**OVERVIEW ON ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANTS**

***Why are administrative assistants or secretaries needed?***

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As an administrative assistant, you are hired to relieve your busy employer of a great deal of work, especially the details of office procedure and other matters that do not require your employer’s personal involvement. You’ll act as a liaison between your boss and the rest of the company. Sometimes you’ll act as a buffer. Depending on the size of the company, you may also be called on to perform tasks normally outside the secretarial role in sales, banking, billing, payroll, accounting, advertising, public relations, purchasing, and more. Everything you do for your employer must duplicate as closely as possible what he or she would do if not absorbed in work that couldn’t be delegated. Every businessperson dreams of having the perfect administrative assistant, and every administrative assistant dreams of having the perfect boss.

**WHAT DO EMPLOYERS WANT?**

It’s helpful to know what an employer expects of a “perfect administrative assistant” so that you can present yourself at your best during both the job interview and those critical first weeks on the job. Here are a few of the most important qualities: Punctuality, dependability, ability to learn, willingness to follow instructions, loyalty and confidentiality etc.

***PUNCTUALITY.***An employer wants an administrative assistant who is consistently punctual and always on hand during office hours. An administrative assistant who continually arrives even a few minutes late or who is ill frequently can cause havoc in a busy office. The employer knows from experience that such an administrative assistant may not be truly interested in the work. This person will be passed over or terminated in favor of someone with greater respect for the job—an administrative assistant who is always punctual and always there when needed.

***DEPENDABILITY****.* An employer considers the applicant’s disposition and personality, trying to judge whether he or she is dependable. For example, would the candidate rush home at precisely five o’clock despite an office crisis, or would he or she take enough responsibility to volunteer to remain after hours if an emergency arises?

***ABILITY TO LEARN.***An employer wants to know the extent of the applicant’s education—not only formal programs and degrees but also self-instruction and single courses. This information indicates the applicant’s willingness and capacity for learning. For example, an employer may hope that you know the specific computer software the company already uses but not be too concerned if you aren’t Familiar with it if you show the potential to learn quickly.

***WILLINGNESS TO FOLLOW INSTRUCTIONS.***An employer wants a candidate who follows instructions carefully and willingly. Of course, a good administrative assistant will soon take initiative and perform certain tasks differently to save time or improve results. But the administrative assistant who always demands complete control may ultimately become unwilling to follow instructions, debating or questioning every one of the boss’s directives. Though intelligent input from an administrative assistant is prized, an employer usually prefers not to argue points that he or she has already decided. The employer is concerned with more important matters than explaining all the reasons for pursuing a particular policy. Therefore, the employer looks for an administrative assistant who will execute a decision no matter how many alternatives may seem obvious, or no matter what a former boss did in the same situation. In other words, the employer wants someone whose personality will be an asset rather than a handicap.

***LOYALTY AND CONFIDENTIALITY.***Although these qualities are impossible to discover during an interview alone, every boss wants his or her administrative assistant to possess them. In an office, there is nothing more unwelcome than the “human sieve” who constantly chatters about every conversation heard, spreads idle rumors like wildfire, and must constantly be screened from confidential projects and information. No matter how efficient, how educated, and how experienced that administrative assistant is, his or her employment will be short-lived.

***AND SOMETHING ELSE.***A keen employer wants more in a prospective administrative assistant than these general qualifications. During an extended interview, the employer will be looking for quick-wittedness, flexibility, commitment to work, a certain quality and level of conversation, and a sense of courtesy.

**YOUR WORKSTATION**

The location and conditions of where you do your day-to-day work can be critical to how effectively you perform. Whether or not you have input on the physical placement of your workstation, your desk and immediate workspace are yours to organize in a way that makes you comfortable and allows you to be as productive as possible. Your immediate workspace may include a desk, chairs, files, bookshelves, credenza, and portable tables. As you arrange these items, plan a layout that considers your work habits as well as the traffic patterns for yourself, other employees, and clients. Here are just a few factors to consider:

***Desk chair****.* Your chair should help promote good posture and back support, and it should be adjustable so you will not tire quickly.

***Lighting.***Proper lighting is highly important in any office. Your work area should have sufficient lighting to avoid causing you eyestrain and headaches yet be positioned to minimize glare on your computer monitor.

***Desk****.* Your desk should be large enough to hold the office supplies and equipment you work with most often and to provide a clear area on which to work. Keep your most often used supplies and equipment, (such as your telephone, memo pad, in and-out box, and stapler), within easy reach when you are seated at your desk. Any reference books that you use frequently should also be easy to reach, as well as a desk reference organizer. A desk organizer with slots is useful to store various work-in-progress folders so they can be quickly found when needed.

***Supplies****.* In your own desk, keep enough frequently used supplies to last for a week. At the beginning of each week, restock your supply. Neatly arrange these materials in drawer organizers, small boxes, or other containers. Store ink pads upside down.

***Computer****.* Your computer should be on a surface apart from your desk, preferably its own desk or table. In any case, you should be able to fit your legs under this surface comfortably as you work. Power cords should be kept out of the way, so you will not inadvertently disconnect them with your feet. Multiple power cables can be connected together with twist-ties. Besides a computer, keyboard, monitor, and printer, your computer workstation will most likely also be equipped with a mouse, a good-quality mouse pad for extra traction, a modem or network card for communications and file sharing, a hard disk drive, an external storage drive, DVD-ROM storage system, printer, and software reference manuals. Other useful accessories to help organize and protect this equipment include plastic dust covers for both the computer and keyboard when they are not in use, a computer fan to prevent overheating, an antiglare monitor cover to reduce eye- strain, and acoustical hoods for printers. All expensive office equipment such as computers, monitors, and printers should be equipped with a surge protector. If you work for a small company, you may have to arrange all these elements so they can also be used by fellow employees without interfering with your other work. Office Supplies Depending on the size of the company and your own responsibilities, you may have to order office supplies for yourself, your department, or the entire business.

**REFERENCE WORKS**

Every office should have a minimum number of reference works and other sources of information. These are invaluable in writing, taking dictation, and transcribing, and will help you improve your work by enlarging your knowledge of the subjects covered in correspondence or reports. By telephoning a specific question to the reference department of your local public library, you can often obtain the information you need or gather advice on how it may be found, but try to avoid problems by having good reference books in the office. The book you are likely to consult most often will be an abridged dictionary, and it should be on your desk. There are a number of good dictionaries. The one recommended here is *Merriam-Webster’s* *Collegiate Dictionary* because it contains most of the information an administrative assistant requires for daily work: spelling, syllabication, pronunciation, meaning, usage, derivation, and even synonyms in many cases. If you do most of your work on a computer, you may elect to use a software dictionary. These programs can be installed on your computer and allow you to look up word spellings, definitions, synonyms, and antonyms with the click of a mouse. If you have an Internet connection that is always on, you can use an online dictionary. Dictionary.com is an excellent online resource that allows you to look up words from within a word-processing document by typing a special combination of keys on the keyboard.

**Work Planning** The first thing to do when you arrive at the office every day should be to air the rooms and regulate the heat or air conditioning (unless it’s set on a permanent basis by building maintenance). Then arrange your desk for maximum efficiency, and replenish your supplies. Prepare your notebook and pencils for taking phone messages or to be ready if your employer gives you a task that requires taking notes. Consult your desk calendar or your computer’s calendar to be sure you’re aware of all you must do during the day. Check your list of recurring matters: appointments, meetings, payroll dates, bill payments, and tax or insurance deadlines. Give your employer a reminder list of appointments and other activities, and prepare any material from the files he or she will need. As part of your normal daily routine, try to order your activities in the most productive way. When you have to leave your desk to run an errand, for example, do other errands at the same time. Whenever possible, use the telephone instead of delivering a message in person (unless, of course, your employer asks you to do so). You may also use email. If you have tasks that involve mailing or shipping, plan them with pickup and delivery times in mind. Maintain a daily To-Do list on paper or in your computer, and check off each item as it is accomplished. When new projects come in, try to complete them as quickly as possible. Prioritize your work. If you have several ongoing projects, and a new one comes in, ask your employer which one has the highest priority. Each evening before you leave the office, make a list of what you need to do the following workday. Then put away all of your work and work-in-progress files, either in your desk drawers or in a filing cabinet. Work that is especially sensitive, such as client lists or accounting records should be put away in a locked file cabinet. Your regular routine includes keeping your work area clean. Clean out your desk drawers periodically. Your computer and other office equipment should be cleaned using a slightly damp towel. Compressed air in a can is useful for blowing dusts off your computer keyboard and monitor screen. Disk-drive cleaning kits use a special diskette to clean the internal working parts in addition to maintaining your immediate area, schedule regular servicing for all office equipment as part of a preventive maintenance program. You do not want to wait for equipment to break down in the middle of a big project with a firm deadline. Here, the old adage is so important: An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Finally, always be thinking of ways you can improve your own performance and the efficiency of the office. Look for problems, and try to find ways to solve them. An orderly, smoothly running business has a greater chance for success, and your company’s success will help ensure your own.

**DICTATION AND TRANSCRIPTION**

Besides storing notebooks and pens in your own desk, keep a notebook, pencil, and pen in an inconspicuous place in your boss’s office so you’ll always be ready to take dictation, even if you’ve just looked in to announce a caller or deliver a message. You will save your boss valuable time, since you won’t have to retreat to your own desk for supplies. Each day, when you begin dictation, first write the date at the top of the notebook page. When the dictation is over, write the date once more at the end, and draw a line across the page.

***Dictation Equipment***

In many offices, administrative assistants do not take dictation or use shorthand. Instead, the employer uses a digital recorder. These machines save you the job of taking dictation before transcribing the letter.

While your employer is dictating into the recorder, you can finish other tasks that would otherwise have to be neglected. In addition, some employers have difficulty dictating to another person but can speak into a machine with ease; therefore, their dictation is actually easier to comprehend this way. The digital recorders connect to a computer in order to transfer the audio file for transcription.

After transcription of your notes, be sure to read over what you’ve typed. If there is even one error, it’s better for you to find it rather than another person. With computers, corrections can be made in a second, and you can produce a perfect, well-spaced, and balanced page. As you proof your work, check to make sure the transcription makes sense. Are there any inconsistencies to references? Is the grammar, punctuation, and formatting correct? Have you used the correct words? And of course, run a spell-checker and proof the document for typos.

**Your Employer's Office**

Some employers consider their offices sacred ground that is not to be touched; others appreciate having their assistants dust and straighten up. You’ll soon learn your own boss’s preferences. If he or she doesn’t mind, start by stacking the files being consulted and replacing those already consulted in the cabinet. Ask, however, before removing papers or documents from your boss’s desk, especially those you have noticed there for quite some time. Discretion is always necessary. You must not overstep your role by touching or mentioning papers that your employer considers personal or private. In addition, many employers maintain their own, unique filing system atop their desks and will advise their administrative assistant not to touch those stacks unless absolutely necessary. One such necessity may be if the boss telephones from out of the office and asks you to retrieve a letter or document from atop the desk. If this happens, turn the stack to the side at the point you found the letter, so that you can later replace It exactly where it was. When you make appointments for your employer, record them on both your boss’s calendar and your own. Be sure to remind your employer of these appointments—even though they’re clearly on the calendar—so that he or she won’t schedule too much work, for example, on the morning of a conference.

**The Intangibles**

Besides performing the usual office duties, all administrative assistants encounter many situations that are a test of character, judgment, and memory. The administrative assistant must know exactly what the employer wants kept confidential. In some instances, your employer may frankly explain when something is not for public consumption, but do not assume otherwise if he or she says nothing. When someone asks you about a confidential matter, it should never be necessary to lie. A graceful “I couldn’t say” is sufficient, especially in response to those who understand and respect your position. An administrative assistant must exercise self-control every moment, even when courtesy is strained. While on the job, you are not living your personal life but, rather, representing your employer. Because of this, you cannot succumb to mood swings or to criticism of those around you. You must always think before speaking and keep yourself open like an impersonal channel for the fulfillment of your role as administrative assistant. Think of how a diplomat must act while representing his or her country in a foreign land. A great many little matters between an administrative assistant and his or her boss will be left unmentioned by them. In a good working relationship, a type of telepathy develops between employer and administrative assistant. Their understanding of each other contributes to their mutual success.

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