
Secretaries and Administrative Assistants

(O*NET 43-6011.00, 43-6012.00, 43-6013.00, 43-6014.00)

Significant Points

- This occupation is expected to be among those with the largest number of new jobs.
- Opportunities should be best for applicants with extensive knowledge of software applications.
- Secretaries and administrative assistants today perform fewer clerical tasks and are increasingly taking on the roles of information and communication managers.

Nature of the Work

As the reliance on technology continues to expand in offices, the role of the office professional has greatly evolved. Office automation and organizational restructuring have led secretaries and administrative assistants to assume responsibilities once reserved for managerial and professional staff. In spite of these changes, however, the core responsibilities for secretaries and administrative assistants 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 perform a variety of administrative and clerical duties necessary to run an organization efficiently. They serve as information and communication managers for an office; plan and schedule meetings and appointments; organize and maintain paper and electronic files; manage projects; conduct research; and disseminate information by using the telephone, mail services, Web sites, and e-mail. They also may handle travel and guest arrangements.

Secretaries and administrative assistants use a variety of office equipment, such as fax machines, photocopiers, scanners, and videoconferencing and telephone systems. In addition, secretaries and administrative assistants often use computers to do tasks previously handled by managers and professionals, such as: create spreadsheets; compose correspondence; manage databases; and create presentations, reports, and documents using desktop publishing software and digital graphics. They also may negotiate with vendors, maintain and examine leased equipment, purchase supplies, manage areas such as stockrooms or corporate libraries, and retrieve data from various sources. At the same time, managers and professionals have assumed many tasks traditionally assigned to secretaries and administrative assistants, such as keyboarding and answering the telephone. Because secretaries and administrative assistants do less dictation and word processing, they now have time to support more members of the executive staff. In a number of organizations, secretaries and administrative assistants work in teams to work flexibly and share their expertise.

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.

Specific job duties vary with experience and titles. *Executive secretaries and administrative assistants* provide high-level administrative support for an office and for top executives of an organization. Generally, they perform fewer clerical tasks than do secretaries and more information management. In addition to arranging conference calls and supervising other clerical staff, they may handle more complex responsibilities such as reviewing incoming memos, submissions, and reports in order to determine their significance and to plan for their distribution. They also prepare agendas and make arrangements for meetings of committees and executive boards. They also may conduct research and prepare statistical reports.

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 a paralegal. They also may review legal journals and assist with legal research—for example, by verifying quotes and citations in legal briefs. Additionally, legal secretaries often teach newly minted lawyers how to prepare documents for submission to the courts. *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 their organization's technical library, and gather and edit materials for scientific papers.

Secretaries employed in elementary schools and high schools perform important administrative functions for the school. They are responsible for handling most of the communications between parents, the community, and teachers and administrators who work at the school. As such, they are required to know details about registering students, immunizations, and bus schedules, for example. They schedule appointments, keep track of students' academic records, and make room assignments for classes. Those who work directly for principals screen inquiries from parents and handle those matters not needing a principal's attention. They also may set a principal's calendar to help set her or his priorities for the day.



Secretaries and administrative assistants use computers to perform clerical and administrative tasks.

Work environment. Secretaries and administrative assistants usually work in schools, hospitals, corporate settings, government agencies, or legal and medical offices. Their jobs often involve sitting for long periods. If they spend a lot of time key-boarding, particularly at a computer monitor, they may encounter problems of eyestrain, stress, and repetitive motion ailments such as carpal tunnel syndrome.

Almost one-fifth of secretaries work 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 and administrative assistants, however, are full-time employees who work a standard 40-hour week.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Word processing, writing, and communication skills are essential for all secretaries and administrative assistants. However, employers increasingly require extensive knowledge of software applications, such as desktop publishing, project management, spreadsheets, and database management.

Education and training. High school graduates who have basic office skills may qualify for entry-level secretarial positions. They can acquire these skills in various ways. Training ranges from high school vocational education programs that teach office skills and typing to 1- and 2-year programs in office administration offered by business and vocational-technical schools, and community colleges. Many temporary placement agencies also provide formal training in computer and office skills. Most medical and legal secretaries must go through specialized training programs that teach them the language of the industry.

Employers of executive secretaries increasingly are seeking candidates with a college degree, as these secretaries work closely with top executives. A degree related to the business or industry in which a person is seeking employment may provide the job seeker with an advantage in the application process.

Most secretaries and administrative assistants, once hired, tend to acquire more advanced skills through on-the-job instruction by other employees or by equipment and software vendors. Others may attend classes or participate in online education to learn how to operate new office technologies, such as information storage systems, scanners, or new updated software packages. As office automation continues to evolve, retraining and continuing education will remain integral parts of secretarial jobs.

Other qualifications. Secretaries and administrative assistants should be proficient in typing and good at spelling, punctuation, grammar, and oral communication. Employers also look for good customer service and interpersonal skills because secretaries and administrative assistants must be tactful in their dealings with people. Discretion, good judgment, organizational or management ability, initiative, and the ability to work independently are especially important for higher-level administrative positions. Changes in the office environment have increased the demand for secretaries and administrative assistants who are adaptable and versatile.

Certification and advancement. Testing and certification for proficiency in office skills is available through organizations such as the International Association of Administrative Professionals; National Association of Legal Secretaries (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) and the Certified Administrative Professional (CAP), which can be earned by meeting certain experience 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 offers two additional designations: Professional Legal Secretary (PLS), considered an advanced certification for legal support professionals, and a 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 legal experience and pass an examination. In some instances, certain requirements may be waived.

Secretaries and administrative assistants generally advance by being promoted to other administrative positions with more responsibilities. Qualified administrative assistants who broaden their knowledge of a company’s operations and enhance their skills may be promoted to senior or executive secretary or administrative assistant, 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 and administrative support experience also can lead to jobs such as instructor or sales representative with manufacturers of software or computer equipment. With additional training, many legal secretaries become paralegals.

Employment

Secretaries and administrative assistants held more than 4.2 million jobs in 2006, ranking it 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	1,940,000
Executive secretaries and administrative assistants	1,618,000
Medical secretaries.....	408,000
Legal secretaries.....	275,000

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

Job Outlook

Employment of secretaries and administrative assistants is expected to grow about as fast as average for all occupations. Secretaries and administrative assistants will have among the largest numbers of new jobs arise, about 362,000 over the 2006-16 period. Additional opportunities will result from the need to

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-16	
				Number	Percent
Secretaries and administrative assistants	43-6000	4,241,000	4,603,000	362,000	9
Executive secretaries and administrative assistants	43-6011	1,618,000	1,857,000	239,000	15
Legal secretaries.....	43-6012	275,000	308,000	32,000	12
Medical secretaries.....	43-6013	408,000	477,000	68,000	17
Secretaries, except legal, medical, and executive	43-6014	1,940,000	1,962,000	22,000	1

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

replace workers who transfer to other occupations or leave this occupation.

Employment change. Employment of secretaries and administrative assistants is expected to increase about 9 percent, which is about as fast as average for all occupations, between 2006 and 2016. Projected employment varies by occupational specialty. Above average employment growth in the health care and social assistance industry should lead to faster than average growth for medical secretaries, while moderate growth in legal services is projected to lead to average growth in employment of legal secretaries. Employment of executive secretaries and administrative assistants is projected to grow faster than average for all occupations. Growing industries—such as administrative and support services; health care and social assistance; and professional, scientific, and technical services—will continue to generate the most new jobs. Little or no change in employment is expected for secretaries, except legal, medical, or executive, who account for about 46 percent 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. Computers, e-mail, scanners, and voice message systems will allow secretaries and administrative assistants to accomplish more in the same amount of time. The use of automated equipment also is changing the distribution of work in many offices. In some cases, traditional secretarial duties as typing, filing, photocopying, and bookkeeping are being done by clerks in other departments or by the professionals themselves. For example, professionals and managers increasingly do their own word processing and data entry, and handle much of their own correspondence. Also, in some law and medical offices, paralegals and medical assistants are assuming some tasks formerly done by secretaries.

Developments in office technology are certain to continue. However, many secretarial and administrative duties are of a personal, interactive nature and, therefore, are not easily automated. Responsibilities such as planning conferences, working with clients, and instructing staff require tact and communication skills. Because technology cannot substitute for these personal skills, secretaries and administrative assistants will continue to play a key role in most organizations.

As paralegals and medical assistants assume more of the duties traditionally assigned to secretaries, there is a trend in many offices for professionals and managers to replace the traditional arrangement of one secretary per manager with secretaries and administrative assistants who support the work of 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.

Job prospects. In addition to jobs created from growth, numerous job opportunities will arise from the need to replace secretaries and administrative assistants who transfer to other occupations, especially exceptionally skilled executive secretaries and administrative assistants who often move into professional occupations. Job opportunities should be best for applicants with extensive knowledge of software applications and for experienced secretaries and administrative assistants. Opportunities also should be very good for those with advanced communication and computer skills. Applicants with a bachelor's degree will be in great demand to act more as managerial assistants and to perform more complex tasks.

Earnings

Median annual earnings of secretaries, except legal, medical, and executive, were \$27,450 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$21,830 and \$34,250. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$17,560, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$41,550. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of secretaries, except legal, medical, and executive in May 2006 were:

Local government	\$30,350
General medical and surgical hospitals.....	28,810
Colleges, universities, and professional schools	28,700
Elementary and secondary schools	28,120
Employment services	26,810

Median annual earnings of executive secretaries and administrative assistants were \$37,240 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$30,240 and \$46,160. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$25,190, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$56,740. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of executive secretaries and administrative assistants in May 2006 were:

Management of companies and enterprises	\$41,570
Local government	38,670
Colleges, universities, and professional schools	36,510
State government.....	35,830
Employment services	31,600

Median annual earnings of legal secretaries were \$38,190 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$29,650 and \$48,520. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$23,870, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$58,770. Medical sec-

retaries earned a median annual salary of \$28,090 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$23,250 and \$34,210. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$19,750, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$40,870.

Salaries vary a great deal, however, reflecting differences in skill, experience, and level of responsibility. Certification in this field may be rewarded by a higher salary.

Related Occupations

Workers in a number of other occupations also type, record information, and process paperwork. Among them are bookkeeping, accounting, and auditing clerks; receptionists and information clerks; communications equipment operators; 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 and administrative assistants 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 and administrative assistants.

For information on the latest trends in the profession, career development advice, and the CPS or CAP 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>

➤ Association of Executive and Administrative Professionals, Suite G-13, 900 South Washington Street, Falls Church, VA 22406-4009. Internet: <http://www.theaeap.com>

Information on the CLSS designation can be obtained from:

➤ Legal Secretaries International Inc., 2302 Fannin Street, Suite 500, Houston, TX 77002-9136.

Internet: <http://www.legalsecretaries.org>

Information on the ALS, PLS, and paralegal certifications are available from:

➤ National Association of Legal Secretaries, Inc., 314 East Third St., Suite 210, Tulsa, OK 74120.

Internet: <http://www.nals.org>