

Secretaries and Administrative Assistants

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Significant Points

- Increasing office automation and organizational restructuring will lead to slow growth in overall employment of secretaries and administrative assistants.
- Numerous job openings will result from the need to replace workers who leave this very large occupation each year.
- Opportunities should be best for applicants with extensive knowledge of software applications.

Nature of the Work

As the reliance on technology continues to expand in offices across the Nation, the role of the office professional has greatly evolved. Office automation and organizational restructuring have led secretaries and administrative assistants to assume a wider range of new responsibilities once reserved for managerial and professional staff. Many secretaries and administrative assistants now provide training and orientation for new staff, conduct research on the Internet, and operate and troubleshoot new office technologies. In the midst of these changes, however, their core responsibilities have remained much the same—performing and coordinating an office’s administrative activities, and storing, retrieving, and integrating information for dissemination to staff and clients.

Secretaries and administrative assistants are responsible for a variety of administrative and clerical duties necessary to run an organization efficiently. They serve as an information manager for an office, plan and schedule meetings and appointments, organize and maintain paper and electronic files, manage projects, conduct research, and provide information by using the telephone, postal mail, and e-mail. They also may handle travel arrangements.

Secretaries and administrative assistants are aided in these tasks by a variety of office equipment, such as facsimile machines, photocopiers, and telephone systems. In addition, secretaries and administrative assistants use personal computers to create spreadsheets, compose correspondence, manage databases, and create presentations, reports, and documents by using desktop publishing software and digital graphics—all tasks previously handled by managers and professionals. At the same time, these other office workers have assumed many tasks traditionally assigned to secretaries and administrative assistants, such as word processing and answering the telephone. Because secretaries and administrative assistants often are not responsible for dictation and typing, they have time to support more members of the executive staff. In a number of organizations, secretaries and administrative assistants work in teams in order to work flexibly and share their expertise.

Specific job duties vary with experience and titles. *Executive secretaries and administrative assistants*, for example, perform fewer clerical tasks than do other secretaries. In addition to arranging conference calls and scheduling meetings, they may handle more complex responsibilities such as conducting research, preparing statistical reports, training employees, and supervising other clerical staff.

Some secretaries and administrative assistants, such as legal and medical secretaries, perform highly specialized work requiring knowledge of technical terminology and procedures. For instance,

legal secretaries prepare correspondence and legal papers such as summonses, complaints, motions, responses, and subpoenas under the supervision of an attorney or paralegal. They also may review legal journals and assist in other ways with legal research, as by verifying quotes and citations in legal briefs. *Medical secretaries* transcribe dictation, prepare correspondence, and assist physicians or medical scientists with reports, speeches, articles, and conference proceedings. They also record simple medical histories, arrange for patients to be hospitalized, and order supplies. Most medical secretaries need to be familiar with insurance rules, billing practices, and hospital or laboratory procedures. Other technical secretaries who assist engineers or scientists may prepare correspondence, maintain the technical library, and gather and edit materials for scientific papers.

Working Conditions

Secretaries and administrative assistants usually work in schools, hospitals, corporate settings, or legal and medical offices. Their jobs often involve sitting for long periods. If they spend a lot of time typing, particularly at a video display terminal, they may encounter problems of eyestrain, stress, and repetitive motion, such as carpal tunnel syndrome.

Office work can lend itself to alternative or flexible working arrangements, such as part-time work or telecommuting—especially if the job requires extensive computer use. About 1 secretary in 6 works part time and many others work in temporary positions. A few participate in job-sharing arrangements in which two people divide responsibility for a single job. The majority of secretaries, however, are full-time employees who work a standard 40-hour week.

Employment

Secretaries and administrative assistants held about 4.1 million jobs in 2002, ranking among the largest occupations in the U.S. economy. The following tabulation shows the distribution of employment by secretarial specialty:

Secretaries, except legal, medical, and executive	1,975,000
Executive secretaries and administrative assistants	1,526,000
Medical secretaries	339,000
Legal secretaries	264,000

Secretaries and administrative assistants are employed in organizations of every type. Around 9 out of 10 secretaries and administrative assistants are employed in service-providing industries,



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ranging from education and health to government and retail trade. Most of the rest work for firms engaged in manufacturing or construction.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

High school graduates who have basic office skills may qualify for entry-level secretarial positions. However, employers increasingly require extensive knowledge of software applications, such as word processing, spreadsheets, and database management. Secretaries and administrative assistants should be proficient in keyboarding and good at spelling, punctuation, grammar, and oral communication. Because secretaries and administrative assistants must be tactful in their dealings with people, employers also look for good customer service and interpersonal skills. Discretion, good judgment, organizational or management ability, initiative, and the ability to work independently are especially important for higher level administrative positions.

As office automation continues to evolve, retraining and continuing education will remain an integral part of secretarial jobs. Changes in the office environment have increased the demand for secretaries and administrative assistants who are adaptable and versatile. Secretaries and administrative assistants may have to attend classes or participate in online education in order to learn how to operate new office technologies, such as information storage systems, scanners, the Internet, or new updated software packages. They may also get involved in selecting and maintaining equipment.

Secretaries and administrative assistants acquire skills in various ways. Training ranges from high school vocational education programs that teach office skills and keyboarding to 1- and 2-year programs in office administration offered by business schools, vocational-technical institutes, and community colleges. Many temporary placement agencies also provide formal training in computer and office skills. However, many skills tend to be acquired through on-the-job instruction by other employees or by equipment and software vendors. Specialized training programs are available for students planning to become medical or legal secretaries or administrative technology specialists. Bachelor's degrees and professional certifications are becoming increasingly important as business continues to become more global.

Testing and certification for proficiency in entry-level office skills is available through organizations such as the International Association of Administrative Professionals; NALS, Inc.; and Legal Secretaries International, Inc. As secretaries and administrative assistants gain experience, they can earn several different designations. Prominent designations include the Certified Professional Secretary (CPS) or the Certified Administrative Professional (CAP) designations, which can be earned by meeting certain experience and/or educational requirements and passing an examination. Similarly, those with 1 year of experience in the legal field, or who have concluded an approved training course and who want to be certified as a legal support professional, can acquire the Accredited Legal Secretary (ALS) designation through a testing process administered by NALS. NALS also offers two additional designations; an examination to confer the Professional Legal Secretary (PLS) designation, considered an advanced certification for legal support professionals, as well as a paralegal examination and designation for proficiency as a paralegal. Legal Secretaries International confers the Certified Legal Secretary Specialist (CLSS) designation in areas such as intellectual property, criminal law, civil litigation, probate, and business law, to those who have 5 years of law-related experience and pass an examination. In some instances, certain requirements may be waived.

Secretaries generally advance by being promoted to other administrative positions with more responsibilities. Qualified secretaries who broaden their knowledge of a company's operations and enhance their skills may be promoted to other positions such as senior or executive secretary, clerical supervisor, or office manager. Secretaries with word processing or data entry experience can advance to jobs as word processing or data entry trainers, supervisors, or managers within their own firms or in a secretarial, word processing, or data entry service bureau. Secretarial experience can also lead to jobs such as instructor or sales representative with manufacturers of software or computer equipment. With additional training, many legal secretaries become paralegals.

Job Outlook

Overall employment of secretaries and administrative assistants is expected to grow more slowly than the average for all occupations over the 2002-12 period. In addition to those resulting from growth, numerous job openings will result from the need to replace workers who transfer to other occupations or leave this very large occupation for other reasons each year. Opportunities should be best for applicants, particularly experienced secretaries, with extensive knowledge of software applications.

Projected employment of secretaries will vary by occupational specialty. Employment growth in the health care and social assistance and legal services industries should lead to average growth for medical and legal secretaries. Employment of executive secretaries and administrative assistants is projected to grow more slowly than the average for all occupations. Rapidly growing industries—such as administrative and support services, health care and social assistance, educational services (private), and professional, scientific, and technical services—will continue to generate most new job opportunities. A decline in employment is expected for all other secretaries, except legal, medical, or executive. They account for almost half of all secretaries and administrative assistants.

Increasing office automation and organizational restructuring will continue to make secretaries and administrative assistants more productive in coming years. Personal computers, e-mail, scanners, and voice message systems will allow secretaries to accomplish more in the same amount of time. The use of automated equipment is also changing the distribution of work in many offices. In some cases, such traditional secretarial duties as keyboarding, filing, photocopying, and bookkeeping are being assigned to workers in other units or departments. Professionals and managers increasingly do their own word processing and data entry, and handle much of their own correspondence rather than submit the work to secretaries and other support staff. Also, in some law and medical offices, paralegals and medical assistants are assuming some tasks formerly done by secretaries. As other workers assume more of these duties, there is a trend in many offices for professionals and managers to "share" secretaries and administrative assistants. The traditional arrangement of one secretary per manager is becoming less prevalent; instead, secretaries and administrative assistants increasingly support systems, departments, or units. This approach often means that secretaries and administrative assistants assume added responsibilities and are seen as valuable members of a team, but it also contributes to the projected decline in the overall number of secretaries and administrative assistants.

Developments in office technology are certain to continue, and they will bring about further changes in the work of secretaries and administrative assistants. 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 require tact and commu-

nication skills. Because technology cannot substitute for these personal skills, secretaries and administrative assistants will continue to play a key role in most organizations.

Earnings

Median annual earnings of executive secretaries and administrative assistants were \$33,410 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$26,980 and \$41,350. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$22,270, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$50,420. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of executive secretaries and administrative assistants in 2002 were:

Management of companies and enterprises	\$36,770
Local government	34,600
Colleges, universities, and professional schools	32,210
State government	31,220
Employment services	29,700

Median annual earnings of legal secretaries were \$35,020 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$27,540 and \$44,720. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$21,990, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$54,810. Medical secretaries earned a median annual salary of \$25,430 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$21,090 and \$31,070. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$18,310, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$37,550. Median annual earnings of secretaries, except legal, medical, and executive, were about \$25,290 in 2002.

Salaries vary a great deal, however, reflecting differences in skill, experience, and level of responsibility. Salaries also vary in different parts of the country; earnings are usually lowest in southern cities, and highest in northern and western cities. Certification in this field usually is rewarded by a higher salary.

Related Occupations

A number of other workers type, record information, and process paperwork. Among them are bookkeeping, accounting, and auditing clerks; receptionists and information clerks; court reporters; human resources assistants, except payroll and timekeeping; computer operators; data entry and information processing workers; paralegals and legal assistants; medical assistants; and medical records and health information technicians. A growing number of secretaries share in managerial and human resource responsibilities. Occupations requiring these skills include office and administrative support supervisors and managers, computer and information systems managers, administrative services managers, and human resources, training, and labor relations managers and specialists.

Sources of Additional Information

State employment offices provide information about job openings for secretaries.

For information on the Certified Professional Secretary or Certified Administrative Professional designations, contact:

► International Association of Administrative Professionals, 10502 NW Ambassador Dr., P.O. Box 20404, Kansas City, MO 64195-0404. Internet: <http://www.iaap-hq.org>

Information on the Certified Legal Secretary Specialist (CLSS) designation can be obtained from:

► Legal Secretaries International Inc., Internet: <http://www.legalsecretaries.org>

Information on the Accredited Legal Secretary (ALS), Professional Legal Secretary (PLS), and Paralegal certifications is available from:

► NALS, Inc., 314 East 3rd St., Suite 210, Tulsa, OK 74120. Internet: <http://www.nals.org>