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History of the Secretarial Profession

Office Technology Time Line

1870s

Telephone
Typewriter
Carbon Paper

1880s

Comptometer calculating machine
Mimeograph machine
Cash register
Adding machine
Pneumatic tubes

1890s

Dictating and stenographic machines

1900s

Loose-leaf ledger sheets
Multigraph
Two color typewriter ribbon
Addressograph

1910s

Power statistical accounting machines
Bookkeeping and billing machines
(combinations of typewriter and computing machines).

1920s

Adding/Subtracting calculation machine
Ditto machines (gelatin duplicating)

1930s

Bank check sorting/proofing

Just when secretaries originated no one knows exactly. The role arose out of the natural need for a prominent person to whom confidential matters could be entrusted and who could act as an assistant for a principal. It is known that secretaries existed in Rome prior to the establishment of the empire. They were usually educated men who took dictation as "scribes," and oftentimes acted as trusted advisors.

Before the invention of parchment and reed pens, tools of the trade for scribes ranged from chisels used upon stone to styluses used on clay, wood, or wax tablets. Shorthand became part of the preparation and training of secretaries (and emperors as well, including Julius Caesar and Augustus).

In early modern times, members of the nobility had secretaries, who functioned quite similarly to those of the present day. They were always men; most had command of several languages, including Latin, and were required to have what we would consider today as a broad generalized education.

As commerce and trade expanded, people of wealth and power needed secretaries (confidants and trusted agents) to handle correspondence on private or confidential matters, most particularly matters of state.

Following the Renaissance, men continued to dominate clerical and secretarial roles. They maintained account books, in addition to performing stenographic duties, and were known for their exemplary penmanship skills. Many labored long hours, with their "secretary" desks serving as their files and workstations.

As world trade expanded in the 15th and 16th centuries, secretaries often attained an elevated status and held prominent positions. Secretarial status titles frequently included "personal"



machines
Dial telephones
Electric typewriters
(earliest versions)
Machine accounting
systems (central records
control, payroll)

1940s

Mechanical listing
printing calculators
Punched card systems
(payroll)
Dictaphone/stenographic
machines with plastic
belts

1950s

Electronic digital
computers (transistors)
Electronic digital
computers (vacuum
tubes)
Data processing - paper
and tape cards
Xerographic duplication
Data processing -
telewriters
Data processing -
computypers

1960s

Magnetic tape "selectric"
typewriters
Microchip computers
Magnetic tape (replacing
punched cards)
Magnetic ink character
recognition

1970s

Microcomputers
Optical scanning and
recognition equipment
Video display terminals
for data/text editing
Facsimile transmission
Electronic (solid state)
calculating machines

1980s

Local area networks,
integrated systems
Non-impact printers
Software packages for
microcomputers

or "private."

Men continued to dominate the secretarial field until the late 1880s. With the invention of the writing machine, many women entered the office workforce in various clerical roles.



During the industrial expansion at the turn of the century, business offices faced a paperwork crisis. Women solved the crisis by adapting well to new technologies such as the adding and calculating machine, telephone, and typewriter. Many women held, or aspired to hold, positions as secretaries. They attended secretarial schools and worked to attain superior skills. The demand for secretaries was so great that it outpaced the supply.

In the 1930s, the number of men with the title secretary dwindled. Women dominated the office workforce. Some were promoted from steno pools, some were graduates of business colleges or secretarial schools, but all were seeking the professional status and pay previously enjoyed by their male counterparts.



Recognizing that continuing education was imperative to career success, a group of secretaries in America's heartland became the nucleus of an organization that would help to professionalize the occupation. In 1942, the National Secretaries Association (NSA) was formed (now known as the [International Association of Administrative Professionals](#)). NSA first administered the [Certified Professional Secretaries Examination](#), a standard of excellence for the profession, in 1951.



1950s secretary



1950s Shorthand



Typing pool - 1960s



1970s word processor

Profession Advances in Information Age



Today, secretaries (also known as administrative assistants, office coordinators, executive assistants, office managers, et al.) are using computers, the Internet, and other advanced office technologies to

1990s

PCs
E-mail
Internet

2000 and beyond

Wireless networks
Voice recognition
Electronic document
collaboration
Virtual meetings
Virtual assistants

perform vital "information management" functions in the modern office.

Secretaries no longer "simply" type correspondence for "the boss." Now, they often write that correspondence—as well as plan meetings, organize data using spreadsheet and database management software, interact with clients, vendors, and the general public, supervise the office and other staff, handle purchasing, and even train other workers. Trends identified by IAAP research include:



- Administrative professionals are becoming researchers and interpreters, not just disseminators of information.
- Work teams are becoming more prevalent.
- Job descriptions are expanding and new titles are being created, such as administrative coordinator, office administrator, administrative specialist and information manager.
- Employers are paying more for specialized skills such as desktop publishing and database management. In addition, many companies are providing performance-based bonuses to outstanding administrative support professionals to help acknowledge their contributions.

The future is bright for computer-literate, well-educated, customer service-savvy administrative professionals.

