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PAs could be taking their work too personally

Sathnam Sanghera: Business Life

Last week Kingston University published a study that surveyed the views of 1,011 PAs and found that while modern secretaries are better educated than ever, many are undervalued, bullied and asked to perform inappropriate tasks. Shocking. At least, it would be shocking if the report's hysterical conclusions actually stood up to scrutiny.

The authors complain, for instance, that half of Britain's 787,000 secretaries, of whom 96 per cent are women, feel that their job does not enable them "to use their full abilities". But since when were jobs created to allow workers to express all their talents? I mean, my occupation allows me to use a great many personal skills, including bile, bitterness and misanthropy, but I have a great many other talents — an ability to make a great fish pie, a certain proficiency on the spoons. So what? This is the world of work, not the Sylvia Young Theatre School.

Another complaint made by the authors is that secretarial work doesn't allow for enough career progression, with Katie Truss, of Kingston University, remarking that "secretaries are still highly dependent on their individual managers". Which is like saying that journalism involves too much writing, or that plumbing involves too much pipe work. Of course secretaries are highly dependent on their individual managers: supporting individual managers is what they do. And you can hardly blame managers for not encouraging development: if you finally find a great secretary, it's not in your interest to encourage her to retrain as an accountant so she can work towards becoming a financial director. If anything, the lack of career progression is a compliment.

But even this argument is not as annoying as the repeated complaint in the report that too often secretaries are given "inappropriate" tasks by bosses, with more than a third of those surveyed indicating they have at some stage been asked to undertake work going "beyond the call of duty". When you initially glance at the cited examples of such inappropriate tasks, it seems the authors have a point. No secretary should have to "book a back wax for a male head of department"; "be rung by a boss on holiday to book his cinema tickets online so he can jump the large queue"; "do research for boss's eight-year-old daughter's homework"; "type minutes for boss's wife's committees"; "type up family tree"; "buy school uniform for boss's children"; or "sew up his trouser seam (while he was still wearing them)".

But the more examples of these supposedly outrageous requests you read, the less outrageous they seem. One secretary, for instance, complained to researchers that she was once asked to "replace a marble handheld toilet brush". Which sounds absurd until you learn it was for her boss's private office toilet — which surely makes it perfectly acceptable. Another complained about "buying tights and petticoat" for a boss, and while this might be a little peculiar if the boss was a bloke, if it was a woman, and she needed the clothes for a work

function, then it's surely not entirely outrageous. Yet another secretary moaned about being told to "clean the car park, as we were expecting important visitors", which might be out of order if she actually had to sweep the car park herself, but in most companies this request would simply involve calling the facilities department to get the work done. And as for the secretary who moaned she was asked to "hold my manager's handbag at the Christmas party because she wanted to have a dance" — get over yourself. People do this kind of thing for workmates all the time.

Let's face it, performing personal work is an element of any secretary's work, a fact that is made evident in the report in (a) the authors' admission that "in historical accounts, there has been an expectation on the part of both boss and secretary that personal work should form an integral part of the role"; (b) the authors' remark that "anecdotal evidence suggests that secretarial job descriptions, where they exist, rarely specify expectations or boundaries around personal work"; (c) the fact that almost all the secretaries who cite inappropriate tasks end up doing them ("I was once asked to go to a butcher's to collect marrowbones for dogs ... I carried the task out, but thought it was a strange request"); and (d) the fact that Sophie, one of the case studies in the report, who has been a PA for almost 20 years, remarks that she considers it part of her remit to undertake personal tasks. "I helped my boss find a house to buy," she is quoted saying. "I have the keys to it to let in contractors, and I'm about to take some dry-cleaning in ... I don't have a problem with that."

And here's the brutal truth about secretarial work: despite the survey's discovery that about a third of PAs manage financial budgets and a quarter deputise for managers, it is essentially menial. And if secretaries can't cope with this, then it probably means they are overqualified. The report found that just over a third of secretaries now have some form of higher education and 5 per cent a postgraduate qualification. But do you really need a MPhil in medieval literature to do a job that involves, according to the report, managing diaries, photocopying, typing, booking and organising travel and managing spreadsheets?

Another brutal truth: a great many secretaries have an inflated sense of their own importance as a result of inflated job titles. Apparently, the title "secretary" is now used by only 4 per cent of the profession, with only 7 per cent using the title "team secretary" or "senior secretary", 65 per cent using the title "personal assistant" and 24 per cent using the title "executive assistant". If you stick the word "executive" in someone's job title and then ask them to do photocopying, is it really surprising they might feel dissatisfied in their work?

sathnam@thetimes.co.uk