Secretaries (’sec-re-tar-ies) perform and coordinate routine and detail work, administrative tasks, and correspondence in business offices or industrial concerns, including storing, retrieving, and integrating information for distribution to staff and clients.

In the automated and complex business world of today, secretaries are an indispensable part of the work force. They are in charge of administrative and clerical tasks necessary to keep their employers’ business affairs running smoothly. They are the information and communication managers for an office.

Work Performed

Secretaries schedule appointments, handle correspondence, and organize and maintain paper and electronic files. They greet clients, answer the phone, screen calls, transfer calls to the proper person(s), place calls for their employer, and arrange conference calls. They open and sort mail, e-mails, and other correspondence; attach memos or information from files; and send information to the proper office or persons using mail, e-mail, telephone, and Web sites. They may operate phone systems, photocopiers, fax machines, e-mail, and voice mail. They use personal computers to compose correspondence and other word processing tasks, and create spreadsheets and other reports.

Secretaries manage databases and use desktop publishing software and digital graphics to create presentations, reports, and other documents such as brochures or posters. Secretaries may also handle equipment purchases and maintenance. They may negotiate with vendors, purchase supplies, and manage areas such as stock rooms or corporate libraries. Secretaries who work for people who travel may make travel arrangements for them. They may go with their employer to business meetings, or be in charge of the office while their employer is away.

Noteworthy Quote:

“A career as an administrative professional is demanding, challenging, and rewarding. Opportunities to add value to an executive are infinite. What other profession allows you to be on top of all the newly released software, be the go-to person for almost any question, and sit at the table with top management?”

—Rhonda M. Strong, Administrative Professional, Kingsport, Tennessee
Some secretaries perform highly specialized work in administrative, legal, medical, engineering, scientific, or stenographic fields. **Administrative assistants, executive secretaries, and executive assistants**, for example, often perform administrative support tasks for one or more key executives in an organization, such as the chief executive officer (CEO), president, or chair. They have a broad range of complex responsibilities involving confidential or technical information, such as preparing correspondence, reports, and materials for publications and presentations.

They setup and coordinate meetings and conferences, arrange public relations programs, find speakers for meetings, and plan receptions. They create, transcribe, and distribute meeting agendas and minutes. They prepare and maintain executive expense reports, meet and greet clients and visitors, and maintain the executive’s calendar. Some do research and read published works from the government and other sources to get facts and prepare reports for their employer. They may hire, train, and supervise other secretaries or office staff.

**Legal secretaries** schedule appointments and maintain a calendar that may often change. They also prepare correspondence and legal papers such as complaints, summonses, motions, responses, subpoenas, contracts, deeds, wills, mortgages, and other legal documents under the supervision of an attorney or a paralegal. Legal secretaries need a working knowledge of legal terminology and citation forms, as well as knowledge of the local courts, rules, and procedures. Some legal secretaries do legal research and assist in the preparation of various legal documents. Some file the pleadings with the court or assist the attorney in trial. They may even take care of personal matters for the attorney while he or she is in trial. (More information on paralegals is located in our brief on **Legal Assistants**.)

**Medical secretaries** work for physicians or other health professionals. They schedule appointments and type and send bills and other correspondence to the patients. They compile and file medical charts, reports, and histories; arrange for patients to be hospitalized; and order supplies. Medical secretaries need a working knowledge of medical terminology, insurance rules, billing practices, and hospital and laboratory procedures. Some transcribe dictation. They may also help physicians with reports, speeches, or conference proceedings. (More information on **Medical Transcriptionists** and **Medical Assistants** is located in their separate briefs.)

Secretaries in other technical fields assist engineers or scientists to prepare correspondence, maintain their organization’s technical library, and gather and edit materials for scientific papers. They must have a working knowledge of engineering or scientific terminology and practices. They may review engineering and scientific journals and assist with research by verifying quotes and citations in scientific papers.

**Stenographers** and **court reporters**, record word-for-word spoken words in speeches, conversations, legal proceedings, meetings, or other events on a stenotype machine that types shorthand symbols. These symbols are then recorded on computer disks or CD-ROM, which are then translated and displayed as text in a process called computer-aided transcription (CAT). In voice writing, a stenographer speaks directly into a stenomask. Stenotyping and voice writing used for realtime (instantaneous) captioning are linked directly to a computer to instantly appear as text on a screen. This process is called communications access realtime translation (CART).

Although many stenographers record official proceedings in the courtroom, many others work outside the courtroom. Stenography is used in courts, in classrooms, at business and government meetings, on television, for Internet streaming, and for closed-captioning for the hearing-impaired. Many stenographers, like secretaries, are experts in legal, medical, or scientific work. Some type copy in another language. (More information on these workers is located in our brief on **Court Reporters**.)

As reliance on technology continues to expand in offices, the role of the office professional continues to develop and grow. Office automation and organizational restructuring have led secretaries and administrative assistants to take on responsibilities once reserved for managerial and professional staff. Many now provide training and orientation for new staff, conduct research on the Internet, and operate and troubleshoot new office technologies.

**Working Conditions**

Most secretaries work in pleasant offices with modern equipment. Some executive secretaries have their own office. Others may belong to teams who share duties and work for several managers in one firm. Secretaries do not do hard physical work. However, they may sit at a desk or computer terminal for long intervals which can cause back and eye strain.

**Hours and Earnings**

Most secretaries work eight hours a day, five days a week. About 19 percent work part-time and many others work in temporary positions. Some top secretaries with heavy workloads often work overtime. Those who work for a trial attorney may work long or unusual hours. Those who work in hospitals, police headquarters, or other places that are open around the clock may work split shifts, odd hours, weekends, and nights. Secretaries who travel with their employer also often work long, irregular hours. They may set up a work space on a plane or train or in a hotel room.

Earnings for secretaries depend on their skills, experience, level of responsibilities, certification, specialty, employer, and geographic location. In general, earnings are typically higher for those working in management of companies and enterprises and local government than those working in education and employment services. Secretaries in large cities, such as Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., also tend to have high earnings.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2006, earnings for secretaries and administrative assistants ranged from less than $18,000 a year to more than $59,000 a year. Secretaries earned an average of $28,460 a year; medical secretaries earned an average of $29,220 a year; executive
Secretaries and administrative assistants earned an average of $39,160 a year; legal secretaries earned an average of $39,670 a year; and stenographers earned an average of $48,370 a year. However, earnings can be significantly higher in executive and specialty areas reaching well into the $70,000-80,000 a year range.

Secretaries in most large companies receive fringe benefits. They may get two to four weeks of paid vacation, sick leave, medical and life insurance, educational benefits (tuition reimbursement), and a pension or retirement plan. Some who work for one person or for a small firm may receive fewer or more modest benefits, while others, especially long-term secretaries, may receive excellent pay and benefits.

**Education and Training**

Secretaries should have at least a high school diploma. Every job applicant should have a better-than-average command of English, grammar, and spelling. They should be able to type at least 60 words a minute. The top requirements for secretaries are keyboarding, computer knowledge, and word processing, communications, and customer service skills. The ability to handle spreadsheets, databases, and desktop publishing is important. Applicants with more education and higher skills have a better job outlook.

High school business education programs offer keyboarding, business, English, mathematics, and other subjects. Two-year colleges and business schools teach secretarial and stenographic skills. Programs range from a few months of training to broad programs that take in all business and office skills. A four-year college degree will give individuals the knowledge that will help them work with executives and professionals. A business administration program, is a good plan.

As office automation continues to advance most companies make continuing education and retraining a part of the job. Secretaries and stenographers attend classes to learn to operate new office equipment, information storage systems, personal computers, or new software packages. Instructors from manufacturers help workers upgrade their skills and learn to run the latest equipment. Professional organizations offer in-service workshops and opportunities for professional growth.

**Certification and Professional Societies**

Testing and certification for proficiency in office skills and professionalism is available through several organizations. The International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP) offers the Certified Professional Secretary (CPS) and Certified Administrative Professional (CAP) designations to those who meet certain experience and education requirements, and pass an examination.

The National Association of Legal Secretaries (NALS) offers the title Accredited Legal Secretary (ALS). Candidates must have 1 year of experience in the legal field or complete an approved training course, and successfully complete the testing process. NALS also offers an advanced certification called the Professional Legal Secretary (PLS) designation.

Legal Secretaries International offers the Certified Legal Secretary Specialist (CL$) designation in various areas of the law including business law, civil litigation, criminal law, intellectual property, probate, and real estate. Candidates must have 5 years of legal experience and pass an examination. Some of the experience requirement may be waived for education or other certification.

Secretaries, administrative assistants, and other office workers may also belong to the Office and Professional Employees International Union. It has about 145,000 members. The Union represents and bargains for both private and public sector professionals and semiprofessional workers in most of the major industries in the United States and Canada.

**Personal Qualifications**

Secretaries and administrative assistants should have self-confidence reflected in a professional demeanor. They need interpersonal skills. They must have an excellent command of written and spoken English. Computer knowledge, and word processing, communications, and customer service skills are important. They need organizational, planning, and follow-up skills. They must also keep business and client information confidential.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with disabilities. Persons should contact their school or employment counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

**Where Employed**

In 2006, secretaries and administrative assistants held around 4 million jobs throughout the United States. Stenographers held another 17,000 jobs. Nearly 90 percent of all secretaries and administrative assistants worked for service-providing industries, ranging from education, legal, and health care to government and retail trade. Most of the rest worked for firms engaged in manufacturing or construction. Secretaries work for courts, legislatures, government agencies, law firms, hospitals, healthcare centers, schools and colleges, and employment agencies. They work in banks, insurance companies, real estate firms, publishing houses, investment houses, and charitable or fund-raising groups. They work for companies that engage in wholesale and retail trade, manufacturing, construction, communications, utilities, mining, and transportation.

**Employment Outlook**

Employment opportunities for qualified and experienced secretaries and administrative assistants should be plentiful. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects employment of these workers to grow by 6.2 percent through the year 2014—an increase of roughly 255,000 jobs. An additional 838,000 positions are also expected to open due to replacement needs. However, projected employment of secretaries and administrative assistants varies by occupation specialty.
Average employment growth is expected for medical and legal secretaries, and administrative assistants and executive secretaries. However, employment of other secretaries is expected to decline. Growing industries, such as administrative support services; health care and social assistance; private educational services; and professional, scientific, and technical services, will continue to generate most new job opportunities.

New office technologies, automation, and organizational restructuring will offset this demand somewhat. The latest in computers, e-mail, scanners, voice messaging systems, automated equipment, and sophisticated software are replacing traditional secretarial duties such as keyboarding, filing, copying, and bookkeeping duties. Managers and workers in other departments are taking over some tasks formerly done by secretaries. In some law and medical offices, paralegals and medical assistants are assuming some tasks formerly done by secretaries.

In addition, as companies downsize, secretaries and administrative assistants are increasingly being used to support the work of entire systems, departments, or units. However, many secretarial and administrative duties are of a personal, interactive nature and, therefore, not easily automated. Responsibilities such as planning conferences, working with clients, and instructing staff cannot be automated, and will continue to ensure that secretaries and administrative assistants play a key role in most organizations.

Entry Methods

High school students should try to get summer or part-time work in local offices or firms where they can do filing and word processing or run simple office machines. Job seekers can apply to offices and factories, or they can answer want ads in papers. Some find work through the local state employment service or a private employment office. Public and private business schools also help their graduates find jobs.

Advancement

Secretaries may start as trainees or as aides to secretaries and executive assistants. Secretaries may improve their prospects for advancement by taking college courses in business, marketing, accounting, business administration, or specialized areas such as legal or medical training. Those who broaden their knowledge of company operations may become executive secretaries, clerical supervisors, or office managers. Some become office managers or word processing supervisors. They may head an office staff. Many become middle management executives. Some go on to top executive positions.

For Further Research

Association of Executive and Administrative Professionals, 900 South Washington Street, Suite G-13, Falls Church, VA 22046. Web site: www.theaeap.com

International Association of Administrative Professionals, 10502 N.W. Ambassador Drive, PO Box 20404, Kansas City, MO 64195-0404. Web site: www.iaap-hq.org

Legal Secretaries International Inc., 2302 Fannin Street, Suite 500, Houston, TX 77002-9136. Web site: www.legalsecretaries.org

National Association of Legal Secretaries, 8159 East 41st Street, Tulsa, OK 74145. Web site: www.nals.org

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