

Secretaries

a new breed for new era

Secretarial roles have certainly evolved in the 21st century, writes **Fran Metcalf**

GONE are the days of secretaries making tea, taking dictation and collecting the boss's dry cleaning.

In the 21st century, secretaries are called "executive assistants" and instead of "barely getting by" as Dolly Parton sang in the film *Nine to Five*, they're earning better incomes than many other professionals.

In Sydney and Melbourne, where many global companies have head offices, executive and personal assistants are earning six-digit incomes.

In Brisbane, the going rate ranges from \$60,000 up to \$120,000, with most earning between \$65,000-\$85,000, according to Russo Recruitment general manager Denise Love.

It is no longer sufficient to have a diploma from secretarial college or a shorthand certificate.

Most executive assistants (EAs) and personal assistants (PAs) now have commerce or business degrees and those at the top of the game have advanced information technology skills.

"My take on it is that secretaries have gone from being the servant to being a true business partner who forms part of the management team," Love says.

"I think technology has driven a lot of that.

"Executives are very self-sufficient now with the introduction of the internet and email and the Blackberry.

"There's no longer a significant need for shorthand or dictation. There's still a need for a support person but their role has changed."

And that role is now a profession in itself, Salene Gallagher says.

Executive assistant to the chief executive of IT company qutbluebox, Gallagher liaises with senior managers on behalf of her boss, prepares documents for board and executive meetings, and delegates work to other employees.

"In the US, many people will take a role as an EA so they can get close and

see what happens behind doors of executives in business," she says. "I'm not expected to make tea or coffee. An EA is expected to delegate and be the ears and voice of the chief executive officer."

Voted by her peers at Martin College in 1995 as most likely to get a good job, Gallagher has climbed the corporate ladder over the past decade or more.

She started out as an assistant to the general manager of a finance company in Woolloongabba, before moving on to become a senior manager at the University of Cambridge in England.

The 33-year-old took her present job after returning to work in Brisbane in October last year.

It's not a six-figure income but, with bonus payments, it won't fall far short.

Despite the ever-evolving differences in secretarial roles over the decades, Martin College director of student recruitment Sarah Barrow says there are still similarities in the kind of attributes sought by employers.

"Businesses still want PAs who have the ability to communicate clearly in verbal and written form," Barrow says.

"Presentation and telephone manner is still very important, too.

"And we still teach keyboarding skills because being able to type is an extremely important skill set in the modern environment.

"But employers are also looking for that next level up, for people who are well organised and can organise other people as well as those who have some basic finance management skills.

"They want them to use a spreadsheet to manage a budget and to be able to work within a budget. That's pretty much crucial."

Barrow says many students who graduate with an events diploma end up working as EAs and PAs in organisations that require a lot of

conferences, meetings and seminars to be staged.

"It used to be much more about how fast they could type, how good their shorthand was and their presentation skills but I think the expectations now are a lot higher," she says.

"They want people who are capable of operating very autonomously."

Love says those traditional secretarial roles of office administration, setting up meeting rooms and organising catering are now carried out largely by administrative assistants who earn \$42,000 to \$58,000.

"The senior person is the diary manager and that can be complex in itself," Love says.

"They are a research assistant, they gather the data and get statistics ready for documents and meetings and they sit in on board meetings. They are integral to the business's strategy.

"They would advise on resourcing, sort out administrative support as needed and organise all of the travel arrangements for the executive.

"These particular people are accessible 24/7 because they are working for very senior executives who travel and they need to be available at all time zones.

"They are really part of the management team. It's not 9am to 5pm."

Love says some EAs and PAs go on to become general or operational managers but many are happy to be part of the executive team without the stress and strains that come with holding the top jobs.

Gallagher, however, aspires to climb higher. She took a pay cut when accepting her present job because she's returned to university to study psychology and her workplace is conveniently located at the Queensland University of Technology's Kelvin Grove campus.

Nevertheless, she says she's adding to her experience.

"It's a very good step if I do go back to a senior management role to have that hands-on experience of working one on one with a CEO," she says.

'An EA is expected to . . . be the ears and voice of the chief executive officer'



PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT:
Executive assistant Salene
Gallagher with her boss Michael
Finney. Picture: Annette Dew



CHANGING TIMES: Helen Parkin first worked as a junior secretary in 1966.

Picture: David Kapernick

From finger clicking to mouse clicks

WHEN Helen Parkin took her first job as a junior secretary in 1966, one of her managers used to click his fingers when he needed her to take shorthand.

Later, in 1977 when she was PA to the finance director of Decca Records in London, she was sent to Oxford Circus to line up for tickets to *Star Wars* for him.

“I stood for three hours in the cold,” she remembers.

Office life is very different now for semi-retired Parkin, who works casually for only six months a year.

After more than 40 years working as an EA and PA to senior managers at companies like Thomas Cook, Channel Ten and John Deere, the 60-year-old now chooses her jobs, the most recent being for a director of a state government organisation.

“I manage his diary and keep most of the calls away from him,” she says.

“I monitor his email inbox to make sure urgent things are taken care of and I manage his calendar for meetings.

“You have to work alongside your

boss but you need to be one step ahead, too,” she says.

When Parkin first started as a secretary, she used carbon copies for office memorandums.

“The Telex machine was fantastic when it came in,” she says.

“You’d get fantastic data from the other side of the world. Then came the fax machine and now video conferencing and email.

“It’s wonderful,” she says.

“Today, you feel you are a well-respected part of the team. We are all equals and we work together.”