

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN A SECRETARY AND A LEGAL SECRETARY

Carol Ann Wilson



Introduction

"Secretary" comes from "secretarius," meaning one entrusted with secrets. Through the ages it has come to be defined as *a person whose work is keeping records,*

taking care of correspondence and other writing tasks. The word itself is as versatile as a career secretary. There is an African bird known as the *secretary bird* because of its pen-like crest feathers. The word has also been used to describe an *officer of a company*, an *official in charge of a governmental department*, and a *writing desk*.

In the movie *Teacher's Pet*, starring Doris Day and Clark Gable, Doris Day's character, a night-school journalism instructor, describes the difference between a trade and a profession: "A trade must be learned on the job, while the fundamentals of a profession can be taught." I submit the legal secretary is a mixture of both.

I want to emphasize the importance of any secretary and especially of the *professional* secretary, that career-minded individual, and point out the differences between a secretary in the corporate world and a legal secretary. Both are noble professions. Both are positions of respect. Remarks are often made by employers about both types such as "I cannot do anything without my secretary." And while no one is indispensable, the truly professional secretary comes pretty close.

Similarities

Similar Duties

How are they alike? The executive secretary to an important corporate leader and the secretary

to a busy lawyer have many of the same **duties**, including:

- ◆ Maintaining a complicated calendar, business and personal, with frequent last-minute changes and juggling
- ◆ Making sometimes complicated travel arrangements, business and personal
- ◆ Scheduling conferences, depositions, and other meetings, often preparing minutes or summaries
- ◆ Drafting correspondence, often requiring great initiative, business and personal
- ◆ Serving as a conduit between clients/-customers and the lawyer/executive
- ◆ Serving as a gatekeeper to protect the lawyer/executive
- ◆ Keeping up with tasks handled by others for the boss
- ◆ Any duties that help the boss to multiply herself or himself to clients and customers, in the relentless search for ways to put more than 24 hours in a day

Similar Skills

Likewise, the two professions require many of the same **skills**, including:

- ▶ Handling multiple tasks simultaneously
- ▶ Dictation, transcription, and keyboarding
- ▶ Knowledge of computers, software programs, and office machines
- ▶ Excellent written and oral communication skills, with flawless spelling and grammatical knowledge

- ▶ Specific knowledge (legal knowledge for the legal secretary or knowledge of a particular industry for the executive or corporate secretary)
- ▶ General life skills, as the secretary serves as confidante, Mother Confessor, babysitter, personal shopper, and friend to the boss and his or her family

The Differences

Responses from Veteran Legal Secretaries

In researching this article, I queried experienced legal secretaries around the country, for their feedback on the differences between a secretary and a legal secretary.

Gina Sciuolo, a Pittsburgh legal secretary, comments: "In a nutshell, it would be the area of specialization. A legal secretary can perform the same duties as a secretary, but the technicality of the work makes the difference. The same thing would apply to a secretary working a medical office. I would call that person a 'medical' secretary."

Another career legal secretary, **Peg Stafford** of St. Louis, sums up the differences by describing these traits of a legal secretary:

- Loyal to the attorney/client relationship
- Efficient and educated
- Gentle and patient with clients and their problems
- Assertive when necessary
- Listener extraordinary

- Sensitive to clients and their problems
- Effective in meeting deadlines
- Confidential confidante
- Resilient
- Eager to serve
- Tactful
- Amazingly well organized
- Ready to handle high-pressure situation on a moment's notice
- Yields to stressful situations and last-minute deadlines with a smile.

Norma L. Smith, a certified Professional Legal Secretary in Rockford, Illinois, offers this insight: "Although all good secretaries must have excellent office skills, a legal secretary must also possess compassion and perception as she deals with people

in some of their most difficult times of life, such as divorce, death of a family member, personal injuries, etc. Even preparation of a will can be a scary thing for many individuals, because it makes them face the issue of dying. And a legal secretary must be a 'stickler' for accuracy, because one word out of context or misused can make a huge difference in the outcome of a legal matter."

A detailed personal experience came from **Olivia Johnson**, a legal secretary in Waco, Texas, who is certified as both a Professional Legal Secretary and a Certified Legal Assistant:

"After graduating from high school and spending a couple of semesters in a community college office occupations course, I went to work as an executive secretary in a drug wholesale company. I stayed with the company almost five years. I had a wonderful boss, the company's comptroller, and I thoroughly enjoyed working for him.

"Once I was asked to speak to a high school's Career Day activities. In the Q&A, one student asked if I intended to be an executive secretary until my retirement. I heard myself answering that I did not plan to spend the next 40 years in that field. I had to admit I was surprised as I heard the words, and I realized that the teacher who had invited me to speak was horrified at my response.

"Until that time, I had not given much thought to my future plans. My husband was trying to get through college and my job was our best source of income. Getting by on a young secretary's salary was challenging, and after paying bills, attending classes at night, and working every bit of overtime I could, I really had not taken the time to analyze my life or plan what I intended to do with it.

"On the way back to work that day, I went over that Q&A session in my mind. I knew the job had become boring, although I did respect and love my boss. I felt that I needed to make a decision, but just couldn't, and, as often happens, one was made for me. I was given a "promotion," while being told my work, attendance, attitude, and skills were exceptional, but no raise from my very low pay. I knew that it was time to seek other employment.

"I wanted to become a legal secretary, but I just didn't know how to go about doing it. Fortunately, my first interview turned out to be the dream job for

me. When offered the job, I took it without hesitation, and counted the days until I could 'go to work for lawyers.' That was 17 years ago, and I still work with the same firm.

"For me there are many differences between a secretary and a legal secretary. In the secretarial position, I was bored. There are only so many itineraries to be typed, plane reservations to be made, and minutes of meetings to be transcribed. I remember thinking that anyone in the company could have done those jobs and freed my time for work that took brains! I often felt that I was an extension of my typewriter, that I was not paid to think, and that no one thought I might have anything to add to the job I did. I felt unappreciated, underutilized, and, as I said, bored. I was allowed to meet with our customers once a year at a trade show where I was commanded to work.

"After working as a legal secretary for a relatively short while, I realized there was SO much to learn. I like that—no, I love it. I love to learn, and since the law changes as our world, our philosophies, our society's mores change, there is never an excuse to plead boredom or to think that I have learned it all. I also felt very early on that I was part of the team—whether I was working with a trial lawyer, finding a mistake or problem in an abstract or title commitment, or discovering a new way to track down a debtor who wanted to forget his prior obligations to one of our clients. I loved the challenge and the endless opportunities to explore new horizons. I felt appreciated and respected with each new assignment.

"Since I took the job as a legal secretary so many years ago, I have had several opportunities to speak at Career Day activities. Now, when asked some version of the same question, I answer "Yes, I intend to be a legal secretary for a very long time. It is my chosen career."

Conclusion: My Personal Perspective

The United States Department of Labor estimates that there are 300,000 legal secretaries in the country, and we can expect a million lawyers by 2000. I believe that most of those legal secretaries feel as Gina, Peg, Norma, Olivia, and I do about the skills and duties required of the legal secretary.

I have been a legal secretary for 30 years, in three states, and for me, the major difference between a secretary and a legal secretary involves ethics. The legal secretary must have a strong knowledge of ethical matters and what can get the attorney into trouble. Executives in the corporate world do not have the added onus of a license that can be lost or suspended. The work of an attorney for his client rises to a much higher level than the corporate executive, and therefore, so does the secretary's. But the legal secretary is not licensed, and if a sanctionable error is made by the secretary, it is the lawyer who is sanctioned. Thus the greater need for the lawyer not only to supervise employees and to know what is being done in his or her name, but to employ the quality, career legal secretary. The career legal secretary assumes and shares such responsibilities with the lawyer, helping the lawyer to meet ethical requirements.

Not to be omitted is caring: caring about the lawyer, caring about the clients, caring about the legal secretary's own professional development, and caring about the legal profession and the legal secretarial profession. Many legal secretaries have put husbands or wives through college, and some are the major source of family income. The true professional does it out of love for the profession.

Finally, professional, career-minded legal secretaries are treasured by Corporate America as well. An employer is impressed to see legal experience on a résumé. The legal secretary: a proud breed; an honorable career; a vital part of the team that delivers quality legal services.

Carol Ann Wilson founded Legal Secretaries International Inc. and lives in Houston, Texas. She holds several professional certifications.