

When secretaries were tall

WHEN I WAS SMALL AND SECRETARIES WERE TALL... Fans of the Bee Gees will know that this is a slight corruption of their song *First of May*. In the original, it was Christmas trees that were tall, but that is the nearest you will get to a Christmas article from me this year. There are only 25 fee-earning days till Christmas (if you count 25 December and all weekends) and I must get on with typing another letter to earn myself one more meagre unit.

When I was a small trainee solicitor and secretaries were tall, I, in company with my contemporaries, was terrorised by the secretaries in the firm where we worked. They were temperamental, terrifying and turbulent. They were also immensely muscular, having for years operated massive manual typewriters which demanded the same sized biceps as the riveters of the hull of the Titanic. Indeed, if secretaries of the time had done the riveting, no doubt the ship would have survived the iceberg.

To get anything typed you had to grovel, wheedle and kiss their boots.

Solicitors then thought it was beneath their dignity to be seen with fingers on a typewriter, thus enabling secretaries collectively to behave like the digestive system: by creating a blockage they could bring the whole office to its knees in no time.

Then, it seems (and this may just be the warm glow of reflection) secretaries became much nicer and it was possible to work with them as friends (allowing for the occasional tiff of course when the digestive system blockage reasserted itself).

A. symbol of virility

In days gone by the macho boast was: "I am so busy I can keep x secretaries busy." 'X' was a figure directly proportional to the self perceived importance of the solicitor concerned. True, when I once thought I was important, I was able to keep two secretaries busy, but I have known very important solicitors who had no difficulty in keeping three or even four secretaries' fingers white with effort as they slid inexorably towards repetitive strain injury.

Technology has moved on. Now, having no secretary (or a fraction of a secretary) is the new macho boast: "I am so skilled I can survive with just a 32th of a secretary."

With case management systems, letters almost write themselves. Attendance notes appear on the screen as if by magic. Voice recognition enables you to talk directly to your computer. As it is so easy, why have a secretary at all?

Well I will tell you. As I have found out from working at home this past year, there is much more to producing a letter than tapping out your thoughts on a keyboard. We are typically allocated a unit of six minutes for every letter we produce. If, like me, your files at the end of the case are scrutinised by 'costs negotiators', who query every comma and full stop, you will find that no credit is given for the effort that goes into producing a single humble missive. Six minutes is all that is allowed and this includes:

- Time to find the right file on the computer.
- Time to print out the letter – including finding that the printer has just run out of paper, or jammed; finding that you have used your last packet, dashing into the nearby town (ten minutes drive if you ignore speed limits and the occasional deer that challenges your reaction times by leaping in front of you) discovering that it is early closing and that the only stationer is shut until tomorrow, then diverting to the supermarket and picking up a pack of organic paper for twice the normal cost, racing back, avoiding the deer.
- Time to file the copy of the letter (looking for the hole punch that has been borrowed by your spouse and finding that it is now so full that it bursts open spraying the room with confetti).
- Time to fold the letter so that the address peeks out of the window in the envelope (and refolding it when you discover that only your own address shows).
- Time to seal the envelope, followed by unsealing it when you realise you forgot to sign the letter.
- Time to unseal the envelope a second time when you notice that the important enclosure is still on your desk.
- Time to hunt for the sellotape as the



envelope has grown weary of being unsealed and now will not seal at all.

■ Time to queue at the post office and watch the desultory advertisements on the video screen while waiting for all the people in front of you to make enquiries about sending vegetables via airmail to the Turks and Caicos Islands by special delivery, or enquiring about the whereabouts of a letter they sent just after World War II and which has not yet reached its destination.

And that ignores the time you spend thinking about what you are going to say, changing your mind six times and then by mistake closing the file without saving it and having to start all over again.

Now the perfect secretary – Jennie for instance who comes to help me on Thursday mornings (she does not work the whole morning so that makes her a 17th of a secretary: how macho is that?) – cannot be the solution for all these ills. But there is something seriously satisfying about seeing the words you have dictated appear accurately on not one but many letters (and without the curious modifications persistently made by the voice recognition programme) with the file copy already in its proper place, the time recording done and with nothing for you to do but sign it.

Which all goes to show that we might like to flirt with the idea of not having a secretary, but life is much more bearable even with a fraction of one. And, at this time of the year, woe betide anyone who does not give their secretary a Christmas present: you may find that it will be you that your secretary replaces.

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