

Executive Secretary

by Annette Solimene

I work as a Secretary 3 or "Sky Three" for Central Services Directorate located at AES Headquarters in Downsview. If you ask me to describe a routine day in my working life, I can state quite definitely, there is no such thing.

The directorate consists of four dissimilar branches: Training, Ice Computing and Telecommunications Services and Data Acquisition, all are located on different floors of the Downsview building. Since I must be in constant touch with the branch secretaries, you can be sure that I spend much of my time in the elevators or in the endless corridors – or dashing down to the mail room or Central Registry in the basement.

I will start by trying to describe an *imaginary* typical day: You begin it thinking or hoping that it will be a bit less hectic because the director general is in a morning meeting and that just maybe you can do some of your filing, xeroxing and catching up on the not so urgent items. How wrong!

The phone starts ringing – either routine calls or requests to set up meetings. Then comes a message that an urgent document must be picked up in records. This requires a response by the end of the day so you scramble off to make copies for the branch directors and canvass them for input so your boss can pull the reply together when he gets back from the meeting. You now attack the DG's out-basket (the work he did after you left last night and before you arrived this morning). In the pile there's a note for you to make travel reservations to Ottawa. The boss only learned of the trip early this morning, so you make several frantic calls to Marlin Travel only to get a busy signal. Half an hour later you successfully confirm the reservations. When your boss returns you brief him on what's happening. Then, confound it, the phone rings again and you're advised that the out of town meeting you've just made travel arrangements for has been rescheduled. You smile, take a deep breath and get back to Marlin to make the changes. (It isn't really so bad. It's problems like waiting for delivery of visas for the USSR or finding out what shots are necessary for AES people visiting Burundi that cause the headaches.)

Now you realize it's time to pick up the morning mail. Today you need a buggy because there's an avalanche of brown envelopes piling up in the mail room. Eventually you start going through the mail, logging, rerouting, proof reading material for signature. Meanwhile the

phone keeps ringing.

The afternoon isn't much different. Instead of placing material in the boss's in-basket you are emptying his out-basket. Usually it's material that must be moved quickly, so you have to continue scurrying up elevators, downstairs, along hall-ways – it's my main exercise of the day!



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Of course you have other routine duties like typing (I use an Olivetti typewriter with a memory or a WANG word processor) travel claims, filing (my best friend is the Bring Forward System – a drawerful of upcoming activities listed by date, time and branch).

Let's not forget you are trying possibly to fit in a coffee break or lunch at some point. Your main task is keeping things moving, organized and hoping desperately that a sudden visit to the building by ministerial staff won't force you to reschedule the DG's meeting you worked so painstakingly to organize.

And now a few words about my *real* work. In actual fact every day is different. And that's why I enjoy this hectic, challenging, unpredictable, eventful job.

It so happens that the director general of Central Services has been designated to decide when AES employees can go home in bad weather. If it's snowing hard in the early afternoon, the calls start coming in: "Has a quitting time been set?" "If we stay until four will snow and ice trap vehicles in the parking lot?" "If the director general is in Ottawa, who is going to make the decision?" Except for the time in April 1974 when we made a wrong call and a sudden spring blizzard trapped some 400 employees overnight in the building, things usually work out for the best. I personally have to know how to handle bad weather enquiries – at least ask people to be patient. When the calls come from AES Downsview, I know what to say. But on one occasion a call came from Health and Welfare Canada en-

quiring whether *they* could have permission to go home because of inclement weather. I simply read them the latest weather report and told them the responsibility rested with their own Department as to whether they could go home. One day, I must take the meteorology course for non-meteorologists. It would help me to come up with a whole lot of useful answers for the phone queries.

You certainly deal with all kinds of people. Once when I was working in the ADM's office in Ottawa for a season, an irate doctor called in to say he had specifically taken the day off to play golf because we (Environment Canada) had forecast sunny skies and he wanted to know why it was raining. He demanded an explanation. That's where your public relations skills come in. Secretaries need a superhuman mix of patience, common sense and a sense of humor.

My office is located very close to the building's main entrance. This means a lot of people wander in off the street seeking immediate answers on a wide range of topics. For example they want to know what the big sculpture outside is supposed to represent (That one's fairly easy – it's supposed to symbolize the weather) but some people want to become instant meteorologists, so I direct them to the careers section of our Training Branch. Others might simply be selling chocolates for a worthy cause and find me an easy target. Then of course there are delegations to meet in the lobby, some of them to be directed to ADMA's boardroom or the Auditorium. Sometimes, because of my knowledge of Italian and French, I am appointed instant interpreter. Languages are invaluable to secretaries. You can even undertake a little foreign correspondence.

I see my job as first of all dealing with people, second as trying to understand a little of everything that goes on in the Directorate, third, trying to deal with crises as they arise and lastly trying to project the image of the director general. You're quite right if you think that the role of a secretary has changed in recent years.

Secretaries are often asked what they think of office automation. If you are referring to increased use of word processors, and electronic mail, I am all for it. We are busy all the time and any labor saving devices introduced into the office are beneficial. But if you think that automation can assume the *real* work of a secretary, you are wrong. A secretary is a secretary, and she is irreplaceable.