

Take an MBA, Miss Jones' – Research Reveals The Changing Role Of The Modern Secretary

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Modern **secretaries** are better educated and perform more high-level tasks than their predecessors yet many are undervalued, bullied and asked to perform inappropriate tasks, according to one of the UK's most comprehensive studies of personal assistants.

The report's authors, Professor Katie Truss of Kingston University, and Rosemary Parr, founder of training and development company Global **PA** Network, found that more than half of secretaries do not believe their job enables them to use their full abilities, suggesting that many organisations are wasting the talents of the UK's 800,000 secretaries.

The pair urged managers and human resources professionals to ensure that secretaries were...valued, with proper job descriptions and career development plans that recognised their huge contribution to the country's economy. They hope their research will lead to the creation of a 'mini MBA' or national personal assistant qualification to improve the status and career prospects of senior secretaries. Their research revealed that three-quarters of secretaries would welcome a professionally-recognised **PA** qualification.

A team led by Professor Truss, Director of Kingston's Centre for Research in Employment, Skills and Society, and Ms Parr analysed the views of more than 1,000 secretaries and personal assistants.

Ms Parr, a former **PA** to BT chairman Sir Christopher Bland, said: *"The perception of the role is stuck in a time warp from 40 or 50 years ago when secretaries were seen as surrogate wives or housekeepers. Now they are more like management assistants: they need to be their managers' second brain - anticipating what their bosses want next as well as doing what they want now, but what our research has shown is that they are not getting the recognition for it."*

Professor Truss, whose previous role as a bilingual **secretary** prompted her to do her doctorate on secretarial work in 1992, said: [i]"I was shocked to find... [continued on page two >](#)

that a lot of things hadn't changed, particularly career paths. Secretaries are still highly dependent on their individual managers."[/i]

But she said that in other ways the job had changed dramatically. Few secretaries do audio typing or use shorthand while more than a third manage financial budgets or other staff and a quarter deputise for their manager. This increase in responsibilities is reflected in a change in job title - only 11 per cent are called **secretary**, with 65 per cent using the title personal assistant and 24 per cent executive assistant. Just over a third have some...

...form of higher education, compared to just 10 per cent in 1992.

The role continues to be dominated by women and, say Professor Truss and Ms Parr, this gender divide is perpetuated by unacceptable requests to undertake duties such as booking a back wax, making curtains or sewing up the boss's trouser seam. More than a third (36 per cent) have been asked to perform personal tasks that go 'beyond the call of duty', including buying a marble-handled toilet brush, bathing an elderly relative and calling the boss's friend to tell him a mutual friend had died. Professor Truss said that although many **PAs** felt some personal requests were acceptable, others felt these tasks were demeaning to secretaries and costly to employers.

*"If an employer were to add up the financial cost of a **secretary** undertaking personal tasks when they should be working for the benefit of the organisation, they might think twice about letting the practice continue,"* Professor Truss said.

The authors said they were concerned about the poor management and low status of secretaries as well as the relatively high proportion (23 per cent) who had been bullied or harassed. Ms Parr, who founded Global **PA** Network with the aim of raising the status of the **PA** profession, said that with the right support **PAs** could establish greater respect and understanding in the workplace.

*"Often **PAs** can get bogged down in the routine of the job and as a result their relationship with their boss can be affected, becoming more impersonal,"* Ms Parr said. *"With the right communication skills however, **PAs** can learn to speak up for themselves and turn this problem round."*

Key facts and figures include:

- Only one-fifth agree they have the opportunities they want to be promoted;
- 56%..

- ...do not believe their job utilises their full abilities;
- 5% have a postgraduate qualification; 2% have no qualifications;
- Three-quarters would welcome a professionally recognised **PA** qualification; four-fifths believe it would raise the status of secretaries;
- 36% have been asked to carry out tasks "beyond the call of duty";
- 43% work for one boss, 26% for two and 31% for three or more;
- 79% never or rarely do audio typing; 72% never or rarely use shorthand;
- 37% manage other staff; 35% manage budgets; 29% train other staff; 25% deputise for their manager.

Secretarial Case-study - Amanda Evans

In her 30 years as a PA, Amanda Evans has seen how the profession has changed. *"Secretaries basically used to answer the phone and take messages, now they're more likely to do the background research and deliver the response to those enquiries,"* she said.

After leaving school at the age of 18, Amanda trained as a French/English bilingual **secretary** and worked in Paris, and then London for organisations including The Savoy hotel, the European promotions division of a major US company and electronics giant Racal.

She joined telecommunications company O2, in December 2002 and works as Executive Assistant to Matthew Key, the Chairman and Chief Executive of O2's parent company Telefónica... Europe plc. She is responsible for ensuring that his schedule runs smoothly and sees her role as "living each day through his eyes but ahead of him, doing all I can to make him as effective as he can be". She manages staff in two offices, one in the UK and one in Spain. She and her team help provide support to travelling senior staff and executives in addition to Mr Key. *"It's a challenging and diverse role, you need to be pragmatic and focused, able to constantly juggle priorities and rapidly changing commitments - being a team player helps,"* she said.

Amanda, 50, who lives in Oxfordshire, is based at Telefónica's headquarters in Slough, Berkshire, and twice a month travels to the company's office in Spain - which encouraged her to learn Spanish. Her fluency in the language has helped to accelerate business relations across the company's Spanish and Latin American operations.

She feels taking on personal tasks is a key part of the job. *"The greater responsibility you have in an organisation, the more holistic the role. Working closely with the chairman's wife is important to keep her updated on changes that may affect domestic arrangements and to ensure, where practicable, he can be around when there are key family milestones."* She added: *"It's nice to have that personal involvement, it shows a level of trust and understanding - we're working with an individual after all."*

Amanda said she was surprised by the high level of bullying described in the report and said she had not encountered any difficulties herself. She added: [i]"PAs and managers tend to have a close working relationship so if tensions rise, it is likely such tensions could flow through to the **secretary**, but it's an example of the close understanding that the boss can express such tensions and know it goes no further."

She supported calls for a national PA qualification and suggested that workshops on subjects such as how the stock market works and on technology could be beneficial to both secretaries and the organisations they represent.

As an experienced PA, Amanda has also been involved in mentoring more junior staff. She explained her view of the PA's role: *"To an extent, the more effective the PA, the less conscious people will be of what has been done, they will just know 'it works'."* She added: *"The boss does not need to understand the steps, simply the end result - and you're as good as the last result, so you need to keep focused."*

Secretarial Case-Study - 'Sophie'

Sophie (not her real name) has been a PA for almost 20 years, although it is not a career she intended to pursue after she graduated from a Manchester university in 1991 with a degree in Maths and Computing.

"People always say to me, 'Why didn't you want to do anything with your degree?', but I graduated into a recession when there were few relevant jobs around and rather than be unemployed I wanted to forge a worthwhile career. I love being a PA: I like organising events and having the satisfaction of everything going to plan and I like the flexibility it offers - I can work from home one day a week."

Sophie, 41, enjoyed her early career doing secretarial work for employers including a health authority, the British Council and a computer software company but she ran into difficulties while working as the PA to the director of a small marketing company. [i]"I was asked to do increasingly junior tasks. I was spending a lot of time stuffing envelopes... ..and printing out documents: it didn't stimulate the brain and certainly didn't require a degree."[/i] She added: *"When I first graduated I worked in a factory, in an all-male environment and never felt bullied or harassed and yet here I felt I was being bullied, undermined and denied training opportunities."*

Sophie left the marketing company and joined her present employer, a computer firm based in the City of London, where she works as PA to the general manager. She finds her current role fulfilling. *"I manage my boss's email and if anyone wants anything I'm the first person they contact. I'm not just a PA, I'm an office manager."* However she said that secretaries, herself included, were generally undervalued and underpaid. *"I don't think secretaries and PAs get a fair salary for the amount of work they do for their company and their boss. If my current employer had advertised for an office manager rather than a PA I'd be paid at least a third more than I am now."*

She added: *"I've been really lucky with my bosses; on the whole they've been encouraging and appreciative. However there is still a minority of people who have that attitude of 'you're only a PA', which makes me want to wear a badge saying 'I do have a degree'."*

She considers it part of her remit to undertake some personal tasks for her manager. *"I helped my boss find a house to buy, I have the keys to it to let in contractors, and I'm about to take some dry-cleaning in. Mine is a fairly old-fashioned PA role and I don't have a problem with that."*

Sophie said she had received very little training during her secretarial career, although she had recently taken part in... two PA masterclasses organised by Global PA Network. "One of the things about being a PA is that I always thought of myself as being in the background but since doing the classes I've felt more confident and ready to take on more responsibilities." She said she would welcome the introduction of a national PA qualification.

