. Guest speakers talked about their role in the office and the changes they have incurred over their career. Students were given the opportunity to ask questions to help better understand the role. Their textbook emphasized how diverse the role had become.

A section on ergonomics stressed wellness in the workplace and the importance of the office environment on productivity and wellness. Student presentations were used in order for the students to share the information they had researched on this topic. The presentation application, PowerPoint, was taught in order for the student to use this software to enhance their class presentations.

They were taught how to plan a conference and organize a meeting. Travel arrangements and international protocol was covered. E-mail was used on a daily basis to communicate messages and assignments to the students.

The students find this a difficult course because there is not always one right way to handle a situation. They want to be told what to do, again a trait common to the profession at one time.

FOLLOW-UP SURVEY

Purpose of Follow-up Survey

Two weeks before the end of the second semester, a follow-up survey was administered to the Office Assistant students. Again, a class period was taken that gave the students sufficient time to complete the survey without feeling rushed. Four questions were asked on this second survey:

1. *You are nearing the end of your training as an Office Assistant. Has your perception of a secretarial career changed over the past year?*
2. *What do you feel is your most important skill that you will take to the work world?*
3. *Do you feel the Office Assistant program has prepared you for the work world? State your reasons.*
4. *Do you plan on returning in September to take the Administrative Assistant program?*

The rationale for asking each question, is as follows:

1. *You are nearing the end of your training as an Office Assistant. Has your perception of a secretarial career changed over the past year?*
Rationale: Key question to study. Through second-semester curriculum, have we managed to give them a clear picture of the skills needed by the profession?
2. *What do you feel is your most important skill that you will take to the work world?*

Rationale: This question will determine what they feel is their strongest skill and also it should reflect what they feel is an important skill to take with them to the work world.

3. *In your opinion, did the Office Assistant program prepare you for the work world. State your reasons.*

Rationale: Student satisfaction.

4. *Do you plan on returning in September to take the Administrative Assistant program?*

Rationale: Useful and important information for program administrator. This data will provide numbers for planning. If they reply No, it may or may not tie into question #3.

Change in Perception

The second survey was administered to 53 students, 9 less than surveyed originally. Thirty-nine of the 53 felt their perception had changed over the past year with 14 feeling it had not. The comments differed from the comments from the first survey for those that felt their perception had changed after four months. The keywords that were stated now included: "very important role and vital position in the company," "most responsible position," "must be well organized and prompt," "the person in charge," "valuable asset," "administrative support," "helpers, but the kind of helper that cannot be missed," "very knowledgeable person," etc.

One student commented:

A secretary must be an excellent communicator, organized, efficient, friendly, responsible and open to change. The secretary has to take charge when the boss is not available, therefore, she needs to know as much or more than her employer. An overworked and underpaid person. Someone that does all the "behind the scene" work. A key player needed to complete the work of administration. Must be reliable, dependable and honest.

Another student commented:

The role of a secretary is much more complex than I had first thought. We are very important people in an office. Your job includes more than just typing. We have to be well-rounded and sensible. We also need to be highly disciplined. We need to know how to use our skills for an endless variety of applications.

Another states:

Someone who is essential to a company. A secretary keeps the business flowing in an office. They have lots of duties. A secretary needs to be a person who is a quick thinker, runner, and a good organizer.

Several commented on the downside to the profession--that monetary compensation was inadequate. "A person who works harder than everyone else and doesn't get paid what they deserve." *An overworked, underpaid person."*

Even though the comments included the traditional skills needed, they were further added to with comments like the ones stated above.

Those that felt their perception had not changed also included statements that did not appear on the first survey, such as: well organized, really responsible, an integral part of the office environment, requires organizational skills, energetic, very busy, a representative of the company and someone that takes the time to care about the work they are doing, someone who takes pride in a job well done, a “Jane-of-all-trades” and far more than a typist, responsible for all the small jobs that hold an office together and make it run smoothly, must communicate well with others, have a positive attitude and must update his or her skills from time to time.

Two students' comments indicated that their perception had not changed:

A typical pen pusher, answering telephones, typing letters, sending mail, sorting documents, dealing with customers and taking orders.

The way I see the role of a secretary is a person who works behind a desk doing work for the boss. This includes typing, answering phones, scheduling appointments, etc.

The students were asked what they felt was their most important skill they would be taking to the work force. Computer skills topped the list with communication skills coming in a close second followed by document processing skills and the ability to deal with people. Other skills listed include: willingness to learn, accuracy, office procedures, team player, adaptability, work ethics, organizational and time management skills, positive attitude, confidence, promptness, effective and efficient, ability to handle more than one task at a time, willingness to keep learning, well disciplined, creative thinking, enthusiastic, and friendliness.

Only two students surveyed felt the Office Assistant program did not prepare them for the work force. Their comments are confusing to understand.

I don't think it has. I have talked with many secretaries and they have told me that more than half of what we have learned we will never use. I find that a little disappointing.

Sort of. It showed you different types of programs for the computer to make things easier for you, it did give you some experience for real life office stuff like simulations and typing letters and how to organize accounting books and your work place, but I think that with technology changing so fast, some of what we learned may be useless, but at least you know the basics.

There was an overwhelming response that "Yes" the program did prepare them for the work world.

Yes. I learned important computer skills which I didn't have before. The management course gave me a much better understanding of a manger's role. I have gained confidence and very useful skills. Many of the concepts I've learned for specific situations, can be applied to other professional and personal areas.

Yes, because before taking it I had no idea that the secretary is responsible for so many things.

Yes, after doing so many projects for my classes, I learned to become more organized. I also learned to handle office work.

Yes. The program is excellent. We are not learning to just type. We are learning to process a variety of documents. We are excellent proofreaders. We have learned a variety of software applications. We have a bit of management theory behind us. Our grammar and English skills are excellent. And to top if off, we are good communicators.

Yes, I know more programs. I can produce good, quality documents. I have learned how to work with others. I have gained valuable experiences.

SURVEY SUMMARY

Perception Change

In the initial survey, it was evident that the students held a traditional view of the secretarial profession. Regardless, as to

whether they indicated “yes” or “no” their perception had changed after four months, their comments still focussed on the traditional skills. When asked on the first survey to describe their perception before entering the program, the students used words that described the duties, for example, typing documents, filing, answering the phone, taking messages, office organization. After four months of course work, words like: an important job in the office, customer assistance, lot of work, new technology, challenging. But again, these words were still related to the traditional duties.

The final survey administered after two semesters, reflected a better understanding of what was expected in today’s office. Descriptions included key phrases that described working as part of a team, for example, team player, adaptability, work ethics, organizational and time management skills, positive attitude, well disciplined, creative thinking. Comments included composing correspondence rather than just typing correspondence and administrative support instead of “just a secretary.” There is an obvious awareness indicated to the importance of the role of an office assistant and responsibilities involved. The second survey

comments made reference to people skills, organizational skills, and attitude. Computer application knowledge was stressed along with the willingness to continue to learn.

The curriculum of the second semester is changing their perception of the profession. Much thought and curriculum content change has gone into the Office Procedures II course in order to accomplish this change. It is a struggle in most cases to prepare students for the work world with skills that go beyond the basic secretarial skills. Critical thinking and problem solving create the most blocks. Students choosing the Office Assistant profession initially want to be told what to do--"tell me exactly how you want me to do it." If this form of learning is used, students are then capable of receiving high grades because consistent practice of a particular skill leads to perfecting that skill. When situations are introduced that require judgement calls and decisions to be made, there is resistance. Students first introduced to this style of learning, fear a lowering of their grades. Repeated reassurance that there may be several 'right' ways to approach a problem eventually gives them the confidence to start using the skills they have learned and apply

them to a problem-solving situations. This process takes time to develop and in many cases requires another year of study to reach the level of confidence and maturity needed before entering the work force.

Returning for Year Two

There was an overwhelming response that “yes” the program did prepare them for the work world. Twenty-eight of the 53 students said they would definitely be returning for the second year Administrative Assistant program. Seven stated it would depend on whether they found employment over the summer. Those returning for year two felt a second year would “**fully** prepare them for this field of work,” “increase my skills and get more in depth in some courses,” “take specialized courses.”

Eleven stated they would not be returning for the following reasons: did not want to be a secretary, transferring into Business Administration Program, felt they learned enough to find a job, getting married, and one student did not find the program challenging.

Program Marketing

The survey questions asking “Who provided you with career counseling?” and “What did this individual tell you about the career?” indicates that these individuals need to be fully informed of this changing role. The advice given to these prospective students was not entirely incorrect but did not give an accurate picture of the new role. The information being given by these individuals has an enormous impact on programs preparing individuals for an Office Assistant career.

When asked on the survey if the title “Information Specialist” confused them, 38 indicated that it did. This also indicates that counselors are not using the new terms. One student in an office visit, indicated that since she could not find the “Secretarial Science Program” in the calendar, she assumed Lethbridge Community College did not offer the program anymore. She then enrolled in the Business Administration Program. Because more than half of the respondents indicated confusion with the program name, the program administrator for the Information Specialist Program will try emphasizing the terms Office Assistant Program and Administration

Assistant Program in the program advertising and less emphasis on Information Specialist Program.

THE 21ST CENTURY SECRETARY

The future looks bright for office and administrative assistants in the 21st century as a result of major changes in the way the business world operates--". . .a future of smart machines, streamlined work spaces, management-oriented responsibilities, far flung communication networks, greater authority and increased professional prestige" (Daily, 1993, p. 12).

For those with an open mind to continued growth and development, there will be exciting opportunities for advancement. One of the challenges will be to cultivate an appreciation for cultural diversity. The Office Assistant of the future will interact with people from many countries. This means learning about other cultures, protocol and being proficient in other languages. Office Assistants in the future may work for employers that work outside the traditional office setting with varying office hours. Already we see individuals working out of their home in order to balance work and family life.

Office professionals will have to be committed to lifelong learning. Technological expertise will be critically important. With the restructuring of corporations and businesses dealing globally, the office professional of the future will be one of an information manager. Familiar objects of the 20th century will be gone (file cabinets, calculators, typewriters). Most work will be done through the computer with very little human contact. Electronic mail, voice mail, and fax will be the norms.

Just as those employed as office professionals, we as business educators need to be committed to lifelong learning. The challenge should be exciting. Business educators who have been in the classroom for many years will need to spend time in the new office in order to better prepare their students for the work world. Business educators need to adapt to a changing environment by keeping the best of the old and using it as a base for building and to respond positively to the new in order to survive and grow.

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