

Whatever happened to... the secretary?

Perhaps the secretary died out with the typewriter. Or was it with the invention of the BlackBerry? Then again, maybe she (and in the popular imagination, she is most certainly female – in fact in my imagination she is Maggie Gyllenhaal, in black pencil skirt, high heels and white shirt, slightly unbuttoned, bending provocatively over the desk with James Spader's hand... ahem, anyway...) just got re-labelled and became the personal assistant. Whatever the reason, she has all but disappeared from office life.

Repackaged as the PA, the secretary is expected to do far more than merely type up letters and answer the phone. The PA must be a multi-tasking, high-flying, schedule-juggling über secretary. Gone are the days when a bit of shorthand punctuated by a bit of nail filing could fill the day. High profile PAs can earn almost as much as their bosses in the right kind of organisation, and it's certainly not considered to be a soft option. Job specifications are increasingly broad and one is expected to cultivate an ever-wider range of strings to the bow, from multiple languages and financial administration to managerial and research skills. The kinds of positions listed under "Secretarial" in the Guardian's jobs pages, for instance, come under titles such as "Operational Research Group Administrator", "Social Concience Executive Assistant" or "Corporate Development Administrator". The actual job title of "Secretary" simply does not exist on these pages.

On the other hand, unless we happen to be the MD of a corporate giant in the City, we are increasingly expected to be our own boss and secretary rolled into one, seamlessly blending into the open-plan, strip-lit, box-shaped offices filled with other non-hierarchical boss/secretary hybrids. We type our own letters, we answer our own phones, we check our own emails and we plan our own schedules. We book our own flights and we buy our own sandwiches. We make our own tea and we buy our own guilt-induced flowers for our neglected partners.

The advent of personal computers and PDAs has perhaps aided this transition, but can they really replace a living, breathing assistant? Witness the sorry sight of so many employees, unable to touchtype, slowly and painfully composing their emails, drowning in piles of unopened mail, unfiled documents and general detritus. In a secretary-less world, we are all our own administrators, leaving much less time for those overlooked skills such as "creative thinking", or just "doing our job".

Maybe I'll put on those seamed stockings, tie my hair up in a neat little ponytail and dress as my own secretary, just to really live out the hybrid identity of the modern office worker, and, let's face it, inject a little glamour into the proceedings.

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