



UNIT-1

The Job Functions of a PA / Secretary

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

Unit 1

The Job Functions of a PA / Secretary

Why Are PAs and Secretaries Needed?

Role and Responsibilities

Personal assistants and secretaries are hired to handle an extensive range of interconnected administrative responsibilities. More specifically, they are taken on to relieve their employers of various tasks that do not require their personal involvement or supervision. As a PA or secretary, you can expect to function as a link between your boss and other employees within the company. Depending on your experience, expertise and the position you're appointed to, you may contribute to more advanced tasks like advertising, accounting, PR management, payroll, banking and so on. Above all, your job is to conduct and complete tasks with exactly the same consistency and attention to detail as your boss would, if he or she was to tackle them personally.

The perfect administrative assistant is no less than a dream asset for the busy professional. Just as the perfect boss is a dream come true for the ambitious PA or secretary. Hence, it can be better to look at your collaboration more as a *partnership* than traditional employment. To make things work, you both have to adjust to each other's personalities and generally make the effort to remain personable and professional.

What Do Employers Expect?

As you'd expect, the definition of an 'ideal' administrative assistant varies from one employer and organization to the next. Nevertheless, there are several important qualities and characteristics you'll be expected to portray during the recruitment process and beyond.

The most crucial of all being as follows:

Punctuality:

Timeliness and punctuality go hand in hand with general reliability. If your employer isn't 100% confident he or she can count on you to be where you need to be at the appropriate time, it will be difficult to establish a relationship of trust. Administrative assistants need to take punctuality to extremes, ensuring they are not only on time, but can be counted on to arrive *ahead* of time. Irrespective of your capacity to perform an extensive array of important or even complex tasks, a PA who is routinely (or even occasionally) late always be passed over for a punctual and timely individual.

Confidence:

The field of PA and secretary services is not for the fainthearted. There will always be instances where the administrative assistant is called upon to make important decisions on behalf of their boss, often with very little time to consider the options available. The very best personal assistants are those that can be counted on to do the right thing at the right time, remaining cool and calm in high-pressure situations. If you fall apart when facing a challenge, this probably isn't the field for you.

Loyalty and Confidentiality:

However casual your relationship with your employer may be, you must still treat everything that happens both inside and outside the office with the strictest confidence and discretion. Your employer will expect you to demonstrate relentless loyalty and keep your conversations and general business activities confidential. For the busy professional, there's nothing worse than a PA you suspect to be relaying everything you say and do to any number of people at work and at home. Even the slightest hint of disloyalty or breach of confidentiality and your employment will come to an end.

Flexibility:

It's almost impossible to pen a complete and accurate job description for the personal assistant or secretary. Not only do the administrative assistant's responsibilities vary significantly from one employer to the next, but you may also be called upon that anytime to handle something that *wasn't* featured in the job description. Precisely why PAs and secretaries are expected to be flexible in the extreme, rising to any challenge that comes their way and doing whatever it takes to ensure a positive outcome.

Daily Routine

Your Office

As with typical responsibilities, the office environment will often be different from one administrative assistant to the next. Some PAs and secretaries work remotely for self-employed entrepreneurs, others are based in legal offices, doctors' surgeries, warehouses, retail businesses and so on. You may be allocated your own office, or be positioned in a cubicle in a shared office space. It's also entirely likely that you'll spend a lot of your time out and about – some administrative assistants spend comparatively little time sitting at a desk in the traditional office environment.

Your Workstation

Depending on who you work for, it may be your responsibility to set up your workstation, or your requirements may have been met by your first day on the job. Likewise, your employer may provide a summary of the equipment and consumables you require, or leave it to you to pick up everything you need. In the case of the latter, you'll of course be able to claim your expenses in accordance with company policy. Just be sure to find out how this works, before going ahead and spending money on the supplies you need.

However, it will be up to you and you alone to ensure that your workstation is both safe and comfortable to work at. Under no circumstances should the importance of workstation ergonomics be overlooked. Important factors to consider when setting up your workstation include the following:

Office Chair

If you'll be spending any amount of time sitting at a desk throughout the day, you need a chair that provides adequate back support and promotes good posture. You should also be comprehensively adjustable, so that you can find the ideal setting to suit your body shape and personal preferences.

Lighting

Poor lighting can quickly take a toll on the health and wellbeing of any office worker. Ensuring you have adequate illumination around your workspace means avoiding lighting that is too dark or too bright, while positioning your monitor to avoid glare.

Desk

Desk size isn't nearly as important as the way it is set up. Again, it's a case of ensuring the ergonomics are suitable for your body shape and general preferences. That said, it's worth remembering that the average PA's desk has a habit of becoming cluttered with a thousand and one bits and pieces in no time at all. You'll probably redecorate the entire thing in sticky-notes in a matter of days. Hence, you need to ensure you have sufficient space to get the job done, storing as much unnecessary clutter away as possible.

Supplies/Consumables

If you work in a larger office environment, chances are there will be an extensive inventory of consumables you can access when you need to. However, it may also be your direct responsibility to order the supplies and consumables you need, or perhaps purchase them directly from a store and claim the costs back at a later date. Ensure you understand your obligations, before getting started.

Computer

These days, it isn't too much to ask for your employer to provide you with a decent computer system. Or to put it another way, a computer system that wasn't manufactured in 1994, and therefore isn't horrifically inconvenient and uncomfortable to work with. Today's high-end computer screens, keyboards, mice and controllers in general are all designed to minimize discomfort and prevent repetitive strain injuries. If you are dissatisfied with your computer system for any reason, it's up to you to bring it to the attention of your employer at the earliest possible juncture.

General Office Supplies

You may also be expected to play a role in the procurement of more general office supplies for other members of the workforce. Examples of which could include photocopier paper, printer toner cartridges, replacement peripherals for computer systems and so on. In which case, you'll need to carefully monitor the usage of such supplies by others, implementing some kind of system to ensure the office never runs short. Again, all such responsibilities will be clarified by your employer, before getting started.

Lockers/Secured Storage

Many (if not most) of the documents you produce and work with will be considered strictly confidential. You will therefore be expected to safeguard such documents and sensitive materials, using appropriate lockers or secured storage units. You may also be expected to play a role in ensuring others around the office fulfil their own security and confidentiality obligations.

Work Planning

A typical working day and the life of a PA or secretary has a tendency to be anything *but* typical. You'll probably have a good idea of basic tasks you need to complete, having planned and scheduled them the day before. However, the number-one rule for those working as administrative assistance is to always expect the unexpected.

The working day typically begins by consulting calendars and diaries, in order to ensure there's nothing on the agenda for the day you haven't forgotten. During the earliest hours of the day, administrative assistants typically address priority tasks identified and scheduled the day before. They are also expected to liaise with their employer, in order to provide them with an outline of their scheduled activities and determine if there has been any change of plan in the meantime.

Reading emails, opening letters and taking appropriate action also forms part of the PA or secretary's morning activities. As for the remainder of the day, it depends entirely on the requirements and schedule of your boss. Not to mention, the capacity in which you have been taken on.

For example, some administrative assistants spend most of their working days focusing on general office admin. By contrast, others accompany their employers on their day-to-day travels. London by morning, Milan by lunchtime and Amsterdam the following afternoon. Administrative assistants are also responsible for making travel arrangements on behalf of their employers, while ensuring they have all the necessary resources to conduct their business activities while away from the office.

Flight bookings, hotel reservations, transfers, restaurant bookings, dry cleaning and so on – all organized by the professional PA or secretary. Some travel alongside their bosses on a routine basis, other cover all essential admin duties at the office while the boss is away. There's perhaps no more important tool in the PA's arsenal than a regularly updated diary or calendar. Handling so many interconnected responsibilities at the same time, it can be surprisingly easy to lose track of something along the way. Something your boss could consider to be of the utmost importance.

Administrative assistants are also expected to keep a close eye on the performance and general repair of the office equipment they use. An unfortunately common scenario you'll want to avoid is that of not being able to do your job, due to some kind of hardware or software outage at the worst possible time. Should an issue be suspected at even the earliest stage, ensure it is reported and acted on accordingly.

Last but not least, it's comparatively rare for a top-level PA or secretary to exclusively work the usual 9 to 5 office hours. In fact, the vast majority of professional administrative assistants will find themselves starting early, finishing late and conducting various matters at home. As previously touched upon, it's this kind of flexibility and versatility employers are looking for when hiring administrative assistants.

Further Reading: