

Secretarial Work, Skills and Careers

2009 Executive Summary

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Global PA Network

Bringing the Global Executive PA Community Together

The Global PA Network was established in 2006 to champion, encourage and support the career development of Executive Assistants, Personal Assistants & Secretaries. Its aim is to offer a structure of career development events, training days, 'in house' training programmes, coaching, live online training webinars, career advisory service, recruitment and outplacement. The network also offers additional products and services which are a particular benefit to this workforce sector.

The network unites PAs globally using the latest conferencing communication technology and online presence. The Global PA Network Founder has conducted training programmes for PAs in the UK, Europe, Far East and Australia and hosted and presented at conferences globally. The network is a unique concept in motivation and inspiration and through the direct experience of its team understands the needs of 21st century workers. The network has the ability to transform from its niche to be inclusive for all employees and offer its services to global workers.



Centre for Research in Employment, Skills and Society, Kingston University: CRESS

The Centre for Research in Employment, Skills and Society (CRESS) was founded in 2008 with the aim of conducting world-class research into employment. Our focus is on understanding how work can be organised for the benefit of both employees and employers. We are home to the ground-breaking Kingston Employee Engagement Consortium, which is funded by 10 public and private sector members and the CIPD. We recently contributed to the government's MacLeod Review into employee engagement across the UK. Other research in the Centre is sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council and the government's Knowledge Transfer Partnership scheme. We are currently working on projects valued at over £750,000 on topics as diverse as the role of civil society organisations, strategic human resource management, the management of knowledge workers in knowledge-intensive firms, leadership, employee engagement, and areas of occupational psychology. We employ a team of full-time and associate researchers; CRESS members have published in leading academic and practitioner journals and are regularly asked to speak at conferences around the world.

Kingston Business School

Centre for Research in
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Professor Katie Truss

is Director of the Centre for Research in Employment, Skills and Society at Kingston University and of the Kingston Employee Engagement Consortium. Katie has researched and published widely on employee engagement, strategic human resource management, the management of change and gender and employment and regularly speaks at international academic and practitioner conferences. She completed her PhD at London Business School in 1992. Katie runs workshops and courses on employee engagement, strategic human resource management and change management for practising managers.



Amanda Rosewarne

is an occupational psychologist with a particular interest in learning and skills development. She is currently completing an MSc in Occupational Psychology at Birkbeck College. Working as an independent consultant, she has been involved in a variety of research projects across the public and private sectors, most recently with Microsoft and The Tomorrow Project. Amanda has an ongoing partnership with The CPD Certification Service, and works with companies wishing to create and develop training activities. In addition to her consultancy, Amanda develops and delivers management and skills training courses, which have included programmes for PAs and secretaries in the construction sector. She is a part-time lecturer at Kingston University Business School and teaches organisational behaviour and skills.



Dr Kerstin Alfes

is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Research in Employment, Skills and Society at Kingston University. She has worked on several research projects looking at the role of the HR function, public management and employee attitudes to work. Kerstin received her PhD from the University of Berne, Switzerland in 2008. Prior to this, she received her degree in Business Administration from the University of Mannheim, Germany.



Rosemary Parr

is the founder of the Global PA Network and its sister training company, PAs of Excellence. After 30 years' experience as an Executive PA, Rosemary qualified as a Coach and Trainer to offer her knowledge, expertise and understanding of the Secretarial/PA role into organisations. A Masterclass series of workshops was introduced to develop the potential and skills of PAs and the programme has developed many PAs within the private and public sector. Together the Global PA Network & PAs of Excellence offer a unique range of services to support the PA profession.

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Finally, we would especially like to thank all the secretaries who participated in our survey and who agreed to be interviewed.



Foreword from Rosemary Parr

My career of 30 years as a Personal Assistant gave me the opportunity to work for a Member of Parliament, Member of the House of Lords, CEOs, and, finally to be Executive PA to the former Chairman of BT, Sir Christopher Bland. From my own personal experience as a PA, I know how important learning and development are to work effectiveness. In 2004, I established a PA network within BT to support the career development of the PAs. The success of this network resulted in the decision to leave BT in 2006 and fulfil my ambition of championing and developing the important role that PAs perform within the workplace. My passion for recognition for PAs led to an introduction to Kingston University Business School that culminated in the detailed research we have undertaken for this report.

Our findings indicate that now is the time for upskilling of the Secretarial/PA profession. I know myself how challenging and demanding the role can be, and I am certain that more can be done to give recognition for this important function in the modern office. I was impressed with the Leitch Report recommendations on upskilling of the UK workforce by 2020, which confirms my belief that a PA Professional qualification is long overdue and could do much to raise respect and career opportunities for the profession. Our research has confirmed that 59% of PAs feel they do not have adequate representation in the workplace and three-quarters would like a professionally recognised qualification. The Global PA Network will lobby to ensure that the UK becomes a beacon of excellence in PA training and development.

Rosemary Parr, Global PA Network. September 2009

Foreword from Katie Truss

It is now 17 years since I completed my PhD exploring secretarial work in England, France and Germany. At that time, much was said about the way in which new forms of communication were set to transform or, at worst, eradicate the work of the secretary. I was very curious to see what, if anything, has changed in the intervening years. Have secretaries disappeared? Has secretarial work effectively been routinised by the widespread use of electronic media? Our study of over 1000 secretaries shows that neither of these has happened. There continue to be many women (and it is still predominantly women) employed as secretaries. The role appears to have been upskilled, with many secretaries now undertaking a very wide range of responsible and challenging roles, and a significant minority themselves managing other staff. Many more secretaries are entering the profession with a degree or other higher educational qualification as well as secretarial training, seeking jobs that stretch them and provide opportunities for autonomous working and a rewarding career path. Few secretaries now use the title 'Secretary', most preferring Personal or Executive Assistant, which better reflect the nature of their role. These changes are to be welcomed.

Three factors, however, remain a cause for concern. First, although secretaries report a very positive working relationship with their individual line managers, only 38% feel that secretaries are treated as valued members of staff in their organisation. Second, fewer than one-third of secretaries report that their job enables them to use their full abilities; out of those with higher education, two-thirds disagree. This finding suggests that although some secretaries are working in appropriate jobs, a significant number are not. Finally, only one-fifth of secretaries agree they have the opportunities they want to be promoted. This figure is extremely low and suggests that there are no systematic career routes through secretarial work, and that organisations are not capitalising on the transferable skills and experience of secretaries and developing them into other roles. In the current economic climate, the engagement and contribution of all workers are vital. Employers know the value of a highly skilled workforce but, it seems, many continue to overlook the knowledge, skills and abilities of their secretaries. It is within the gift of employers to address the three overarching concerns about the way secretaries are managed, recognised and rewarded that our study has identified. I hope that this report provides a useful insight into secretarial work today, and suggests some ways in which employers can enhance the management of their secretarial workforce to the benefit of both secretaries and organisations.

Katie Truss

Centre for Research in Employment, Skills and Society, Kingston University, September 2009

Executive Summary

Background

- There are around 787,000 secretaries/PAs working in the UK today, of whom 96% are women (ONS, 2009). However, little is known about the work they do, their qualifications and skills, the way they are managed and their attitudes towards work. We report here on the findings of a survey of 1,011 secretaries and PAs to explore how the secretarial role has changed and developed, and to evaluate the effectiveness with which PAs are managed.

Demographics and Working Conditions

- 99% of our sample are women, and the majority are over the age of 25.
- Just over one-third have some form of higher education, and 5% have a postgraduate qualification. 2% report no qualifications.
- Around half have a secretarial certificate, diploma or foundation degree in administration.
- Three-quarters of secretaries would welcome a professionally-recognised PA qualification and fourth-fifths believe it would raise the status of secretaries.
- Many would welcome greater professional representation in the workplace.
- Most of our sample, 64%, work in the private sector, 11% in the third/not-for-profit sector and 25% in the public sector.
- Whilst 65% use the title Personal Assistant, 24% Executive Assistant, only 11% have a title including the word Secretary.
- Almost three-fifths of PAs work at Board level.
- Salaries range between less than £15,000 to over £50,000, although 60% earn between £25,000-£40,000.
- Just under one-third of secretaries feel their reward package is not fair compared with others working in the same organisation or in similar jobs outside.
- Most work in full-time permanent roles for between 30-49 hours per week.
- 43% work for just one boss, 26% for two bosses, and 31% for three or more. One-third of those working for more than one boss experience difficulties balancing their workload.

Job Content

- The five most common tasks undertaken by PAs are: diary management; photocopying; typing documents; booking and organising travel; and managing spreadsheets.
- The majority of secretaries never take shorthand or do audiotyping.
- One-quarter of secretaries manage at least one other member of staff, including other secretaries, administrators, trainees but also chauffeurs and housekeepers.
- A significant minority of secretaries undertake a variety of management tasks including managing budgets, training, and deputising for their boss.
- Secretaries carry out a range of specialist tasks, including preparation of reports, research, billing and accounts, IT systems maintenance and facilities management.
- Taking a list of 12 high-level secretarial tasks, we can differentiate between three types of secretarial role; Executive Assistants, who work autonomously and have a wide range of responsibilities; Personal Assistants, who occupy an intermediate position; and Secretaries, who perform more traditional secretarial tasks. These do not necessarily equate to job titles.
- Just 18% report 'never' doing personal work for their boss, and 36% say they have been asked to carry out tasks 'beyond the call of duty', from personal errands, arranging family events, to buying presents and caring tasks.
- All secretaries use e-mail very frequently, but face-to-face contact and telephone work continue to be important.

Management of Secretaries and PAs

- 38% of secretaries feel PAs are treated as valued employees.
- Around half are appraised based on a set of competencies and based on results, and fewer than half say their appraisal focuses on developing their skills and abilities.
- Over three-fifths feel they are kept well informed and that their suggestions are taken seriously, but fewer than half are able to participate in decisions affecting their job.
- 42% of secretaries are 'Informed Participators' kept well informed by their manager about what is happening, and given the opportunity to participate.
- Two-thirds of secretaries rate their immediate line manager very highly.
- 23% have experienced some form of bullying and harassment and this group have significantly lower job satisfaction and engagement levels.
- Three-quarters of secretaries have received at least some training since starting their current role.
- Most secretaries would welcome further training and development such as project or event management, negotiating skills and HR.
- Just over half feel they are well matched with their job and that their job gives them the chance to do the things they do best, but over one-quarter disagree.
- Fewer than one-third say their job utilises their full abilities and 65% of those with higher education disagree with this.
- Just one-fifth of secretaries have the opportunities they need to be promoted.
- 15% believe it is easy for secretaries to be promoted outside secretarial work and 12% within secretarial work in their organisation.
- 13% of secretaries are 'High Flyers' receiving training and perceiving good opportunities to be promoted. One-third are 'Stagnant', with neither training nor a career path.

Attitudes

- Three-fifths are satisfied with their jobs and half are glad they decided to become a secretary.
- 27% can be described as 'Full Contributors' satisfied with their jobs and able to use their full abilities. 19% are the 'Underused-Disenchanted', dissatisfied and unable to use their skills.
- 84% of secretaries are engaged which compares favourably with other studies using the same measure.
- 11% report feeling burnt out.
- 63% are happy with their work-life balance.

Conclusions

- The demise of the title Secretary and its replacement with Personal or Executive Assistant reflects the changing nature of much secretarial work. Where secretaries are performing high-level tasks, and are able to use their skills, then they are more satisfied with their work.
- Many secretaries have high-level qualifications but only one-third feel their jobs enable them to use their skills. This implies that many organisations are wasting the talent of their secretaries.
- The ongoing assumption that secretaries should perform personal tasks for their managers perpetuates the gender division of the role and sometimes verges on the unacceptable.
- Secretarial career paths within and outside secretarial work are truncated, which means that organisations are not capitalising on the transferable skills of their secretarial workforce.
- The poor management and low status of secretaries are a cause for concern as is the relatively high level of bullying and harassment experienced.

Management Implications

- At a national level, the development of a professional PA qualification recognised by employers, together with greater representation for PAs in the workplace, would enhance the status and career prospects of senior secretaries.
- Employers need a better understanding of the profile of their secretarial workforce in terms of skills, qualifications and abilities in order to ensure that they are well-matched with suitable roles and able to contribute.
- More efforts need to be made to professionalise the management of secretaries within organisations, rather than leaving this to the whims of individual line managers. This will include the development of appropriate job descriptions and HR practices and processes to support PAs such as appraisals, personal development plans, succession plans, mentoring and coaching.
- The status of secretarial work and of PAs themselves needs to be raised within the workplace to better reflect the variety and complexity of secretarial work at a senior level.
- Employers need to reflect on the continuing practice of PAs performing personal tasks for their line managers (and their families) both from a resource perspective, and from the perspective of the potential abuse of secretarial goodwill.
- Clear promotion routes are needed both within and outside secretarial work to enable PAs to develop their careers and to enable organisations to capitalise on the accumulated skills and experience of their PA workforce.