

Secretaries have a stepping-stone

Computers permit ambitious work; assistants can move up and out

BY TAMI LUHBY

Joanne Santangelo spends her days at Brundage Story & Rose maintaining investment accounts, contacting clients and addressing their concerns. But Ms. Santangelo is not a partner or even an associate. As an assistant to a partner, she started at the Manhattan investment counseling firm 16 years ago by typing, filing and answering the telephone.

Over the years, computers have allowed her to complete more of her mundane tasks of record keeping and preparing meeting presentations more quickly, leaving her time to work with clients. And her company has encouraged her growth.

"If they see you are willing to take on more responsibility, they will certainly give it to you," she says.

No longer trapped at their typewriters, executive assistants, who are predominantly female, have seen their duties, opportunities for advancement and salaries stretch. In New York, experienced, educated assistants can have their pick of posts, commanding salaries between \$35,000 and \$70,000, recruiters say. As a result, more college graduates and men are seeking these jobs as an entrée into a corporation.

"People can move up and out of executive assistant positions," says Dick Brody, president of Manhattan-based ASA Personnel Inc., which annually places several hundred people in these jobs. "They are intelligent, learn the product and the company, and are capable of getting to the next level."

With executives using word processors and e-mail to write memos and letters, their support staffs are called on to do research, contact clients, create presentations and sometimes even speak on their behalf.

Independent decisions

"These people are making decisions for executives rather than just doing what the boss told them to do," says Alan Kramer, president of Kramer Executive Resources in Manhattan.

Some industries, such as advertising and publishing, historically have promoted from the mailroom. Now, some people who want to enter other fields, especially sales, marketing and human resources, are taking executive assistant positions so they can work on projects and gain experience, says Claire Zukerman, president of Syosset, L.I.-based Corporate Search Inc. Her firm annually fills about two dozen executive assistant positions in New York City firms.

But the loosening of the pink collar does not mean that executive assistants have stopped typing memos, getting coffee, sending gifts and running errands for their bosses. The job description depends on the company and the executive, according to assistants and recruiters. The long hours with no overtime pay can be very frustrating for some, says Ellen Bravo, co-director of 9to5, National Association of Working Women, in Milwaukee.

"People in the organization know the assistant is running the show and the person to go to," she says. "But the assistant never gets the recognition or compensation."

Demanding proper treatment

Executives, particularly women and baby boomers, are growing more sensitive to their assistants' personal needs, says Ms. Bravo, whose organization has a New York City chapter. And the assistants are learning to demand proper treatment, including freedom from sexual harassment.

To prepare up-and-coming executive assistants for corporate life, Manhattan's Taylor Business Institute created an internship program in 1995, says Academic Dean Rose Ann Black. Secretarial schools like Taylor have found that they need to adapt their curricula to meet the changing needs of the job market. They teach students not only word processing, but also spreadsheet, database and presentation programs.

Taylor has added case studies and problem-solving exercises. The Katharine Gibbs School, with locations in Manhattan and on Long Island, builds teamwork skills by asking students, about 10% of whom are men, to work on group projects.

Coleen McManus is one executive assistant who has always viewed her position as a path to power. One semester shy of a bachelor's degree in accounting, Ms. McManus left college to answer telephones and type memos for the president of the World Boxing Association's North American division in Philadelphia. Within a few years, she was organizing bouts, conventions and ceremonies as the U.S. coordinator.

When she was hired at Manhattan-based Adrienne Vittadini Enterprises Inc. two years ago, the clothing design company told her that a promotion was possible. As Ms. Vittadini's executive assistant, Ms. McManus answers and prioritizes calls and letters, as well as handles the design team's travel expenses, often converting and reconciling five different currencies. And she learns all about the business when executives report to her boss.

"I have more responsibility and contacts than entry-level jobs," says Ms. McManus, who has her eye on the licensing and sales departments. "As an assistant, you are getting in at the top." ■

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