Just when secretaries originated no one knows exactly. The role arose out of the natural need for a prominent person to whom confidential matters could be entrusted and who could act as an assistant for a principal. It is known that secretaries existed in Rome prior to the establishment of the empire. They were usually educated men who took dictation as "scribes," and oftentimes acted as trusted advisors.

Before the invention of parchment and reed pens, tools of the trade for scribes ranged from chisels used upon stone to styluses used on clay, wood, or wax tablets. Shorthand became part of the preparation and training of secretaries (and emperors as well, including Julius Caesar and Augustus).

In early modern times, members of the nobility had secretaries, who functioned quite similarly to those of the present day. They were always men; most had command of several languages, including Latin, and were required to have what we would consider today as a broad generalized education.

As commerce and trade expanded, people of wealth and power needed secretaries (confidants and trusted agents) to handle correspondence on private or confidential matters, most particularly matter of state.

Following the Renaissance, men continued to dominate clerical and secretarial roles. They maintained account books, in addition to performing stenographic duties, and were known for their exemplary penmanship skills. Many labored long hours, with their “secretary” desks serving as their files and workstations.

As world trade expanded in the 15th and 16th centuries, secretaries often attained an elevated status and held prominent positions. Secretarial status titles frequently included “personal” or “private.”
Men continued to dominate the secretarial field until the late 1800s. With the invention of the writing machine, many women entered the office workforce in various clerical roles.

During the industrial expansion at the turn of the century, business offices faced a paperwork crisis. Women solved the crisis by adapting well to new technologies such as the adding and calculating machine, telephone, and typewriter. Many women held, or aspired to hold, positions as secretaries. They attended secretarial schools and worked to attain superior skills. The demand for secretaries was so great that it outpaced supply.

In the 1930s, the number of men with the title secretary dwindled. Women dominated the office workforce. Some were promoted from steno pools, some were graduates of business colleges or secretarial schools, but all were seeking the professional status and pay previously enjoyed by their male counterparts.

Recognizing that continuing education was imperative to career success, a group of secretaries in American’s heartland became the nucleus of an organization that would help to professionalize the occupation. In 1942, the National Secretaries Association (NSA) was formed (now known as the International Association of Administrative Professionals). NSA first administered the Certified Professional Secretaries Examination, a standard of excellence for the profession, in 1951.

Today, secretaries (also known as administrative assistants, office coordinators, executive assistants, office managers, etc) are using computers, the Internet, and other advanced office technologies to perform vital “information management” functions in the modern office.

Secretaries no longer “simply” type correspondences for “the boss.” Now, they often write that correspondence – as well as plan meetings, organize data using spreadsheet and database management software, interact with clients, vendors, and the general public, supervise the office and other staff, handle purchasing, and even train other workers. Trends identified by IAAP™ and staffing industry research include:
1950
Electronic digital computers (transistors)
Electronic digital computers (vacuum tubes)
Data processing – paper and tape cards
Xerographic duplication
Data processing – telewriters
Data processing – computypers

1960
Magnetic tape “selectric” typewriters
Microchip computers
Magnetic tape (replacing punched cards)
Magnetic ink character recognition

1970
Microcomputers
Optical scanning and recognition equipment
Video display terminals for data/text editing
Facsimile transmission
Electronic (solid state) calculating machines

1980
Local area networks, integrated systems
Non-impact printers
Software packages for microcomputers

- Administrative professionals are becoming researchers and interpreters, not just disseminators of information.
- Work teams are becoming more prevalent.
- Job description are expanding and new titles are being created, such as “office administrator,” “business coordinator,” and “information manager.”
- Employees are paying more for specialized skills such as desktop publishing and database management. In addition, many companies are providing performance-based bonuses to outstanding administrative support professionals to help acknowledge their contributions.

The future is bright for computer-literate, well-educated, customer service-savvy administrative professionals.

**Etymology of Secretary**

The word “secretary” ultimately comes from the same Latin word that gave us “secret.”

Originally, it meant “one entrusted with the secrets and confidence of a superior.” In Middle English it was *secretarie* and in Middle Latin it was *secretarius*. The word “secretary,” in something close to its present meaning, has been with us for at least 500 years.

In France, from the 13th to the 16th century, the word “secretarie” meant a confidant. It also became an administrative term meaning someone “someone who transcribes or arranges for another.”

Probably the earliest use of the word was in relation to those people who acted for a king. A king would have his trusted agents handle correspondences on private or secret matters, particularly matters of state.

The English lexicographer Samuel Johnson, in his 1755 dictionary, quotes Shakespeare, who wrote in early 17th century, “Call Gardiner to me, my new secretary.” There is also a quotation from the English philosopher Francis Bacon, a contemporary of Shakespeare: “That which is most profitable is acquaintances with secretaries, and employed
men, of ambassadors.” Johnson described a secretary as “one entrusted with the management of business; one who writes for another.” In 1806, Noah Webster succinctly described a secretary as “one who writes for another.”

By 1847, the definition in the first Merriam-Webster dictionary was greatly expanded: “Secretary: 1. A person employed by a public body, or by a company or by an individual, to write orders, letters, dispatches, public or private papers, records, and the like. Thus legislative bodies have secretaries whose business is to record all their laws and resolves. Ambassadors have secretaries.

2. An officer whose business it is to manage the affairs of a particular department of government; as the Secretary of State…” Today, the word “secretary” is commonly stereotyped to mean a “person who types correspondence” or a “dictation-taker.” To better describe the administrative and information management functions of today’s office support staff, the term “administrative professional” is recommended as an alternative to the “secretary” title by the leadership of Professional Secretaries International® - The Association for Office Professionals™. In August 1998, PSI (now IAAP) delegates at the PSI International Convention and Education Forum in Atlanta, Georgia approved a bylaws amendment changing the association’s name to “International Association of Administrative Professionals” to reflect this expanded role.

IAAP defines an administrative professional as an “individual who possesses a mastery of office skills, demonstrates the ability to assume responsibility without direct supervision, exercises initiative and judgment, and makes decisions within the scope of assigned authority.”