

Beyond the call of duty

By **Ben West**

THE role of the secretary has changed beyond recognition in recent years, and not just in the technology a secretary will handle. As well as grappling with the latest computer systems rather than a typewriter and Tippex in days of old, a modern secretary often has to multitask to a considerable degree.

A recent study found that more than a third of secretaries have been asked by their bosses to perform personal tasks that go "beyond the call of duty", including sewing up a trouser seam, buying a marble-handled toilet brush and booking a back wax.

The study, analysing the views of more than 1,000 secretaries and personal assistants, found that although modern secretaries are better educated and perform more high-level tasks than their predecessors, many are undervalued, bullied and asked to perform inappropriate tasks.

The study found that more than half of secretaries questioned did not believe their job enabled them to use their full abilities, suggesting that many organisations are wasting the talents of the United Kingdom's 800,000 secretaries.

The study's authors, Kingston University's Professor Katie Truss, and Rosemary Parr, founder of the training and development company Global PA Network, urge managers and human resources professionals to ensure that secretaries are valued, with proper job descriptions and career development plans that recognise their huge contribution to the country's economy. 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 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."

The increasing responsibilities of the modern secretary have led to a new breed of "power PAs" evolving – with huge salaries in tow. Often they are more qualified than management, typically speaking at least one foreign language and possessing a postgraduate degree.

In her 30 years as a PA Amanda Evans has seen how the profession has changed. She said: "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."

After leaving school at the age of 18, Ms Evans, 50, trained as a bilingual secretary and worked in Paris and London for various organisations. She now works as executive assistant to Matthew Key, the chairman and chief executive of Telefónica Europe. 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, providing support to various travelling senior staff and executives.

"It's a challenging and diverse role," Ms Evans said. "You need to be pragmatic, focused and able to constantly juggle priorities and rapidly changing commitments. Being a team player helps."



