Objectives of Secretarial Training

by

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In the Private Business School

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BEFORE there can be any real discussion of this subject, it is necessary to define what is meant by the term "secretary." In an article on "Selling in the New York Manner" in Printer's Ink, October 18, there appeared the following statement:

"Again there is a lack of the old-fashioned stenographers, but the want-ad columns show plenty of 'private secretaries' looking for jobs."

This is clearly a dig at the popular and almost universal use of the word "secretary" instead of "stenographer," and it is an indication of the reaction that naturally has followed the rather loose use of the term "secretary." It also suggests the necessity for a more accurate use of the term, in justice to the schools which are really giving a secretarial course, and to the products of these schools.

What Is Secretarial Work
Where the line of demarcation is between stenographic and secretarial work is very difficult to define with any precision. Nearly all stenographic work embraces some secretarial work. The outstanding fact is that in the secretarial field, as in every other department of business, there are gradations from the high-grade stenographer, with some secretarial duties, to the confidential and personal assistant, with practically the rank of an executive.

The span between the lowest and highest secretarial status can be materially shortened by professional training beyond that which is considered essential to high-grade stenographic work. In brief, it may be said that the private secretary to a business executive is a confidential assistant who cares for all the details
of his work, stands as a buffer between him and those who would deprive him of his time and the opportunity for constructive thinking, and generally assists him with the handling of important matters under consideration. As soon as the stenographer steps out of the technical field of shorthand work by taking on additional tasks that are better performed by him, tasks which involve initiative and decision as well as technical ability in performance, he emerges from the stenographic into the secretarial class. Unfortunately, when the word “secretary” superseded the word “stenographer,” many schools merely adopted the new term without enriching the course of training to make the term really applicable.

There has been a change in the name without a change in the content or purpose of the course. Nevertheless, it is certain that the better business schools have a very clear idea of the distinction, not only in the terms but in the type of training essential to success in either field. In the schools that honestly differentiate between the two terms, the secretarial course practically begins where the stenographic course ends.

Different from Stenographic Work
My own conception of the two types of work is that there is just as much difference between stenographic and secretarial training as there is between bookkeeping and accountancy training. The secretary must have all the skill that first-class stenographers have and, in addition, he must know almost as much as the “boss” knows about everything, and considerably more about some things. In actual experience a secretary’s knowledge must extend over such a wide range that it would not be profitable to discuss the question here. It involves education from the grammar school up. Most of this knowledge is the result of experience, experience in many activities, with highly specialized knowledge of others.

The Tools of the Occupation
There are certain subjects necessary in the secretary’s training, and in the first-class stenographer’s training, that are fundamental. They furnish the tools of his work. They are shorthand, typewriting, and the English language. Formerly, secretaries were not required to per-
form stenographic work. Today expert ability in this direction is essential, and the more capable the secretary is as a shorthand writer, the more his services are in demand and the better are his opportunities for the service that means advancement. Numerous instances might be cited in which superior shorthand ability has been the deciding factor in securing a really big secretarial position. Typewriting is hardly less important, for typewriting is the medium through which the skilled shorthand writer ultimately shows his ability.

The shorthand writer deals with the English language continually. It is his stock in trade; he must know it as he knows his shorthand; every detail of it, from the mechanics of it—punctuation, spelling, capitalization—up to and including literary appreciation. He must be able to write it. His judgment of language values must be practically faultless.

Now, these fundamentals are teachable subjects, as we know from experience. They have formed the basis of stenographic classes from the beginnings of commercial education. For purely stenographic work they form a complete equipment, technically, as we can expect. But they are only the beginnings.

Laboratory Practice

The development of a high degree of skill in the basic subjects is a primary essential in laying a foundation for secretarial practice. These tools must be used over and over again practically, in laboratory work, until the technique of their use is automatic. This means a period of seasoning in which the student puts into practice repeatedly the theory of both shorthand and typewriting that he has learned in the earlier stages of his work. He must be able to write shorthand very rapidly and transcribe it with accuracy. He must have developed such ability in reading his shorthand accurately that he is able to use to the fullest extent whatever typing skill he has. He must be able to make immediate decisions regarding English. In other words, during this period the student must be made a first-class stenographer; then he is ready for a super-structure of secretarial work. The secretary deals with situations; his tools are only adjuncts.
Secretarial Background

The third objective in the secretarial course is to give the student a background and the materials for secretarial problems that will develop technical ability. The required subjects in such a course are: elementary, intermediate and secretarial bookkeeping; business arithmetic; rapid calculation; business writing; commercial lettering; commercial law; shorthand theory, dictation and practice; typewriting; transcription; business English; spelling and word study; business correspondence and composition; office practice and machines; office management; business organization; business ethics and decorum; secretarial technique; economics, and perhaps commerce and industry.

It is realized that every secretarial position is different from other secretarial positions. The nature of the work that a secretary will do is controlled entirely by the kind of organization he finds himself in and the kind of man he serves. These positions are just as varied as personalities. Nevertheless, leaving out the purely technical phases, the mechanics of business are pretty much the same. Banking is the same for all industries that use the bank; transportation is the same; business forms the same; business procedure the same, and so on. Since the student does not know and we do not know what kind of a position he will undertake, it is necessary, as an objective in the secretarial course, to include subjects that are of practically universal application.

Examples of the kind of accurate information which the secretary must possess might be mentioned: the use of business papers that relate to the records of a business; bills, invoices, statements, forms of remittance; transportation of both goods and products; banking; office appliances; business and legal papers; alphabetizing and filing; business literature; the business library; business graphs; postal information. The fact should not be overlooked that both secretarial and stenographic service involve much of clerical work.

Other subjects that are given attention are: attractive forms of business letters; handling dictation effectively; organizing transcription; effective handling of correspondence; receiving and giving instructions; directing the work of
stenographers; editing dictated matter; briefing; interviewing callers; organizing memoranda; office organization; business organization. Problems revolving around all these activities may be drawn from actual experience and presented for solution to the secretarial student. The whole objective of secretarial training is not to stuff the student with a mass of detached information, but to tie up whatever information he receives with actual problems that call for an effort to find the solution.

Personality

Running through the entire course there is one outstanding feature, the development of secretarial power and of personal qualities that contribute to success. These are all teachable subjects. Some students naturally get much more out of them than others. The problems and the work performed in solving them will not create brains, but they will assist the student in organizing whatever brains he may have, develop potential abilities, make him see more, and give him power to do more. That, after all, is the main objective in education, to develop the individual.

Such subjects as office organization and business organization are, I believe, necessary in a secretarial course. The secretary is a potential executive. Unless he knows something of the business structure, how it functions, what his job leads to, he is merely marking time. His services may be of unlimited value as a stenographer, but he will never reach the secretarial realm.

Future Growth

The secretarial course should be organized with the future business growth of the student in view. It should give him a background for enlarging his usefulness in a secretarial position, or for seeing and working his way up to a position of greater service. The fundamentals of education have been succinctly stated by Mr. W. P. Burris of the University of Cincinnati, and they apply with striking force to the objectives in secretarial training:

Education is growth.

The means of growth is experience, our own or that of some one else, past or present.
But it must be experience about which we think and with regard to which we make decisions that we can or cannot verify.

To the extent that we are able to verify our decisions with regard to experience it has meaning.

Increasing power to get the meaning out of experience is what we mean by growth.

And growth is education.

Thus the circle is complete, and the extent of our education is, therefore, bounded by our opportunities for experience and our capacity for thinking.

To supply or to utilize such opportunities, and to train human beings in making the most of them through careful thinking, is the two-fold task which is set before the teacher.

The teacher who consciously and skillfully accomplishes this task is more than a teacher. Such a one is an educator.

These are the fundamentals in education. All else is accessory.

The secretarial training course should provide the training not only for effective service, but for growth in its truest sense, and I believe that this idea is emphasized by all schools that honestly endeavor to give a secretarial course when they announce it in their catalogs.

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