



Power Play

Are you responsible for more than your job description says? Does your supervisor understand and appreciate how much you do? Do you save the company money in many ways? Are you compensated at a level commensurate with your contributions? Can you easily articulate what you do and how you do it?

The new economy requires office professionals be facilitators, resource managers, innovators, technologists, and complex problem solvers. Yet, in many cases, an administrative professional's job description reads like something out of the last century, when secretaries were expected to sit at their typewriters awaiting the next assignment.

Part of the problem is defining the office professional's position. Each company defines job titles in different ways. In one office, an administrative assistant may do entry-level work, while in another company, he or she may manage the entire office. The office professional field now represents a wide range of occupations centered around the categories of general office jobs, specialized office jobs, and administrative management jobs. For example:

- **General office jobs:** data entry operator, word processor, office assistant, switchboard/receptionist, and secretary.
- **Specialized office jobs:** accounting assistant, customer service representative, desktop publisher, human resources specialist, marketing assistant, and meetings and event planner.
- **Administrative management jobs:** administrative assistant, executive assistant, office manager, and administrative services.

Nearly five million office professionals are employed today, and 300,000 new

As companies struggle to fill jobs with qualified staff, now is the time for administrative staff to articulate their roles and demand recognition and remuneration

By Barbara Lea and Melanie Gadener

jobs will be created nationally by 2003, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. And, there's a serious shortage of workers to fill these positions. The basic law of economics says high demand and short supply will bring a higher price. Now is the time to demonstrate why office professionals deserve that higher price—both in recognition and remuneration.

Study Defines Job Title

The Office Administration Advisory Board at West Valley College in Saratoga, California, decided to research the administrative professional occupation. The members of the group identified a strong need to benchmark non-exempt office professional jobs. With company downsizing and the loss of many mid-management positions, the responsibilities of office professionals have expanded tremendously, often without additional training, pay, or recognition.

The advisory board secured a research grant endowed by the Carl D. Perkins vocational and Applied Technology Education Act to review this issue and titled the study *Developing Performance Standards and Measures for Office Professionals*. As the group structured the study, it decided to focus on one job title—the senior-level administrative assistant.

After extensive discussion, the group decided on the following job description for administrative assistant, developed in the 1999 NOVA Private Industry Council Job Training Consortium Labor Market Information Study:

"Administrative assistants aid executives by coordinating, analyzing, and improving office services, such as personnel, budget, and operative practices. They

analyze personnel requirements, study methods of improving performance standards, and analyze jobs for wage- and salary adjustments and promotions. They analyze budgetary requirements and expenditures and study methods to implement cost reduction. They analyze operating practices and create new systems or revise established procedures to simplify and improve reporting procedures, workflow, recordkeeping systems, forms con-

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trol, office layout, or suggestion systems. They interpret operating policies, prepare reports with recommendations for solutions of administrative problems, and answer correspondence. They may direct services, such as maintenance, repair, supplies, and mail." (www.novapic.org)

Three executive-level office professionals were chosen as subject matter experts (SMEs) for the study.

- They held the titles executive assistant, office manager, and administrative support assistant. Two had also earned the Certified Professional Secretary (CPS) rating.
- They demonstrated similar levels of expertise.
- They made comparable organizational contributions.

- They supervised their own support staff.

- They reported to managers with titles such as CEO, vice president, controller, division chief, and assistant division chief.

- Their range of experience was 10 to 28 years.

- They held jobs that frequently changed structure throughout the course of the nine-month study. Two were promoted during the study.

- Their compensation packages included one or all of the following: stock options, spot bonuses, annual bonuses, and/or supplemental vacation days.

- One was employed by a Fortune 50 computing and imaging company; another, NASA's Center for Excellence for Information Technology, and the third, a start-up company of systems integrators.

After much investigation, the group agreed no one tool would accurately describe the SMEs' occupation. In the study, 129 occupation titles taken from eight occupational classifications were examined. The tools ultimately used to complete the study were:

- Work Keys Profiles (www.act.org/workkeys), based on the historically useful *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*.

- O*NET Database (www.doleta.gov/programs/onet), an occupational information network developed by the Department of Labor to provide a comprehensive database system that offers a framework for exploring the world of work, using descriptions of the worker and the requirements of the work to describe an occupation.

- Productivity Plus Profiles, based on the new O*Net Database, developed during the course of this research project, and available on the project Web site.



In addition, questionnaires, one-on-one and group interviews, skill assessments, and focus group meetings were used in the research process.

Value and Contributions Identified

Although the SMEs had difficulty articulating their own value and contributions, their managers did not. After systematically analyzing all 10 areas of the jobs held by the SMEs, the managers concluded SMEs spent only five to 20 percent of their time on executive secretary/administrative assistant tasks. The balance of their time was spent on middle management activities or working as individual contributors.

Consider some of the key results (for complete profiles and case studies, visit the project Web site):

- The SMEs provided 10 primary services with 30 interrelated activities including data analysis, process management, administrative management, human resources management, and information and technology management.



- They performed 42 corresponding tasks or individual actions on a regular basis including analyzing price proposals, conducting classes, consulting with customers, monitoring contract performance, formulating budgetary reports, interpreting policies, and recruiting and coaching employees.

- In each organization, the SMEs and their managers quickly identified important groups of internal and external customers, partners, and suppliers affected by the SMEs' work.

- The SMEs and their managers easily established how each SME's work influenced organizational goals such as customer satisfaction, learning and growth, process improvement, and financial results.

- Thirty-four cross-functional skills were identified that combine learning processes, social interactions, complex problem solving, technology, and resource management—all of which the SMEs used regularly. A high level of proficiency was required in many areas, particularly social interactions and technology.

- Detailed performance development plans did not exist. The SMEs had annual performance reviews that included standard company ratings in relation to compensation plans. But they did not have comprehensive, measurable development plans attached to specific areas of their jobs showing new objectives and how they link to customers, supplementary recognition, skill development, and necessary resources.

As part of the study, new performance management plans were implemented. The managers were very supportive and readily committed to added compensation for achieving objectives on the new plans.

Communicate with Confidence

The time is ripe for making significant changes in your individual work environment. Managers and human resource departments are finally ready to listen due to the growing shortage of qualified workers. But office professionals must take the initiative to accurately communicate with confidence what they do, why they do it, and how they should be compensated.

If analyzing your job seems too complicated, take a look at a tool developed by the study group—the *Performance Analysis Workbook for Administrative Management Jobs* (download the workbook at www.officeprofessionals.org). Keep in mind that the template was designed specifically for senior-level administrative management jobs. Use the workbook to change how your job is perceived, define how you contribute toward organizational objectives, evaluate the expertise you're using, update your salary guidelines, and develop new performance management strategies.

Your contribution to your company is a valuable one; it's time to make that clear by working with your manager to upgrade your job description and your salary.

Melanie Gadener, project coordinator, is a member of the West Valley College Office Administration Advisory Board and owner of Productivity Plus Processes, in Fremont, CA. She has worked with thousands of office professionals and their managers, helping them redefine their changing roles. Barbara Lea, assistant project coordinator, teaches business and computer application courses at West Valley College in Saratoga, CA. For more information, visit www.officeprofessionals.org.

Promote Yourself

By Colleen Powers

How often have you heard the phrase "That's not in my job description"? Any new experience, such as being assigned a new task or duty, presents an excellent opportunity for growth, both professionally and personally.

Maximizing your position by embracing new responsibilities benefits everyone in the workplace. Many factors force increased duties on office professionals, and they usually are the result of external or internal workplace changes, such as a new supervisor or product line.

As a result of these and other changes, an increase in job duties is a possibility. Embracing these new responsibilities may be your key to success. It certainly is the basis for self-advancement.

Although you can present an upgrade to your position in many ways, preparation of your case is crucial. The list that follows includes all items employers should assess to evaluate your value and your appeal for a job upgrade. To make your case, document and present these materials in a professional manner, preferably a bound and tabulated format.

1. Appeal of Classification. Title and description of the position, with duties and responsibilities appropriately described; the old job description; new job description, and reasons for requested change in classification are included here.

2. Organizational Chart. Demonstrate in graphic form the working and reporting relationships within your workplace.

3. Bulleted Listing of New Duties. Outline the specific duties and responsibilities of both your old and new (proposed) positions within the organization. Update this document as the process of appealing job classification continues.

4. Basis for Appeal. This element is perhaps the most important. Using a multi-paragraph format, describe the following:

- Basis of the appeal: List the job duties you perform, as you perceive them, with the most important ones appearing first and percentages of time spent on each.
- Relationships with other employees:

What people or groups of people do you come in contact with in the performance of your job both within and outside your agency? Indicate where appropriate the job titles or functions of your contacts, and describe the nature and purpose of your interpersonal relationships.

- Purpose of the position: Briefly describe the overall basic purpose of your job.

- Job changes: Have you experienced any significant job changes since your appointment? If so, indicate the dates the changes took place and briefly describe the nature of the changes.

- Problem solving: Outline briefly the major problems you face in the performance of your job and how you resolve them.

- Assignment, review and approval of work: Describe who assigns, reviews, and approves your work and how you receive it.

- Supervisory responsibility: Include specific payroll titles for those positions that report directly to you. Describe subordinates if applicable, and indicate again by official payroll title those positions that report to you through your immediate subordinates. Include functional supervisory responsibility as well (positions that report to you for only a portion of their total job assignments).

- Technology and equipment operation: Describe the technology you must know and use, and the equipment you typically operate and repair.

- Working conditions: Briefly explain any unusual working conditions such as physical effort, hazards, environment, time demands, or stress that are important elements for anyone in this position.

- Special requirements: Indicate whether your job requires a certificate, license, graduate degree, or other specific requirements you possess or are working toward.

- Additional information: Explain any aspect of your job not covered by the previous areas that you believe is important to understanding your duties.

5. Letters of Recommendation. Obtain any internal and external letters of recommendation that specifically address the duties you perform for the letter writers and include support of your promotion to



the new job classification.

6. Work Samples. Samples of your work are critical. There's no better way to support your appeal than with actual samples, such as brochures, Web site design, successful implementation of a new filing system, etc.

When you take the initiative to upgrade your position, you can dramatically improve your personal satisfaction. Knowing your work is appreciated makes your job duties and work environment more pleasant. Don't view the next new assignment as just another task to add to an already crowded to-do list. Instead, use it as an opportunity to upgrade your position.

Don't expect advancement to happen automatically or without basis. Unfortunately, new duties often aren't explained nor are you asked if you want to accept them. But your accepting new duties and using them for self-benefit must be understood. The process of appealing your job description doesn't have to be threatening and it likely will benefit your employer as well. The end result will be a better working environment and relationships, and greater personal satisfaction.

Colleen Powers is administrative assistant in the Marketing/BIS Department of the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. In the past five years, her position has been upgraded twice with a overall salary increase of 64.3% percent. Reach her at 508/999-8446.