

OUR TYPE OF WOMAN

As a young career girl **RACHAEL OAKES-ASH** put secretary at the bottom of her desirable job list. But she learned the hard way who really runs the show. Here's to the office dynamo.

Illustration by **GREGORY ROBERTS**

THERE IS A CONFESSION I MUST MAKE: I have always seen the secretary as an overrated butler with fast fingers. Or worse still, as a bulldog proudly guarding her man (or woman). Nosey ("May I say who is calling?") and downright interrogative ("What is your call regarding?"), the secretary fostered in me strong offensive tactics while I was cold calling for employment. "It's a personal call" worked with some. "He's expecting my call" worked with others. But "I know your job is terribly important, and you must have an in-tray the size of a pyramid waiting to be filed, but I'd like to speak to the person who makes the real decisions in the office, the one with the six-figure salary and same working hours as you" didn't.

As an educated girl in the 1980s, I thought I was above the secretarial pool. An office junior in a middle-sized advertising firm, I had plans to make it into "creative" where I would conjure up award-winning ads before midday and spend the rest of the day celebrating over prawn cocktails and rare steak with Bollinger for drinking water. Not for me the kowtowing to some suit who didn't know how to turn on a computer and liked his coffee white with one. I was sure my post was a step up from the girls sitting outside the offices of those with the expense accounts.

The day came when I was to be promoted. However, I lacked a major skill necessary for the promotion – I couldn't type. So I was to be "promoted" to a secretarial role and had four weeks to perfect my keyboard skills.

I resisted, I fought, I kicked, I screamed and, four weeks later, still had not learned to type. I was fired, but I held my

head high for I had not fallen to the lowly ranks of secretary.

I had yet to learn the power of the secretary – better known these days as "administrative professional" or "personal assistant" – in the office hierarchy and the extraordinary skills required. That she had to be a travel agent, counsellor, stylist, dog walker and party planner had not come to my attention. I was back in the Dark Ages behind the screen the Bank of England provided to segregate its female workers in 1921, lest they "see and perhaps envy the more interesting work the men were doing".

Sure, I knew the role of secretary was a female role and as a fresh-faced feminist in training, I applauded the role of women in the workforce. But I was fixated on the fact that the glass ceiling seemed to hang noticeably low over those in the typing pool and I didn't want to bump my head. It was still only the 80s (though it was hard to tell in which century).

Joyce Crane, 74, has been working as a secretary since





1946. She remembers when young women were proud to call themselves secretaries, long before the “executive assistant” came into play. “When we left school, there weren’t a great deal of choices,” Crane says. “We’d go to school-certificate level and then most girls went into domestic service or became a nurse. The average working-class family didn’t have the financial choice to send their girls to business school. You were looked up to if you were a secretary.”

After graduating in record time from the Charters Business College in Sydney, Crane’s first job, at 15, was as a typist in a music publishing company where she stayed until after she married and became pregnant. She didn’t have to give up her job until her pregnancy started to “show” and she returned to work when her firstborn was two years old.

“A lot of my friends thought I was a bit ‘cute’ going to work ... they didn’t need the money so they stayed home. It was frowned on to be a working mother. People used to write into

the papers about it. I was determined I would do it all; my kids would have the whitest sandshoes on sports day because I thought no-one was going to criticise me, I could work and be a mother.”

Crane, who can remember the days of the tea lady and not having to make coffee for her boss, continued to work as a secretary throughout the 1950s and 60s. Traditionally trained and happy in her role, she then began to envy some of the more forward-thinking secretaries she worked with in the 1960s who were taking on new roles. “The other secretaries were more organisers. They were booking itineraries and hotels, things outside of the norm. It didn’t occur to me that I could do that,” she says.

The girls graduating from secretarial college in the 1960s had the same shorthand and typing skills as those from the 1880s. But while their sisters from Mrs Dora Armitage’s secretarial school, which opened in Sydney in 1888, “must >

have a thoroughly sound English education and a knowledge of French, Latin and even of Heathen mythology”, young women from the Lucie Clayton School in England, in 1960, were taught about make-up, deportment and even how to get out of a car. By the 1980s, secretaries were compared to flight attendants and, in some colleges, regularly weighed (lest that extra kilo impact your typing speed).

Anyone who has witnessed Melanie Griffiths's big hair, bad accent and sexual liaisons with her would-be business partner in the movie *Working Girl* will realise how difficult it was for women in the 1980s to move from the typing pool to real offices with windows and natural light. “No-one wants to hear it from a secretary,” Griffiths says when trying to present her business idea.

In the same way the typewriter freed women to move from the home into the workplace, the introduction of the personal computer and e-mail to the corporate world in the 1990s helped secretaries climb the corporate ladder.

Winsome Bernard, managing director of Quay Appointments, has been placing job seekers for more than 20 years. She says it's difficult now to find one-on-one secretarial jobs. “Managers do a lot of the secretarial work themselves with computers,” she says. “They're coming through schools and universities with computer skills and e-mail has cut down the work of the secretary considerably. It's far easier now for people to move from a secretarial position into other roles and eventual senior management.”



TAPPING INTO HISTORY

■ **The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog** is the mantra of typing students – all 26 letters of the alphabet are contained in one sentence. Who would have thought a quick fox and a lazy dog could change the shape and sex of office history? But change it they did. Before the commercial development of the typewriter in 1873, the role of secretary was strictly a male domain. The well-educated, male secretaries often took dictation in shorthand with reed pen upon parchment or quill on paper.

■ **Typewriters** were introduced to Australia in 1885 and the first shorthand and typing school was opened in Sydney three years later by Mrs Dora Armitage (where young, educated girls encouraged foxes to jump over lazy dogs on a daily basis). Typing was considered a “suitable” white-collar role for girls entering the workforce; typing pools were, after all, gender segregated.

■ **In 1930, 95 per cent of** secretaries were female. Over the following 70 years, secretarial work has gone from being a job for the middle classes, to a job for the lower classes and back again. It has also survived a name change to administrative professional or personal assistant in an attempt to convince non-believers how important the secretary is in the grand scheme of things. National Secretaries Day has been upgraded to Office Professionals Day and is celebrated on April 24.

■ **It is Office Professionals Year** with the International Administrative Professionals week celebrating its 50th anniversary in the United States from today until April 27. And for those truly committed to their professional office career, the fifth International Summit of Office Professionals will be held in London in 2003 (bags not taking the minutes of that meeting).

Thankfully, the ability to get out of a car without exposing your knickers is no longer a prerequisite for a personal assistant. “You do, however, need advanced computer skills in spreadsheets and presentation software,” says Bernard. “The emphasis is no longer on presenting a typewritten documentation, it's about research and information-gathering and collating. A secretary in an entry-level position could ask \$40,000 per annum.”

That's a long way from the three pounds, three shillings a day of 1886 but a longer way still from the six-figure salaries of their bosses of today.

The salary difference between boss and secretary doesn't bother 23-year-old Despina Tzolakidis who travels two-and-a-half hours a day from her home in Wollongong to Williams Business College in Sydney. She's studying to be a secretary – she freely uses the term – and is half way through her

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one-year business administration diploma.

The nine-to-five, Monday-to-Friday routine of a secretary appeals to the former fashion retailer, though her girlfriends were not so convinced. “The first impression from my friends was, ‘Why do you want to be a secretary?’ They thought you just turn on your computer and drink cups of coffee all day. There is a lot of work that secretaries do that they don't get enough credit for – the organisation, the preparation – and without them the office wouldn't run.”

I EVENTUALLY LEARNED TO TYPE IN LONDON IN the 1990s. Four weeks at the Queen's Secretarial School in South Kensington, tapping away on my keyboard, “the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog”. On my return to Australia, I entered the typing pool of a large record company. The managers' offices were on the outside walls, the coordinators at desks outside each office. I soon realised that there was a hierarchy within the pool itself. The more senior your boss was within the company, the more senior your role. It also didn't take long to understand just how much a secretary holds a company together.

Obviously, I am not the first to notice. The BBC's Radio 4 ran a special program in 1990 in which a male executive and his PA swapped jobs. The outcome? The secretary had no problem in her boss's role but the boss could not cope in hers. Surprise, surprise. Most secretaries have known this for years.

Secretaries have had a bad rap for too long. They've put up with enough schtick from their bosses – working the same hours as the boss for half (but more often less) the salary – and all they get is a bunch of flowers or a bottle of chardonnay on Secretaries Day for thanks. (Bosses take note, an all-expenses paid weekend break at the Hyatt Coolum for secretary and partner is a far more appropriate gift).

As a converted non-believer, I say the quick brown secretary jumped over the lazy boss and can now rule the corporate world. So bosses beware, Ms Moneypenny is moving up. □ *National Office Professionals Day is Wednesday. For details of breakfasts around Australia, go to www.aiop.com.au*