

# THE Guide<sup>4</sup>



## THE EVOLUTION OF THE OFFICE PROFESSIONAL



  
Think



*Specialists in office recruitment*



*The building of a strong office support team is a keystone to success in today's business world. Once categorised as stereotypical secretaries, typists and PAs, the office support professional has been transformed and is now responsible for a comprehensive range of tasks associated with business support – from office management to procurement.*

A clear understanding of the role, definitions, skill sets and career paths of the office support professional is still evolving, yet more change is expected as businesses look for the most effective and efficient way to incorporate new technology into the workplace and combat the effects of the economic recession.

The office professional market was hit hard by cutbacks in 2009 as the recession pushed at least one in three employers into headcount reductions, wage freezes and other cost control measures.

As the economy begins to recover, the demand for office support professionals is increasing at the fastest pace for 12 years<sup>1</sup>, making it the fastest growing sector to emerge from the recession. This growth has been driven by businesses focussing on freeing up the time of their in-house professionals to enable them to concentrate on key business decisions – and in turn generate more revenue. With competent office support professionals needed to enable them to do this, this sector is booming and over 97% of organisations are now acknowledging the crucial importance of these administrative functions for business success.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, employers are increasingly aware that the prosperity of individuals, businesses and the nation could depend, in part, on the acquisition of top-level office support professionals.

<sup>1</sup> RECKPMG Report on Jobs April 2010

<sup>2</sup> The CFA (Council for Administration)



The market for office support professionals is an ever growing one. Back in 2006, the CfA Business & Administration Skills Survey found that there were over 3.6 million workers in administration roles in the UK. This number included many employees who didn't fit into the traditional office-based perception of support professionals, including specialist roles such as legal secretaries, which highlighted the broad spectrum of work that this category covers.

In addition to this, the CfA found that over 18 million workers in the UK made use of administration skills when carrying out their duties – a statistic that illustrates how widely the office professional sector can be viewed.



## ALL IN EMPLOYMENT BY STATUS, OCCUPATION & SEX

Quarter 2 (Apr – Jun) 2009; thousands,  
not seasonally adjusted

Standard Occupational Classification (SOC 2000)	TOTAL	Employees <sup>3</sup>		Self-employed
		Full-time	Part-time	
4131 Filing/other records assistants	147	101	42	*
4150 General office assistants or clerks	638	362	238	26
4215 PAs/secretaries	316	187	109	14
4216 Receptionists	238	96	140	*
4217 Typists	15	*	*	*
9211 Postroom workers, messengers	181	115	55	11
9219 Elementary office occupations n.e.c.	34	21	*	*
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,569</b>	<b>882</b>	<b>584</b>	<b>51</b>

<sup>3</sup> Includes full or part-time

\* Sample size too small for reliable estimate

Source: ONS – Labour Force Survey



The change in the office support professionals market is not just a matter of increasing numbers, but also one of the ways that people work.

As the perceived value of office support professionals has grown, administrators are being asked to take on more and more responsibilities. The CfA survey notes that in the 2004 – 2005 period 40% of administrators undertook support duties for more than 10 people, compared to 38% of respondents in 2002 – 2003 who only supported 3 – 5 people. This continued evolution will have a marked impact on the office support market.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst the demand for support professionals is ever increasing, the ageing “baby boomer” population is approaching retirement and is beginning to reduce working hours to part-time or leaving full-time administration work posts altogether. For some organisations, these phenomena may help create leaner and smarter teams. For others, this means that a huge amount of capability and experience will leave their work in administration over a relatively short period of time.

Currently, administration replacement demand is running at 1.2 million people over the next five years and with the shortfall set to continue, employers will have to invest more in their office support professionals to reduce turnover and keep motivation high.

<sup>4</sup> CfA A Business & Administration skills survey, 2006

*“We were looking for someone that could adapt and grow with the needs of the business.”*

*Underestimating the potential in this role was our first mistake - the right candidate could carve out a role for themselves and become an integral part of the company. Developing skills in business, finances and HR, this candidate’s role has continue to evolve, now with potential to reach director level.”*

**Nik Entwistle,**  
Managing Director, Turn Key



# ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF SUPPORT STAFF

The office professional role has been transformed in the last decade. Managers in any business are expected to be computer literate and easy-to-use online technology has replaced much of the need for traditional secretarial support.

What's more, communication has become much more informal thanks to widespread acknowledgement of emails and texts as acceptable business tools. In the office environment, one of the main effects of these trends has been the shift from support staff allocated to individuals (such as traditional PAs) to more team-orientated support roles.

A manager at the Institute of Qualified Professional Secretaries has commented that:

**“Today’s secretary is more likely to fill a number of different roles including HR, marketing, finance and project work, as well as routine tasks such as diary keeping or mail. As an Executive Assistant, you may be the assistant to the Chief Executive, or even to the whole board of directors, but you will never be regarded as an office dogsbody.”**

Office support professionals are often autonomous and will undertake strategic and complex activities over a wide range of situations. In addition to traditional responsibilities, they are now often responsible for such things as:

- Staff supervision
- Office equipment
- Training budgets
- Advertising
- Recruitment
- Travel arrangements
- Events
- Entertaining
- Staff salaries
- Suppliers
- Implementation and maintenance of regulations

Less formal and hierarchical structures are another feature of recent developments in the office workplace. Experienced secretarial and support professionals have acquired additional expertise in functional activity which has meant that they are able to take on more substantial roles.

For example, the office support professional is increasingly expected to demonstrate appreciation of the function they work in – copying information or passing messages without understanding their significance does not add value to the business. An assistant to a marketing manager is expected to have knowledge of marketing and a financial assistant to be able to manage spreadsheets. The office worker has become a genuine office professional.



*“During my assignments, I’ve seen office support workers gain recognition and suggest process improvements, demonstrating the insight and dedication that temporary office staff can bring to a company. When workloads increase but staff levels remain the same, the importance of the office professional grows and becomes the very heartbeat of any organisation. They play an important part in company growth and should be recognised for the impact that they make.”*

**Andrew Evans**  
Temporary Office Professional



# GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR OFFICE SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS

Acquiring, retaining and developing talent is critical to every organisation's success. Changes in the UK market may now mean that this is even more important for support professionals who have an integral role to play in the rebuilding of businesses bitten by the recession. So how can businesses effectively attract the right support professionals, retain them and ensure productivity?

## 1 EMPLOYER BRANDING

It's important to attract the right type of candidate from the outset – especially in times of economic uncertainty where the need to attract and retain high performers is increased. Employer branding helps you to achieve this. From your website to your advertisements – all these messages help to instantly communicate why talented people would want to join and remain with your organisation. As they're on the front line, your recruitment team must personify the employer brand.

## 2 TOOLS AND TRAINING FOR LINE MANAGERS

Ensure your managers have the tools and training to increase levels of employee satisfaction, commitment and motivation. Are they setting clear smart objectives that tap into the motivators of their staff? Are incentive schemes in place and is there a clear path for career development and progression?

## 3 CONSULT EMPLOYEES

Ensure wherever possible that employees have a voice – through consultative bodies, regular appraisals, attitude surveys and grievance systems. This helps support professionals to feel that they're part of the company and can have an impact on its future. It can also provide dissatisfied employees with a mechanism to sort out problems before they consider resigning.

## 4 CREATE A SUPPORT STAFF NETWORK

Networking with other people in similar roles can help to leverage knowledge. Encourage peer groups of office support professionals to share best practice. It is widely recognised that many employees use the social aspects of the workplace to further their development. Networking will also ensure that basic social needs within the workplace can be met, creating more positive and motivated staff.

## 5 AVOID CULTURE OF 'PRESENTEEISM'

Many people feel obliged to work longer hours than are necessary in order to impress management. Ensure that all your staff know that evaluation of individual commitment is based on results achieved and not hours put in. Flexibility and accommodating individual preferences on working hours can be the key to attracting and retaining the best staff.



*“Having a vast team of support staff, each with a different specialism, seems to be becoming a thing of the past. I have worked with various teams of office support staff members over the past decade and seen this role become increasingly more demanding. Pushed to develop their skills to cover a broad spectrum of talents including finance, HR and business management, the role of office support professional has become not only more challenging, it is now a position heavily relied upon by senior management teams.”*

Michael Moore  
Resource Specialist, Sage

Tate



More change and innovation is likely to be seen in the office over the next ten years – as dramatic perhaps as the shift of the last decade. As an article in HR Magazine stated in October 2009:

“Organisations will be designed to facilitate lightning-quick decision-making. Power will be decentralised. Networked employees will work remotely and flexibly. Creativity will become just as important as productivity, and leaders will switch their focus from barking orders to inspiring great ideas.”

What will this mean for the office support professional? Empowerment and greater freedom or an endless search to track down disappearing colleagues? We certainly know that the role is changing both in responsibility and importance and this trend seems set to continue.

The key attributes of the office support professional – communication and interpersonal skills – will become more important to employers where team sizes have been reduced, workloads are heavy, and a collaborative style and effective team work are essential.

Providing training and skills development for office support professionals could be a priority for employers looking to emerge from the recession as demands for more highly skilled office professionals grow.

According to the Secs Life survey conducted by guardianjobs.co.uk in December 2009, 82% of employers were planning to spend as much or more on training in 2010. These employers will be building on the achievement of 2009 in which 62% of support professionals gained new skills, often “far beyond the traditional admin/secretarial role.”

With technology also likely to continue its profound impact on the office environment and employers searching more effective ways to enhance staff productivity and motivation, greater empowerment of the office support professional is a safe bet for the future.

As the role continues to evolve, what is clear is that the future of the office professional in providing support and enabling change lies at the heart of the potential transformations that could appear.

*At Tate, we have been specialists in office recruitment and support staff for nearly 25 years and can guide you through the recruitment process as well as giving you the best advice to ensure you retain your talent.*

*When you need excellence and expertise, Think Tate.*

*“The role of the traditional one-to-one PA has evolved.*

*Today, a successful PA will work for a team of managers or directors and will competently manage both their own time, and that of the team for whom they are working.”*

Christine Carey,  
Area Manager, Tate



WATERTIGHT  
GUARANTEE

Tate