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**Revisiting the study of occupations:  
A holistic view of contemporary secretarial work**

**Débora Carneiro Zuin**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis revisits the study of occupations. It proposes a holistic approach for analysing occupations in relation to three dimensions, focusing on the content, the lived-experience and the context of the job as the key elements in framing occupational work. Primacy is given to the job content and how this interacts with lived experience and context. An ethnographically-informed methodology was employed, which included interviews with 9 legal secretaries and 15 medical secretaries in Scotland. Their occupational content was interrogated in terms of their knowledge, skills, qualifications, tasks, task discretion, practice and interpersonal relations. The context of their occupations was examined in relation to their organisational, sectoral and industry location and degree of formal and informal collective organisation. To understand their lived experience, the study investigated their routes into secretarial work, how their work informed and was informed by their personal identity and the outcomes of their efforts. The findings revealed that the work of these secretaries has changed and extended to include an extensive list of tasks and skills. A variation between the work of medical and legal secretaries was discovered in relation to the tasks developed, and a small variation in the kind of knowledge required to undertake their tasks. In part, secretaries did not realise or appreciate the extent of skills they deployed in their jobs, and they exhibited anxieties in relation to forthcoming organisational changes that might affect the work they do. Respondents also demonstrated a degree of conflict and ambiguity in the development of their work. Although having discretion and autonomy to develop their work, secretaries still suffered from conflicting information with and from management. The empirical findings generate valuable information on the labour process and identity of medical and legal secretaries contributing to our understanding of their work. The thesis concludes by assessing the merits of a holistic approach to understanding occupational work.

## DECLARATION

This thesis is been conducted entirely by me and is my sole work and composition. It has not been submitted for examination for any other degree or professional qualification.

Débora Carneiro Zuin

December 2012

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my wonderful family, Affonso, Annie, Amanda and Dominic.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

BSMSA	British Society of Medical Secretaries and Administrators
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
EUMA	European Management Assistants
IAAP	International Association of Administrative Professionals
IQPS	Institute of Qualified Private Secretaries
IT	Information technology
LPA	Labour Process Analysis
NHS	National Health Service
NS-SEC	National Statistics Socio-economic Classification
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PA	Personal Assistant
PC	Personal computer
SOC	Standard Occupation Classification
UK	United Kingdom

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Occupations matter to society, organisations and individuals. Major theoretical debates within and across different disciplines are concerned with occupational work. Recognising the centrality of occupational work to people's lives, this thesis examines how occupations are understood, the meaning ascribed to occupations by occupation holders and individual occupational experiences. The first section of this introductory chapter states the objectives of the thesis; the second section examines why occupations matter and the challenge of studying them due to definitional and classification issues; the third section presents the methodological approach used in this study in order to achieve the proposed objectives; finally, the last section provides an overview of the thesis chapters.

## 1.1 Focus and objectives of thesis

The conceptual focus of this thesis is on the study of occupations. The rationale for the focus on occupations is that they are central to people's lives. Occupations are the main mediators between individuals and society (Krause, 1971) and their impact is felt on individual, organisational and societal levels.

Occupations have been a common concern of many studies in different disciplines, bringing challenges in relation to the definition and classification of occupation.

The sociology of work and occupations and the related areas that also study occupations and present a great contribution and wealth of knowledge of occupations will be presented in the next section in more detail. Those developments and explanations of occupations contribute to studies in different disciplines with different focus and purposes, each of them contributing with further understanding an occupation or an occupation holder. This study intends to develop those studied issues further and contribute to the understanding of occupation as a holistic entity.

This study attempts to push this lack of theoretical development in the direction of understanding of occupations, the meaning ascribed by a person to it, the way a person experiences and understands their occupation, as well as the way in which the person's context affects or not the perception of their occupation experience.

The empirical focus of this thesis is on the secretarial occupation in order to understand the contemporary work of secretaries and to answer the questions raised in this study regarding occupational work. The secretarial occupation has a number of distinctive characteristics. Firstly, it is predominantly gendered. Secondly, secretarial work combines technical skill with important interpersonal skills. Thirdly, secretarial work has been subject to significant challenges and pressures. Organisational, individual or social pressures affect their personal and occupational identity. This group of workers is worthy to be studied as they have a very important role in organisations in all sectors, and their work is not well known by most people, not least recognised by its multiplicity of tasks and skills.

The objectives of this thesis are derived from the need to further understand occupations and are as follows:

- to propose a new approach to analysing occupations in terms of three dimensions: the content, the context in which the tasks are undertaken, and the meaning ascribed to the occupation by the individual, the lived experience;
- to apply the approach developed, its relevance and usefulness in relation to the analysis of the contemporary experience of the secretarial occupation;
- to contribute to the study of occupations and to the study of secretarial work with new empirical data.

## 1.2 Occupations matter

Occupations matter. They matter to society, organisations and individuals. This is clear from the centrality of occupations in major theoretical debates that use occupations as a point of reference, as a data base and even as a variable in analysis of different specialities within sociology (Hall, 1983).

At a societal level, major social and political changes continue to impact on the way organisations are structured and the way people work and interact with wider society. As argued by Krause (1971), changes in the broader organisation of society bring changes to organisations that may affect career opportunity and the pattern of job recruitment for the new generation of workers.

There is no doubt that occupations play a central role in societies and that “occupations represent a meaningful focus in the lives of many people” (Lee et al., 2000:799). There is no better or more relevant statement than Krause’s (1971) reflections on the importance of studying occupations:

“In an era of political action and rapid social change, when all institutions of society are being re-examined, it is only natural that the central institution of work should come under scrutiny. Occupations and professions are among the main mediators between the individual and society.” (1971:1)

Krause’s view remains relevant today. Occupational groups play a major role in the social and political spheres of society and thus occupations are worthy of systematic study, both as a process, and as a change-oriented group (Krause, 1971:1) – occupations as societal “mediators” are in a constant process of development, impacting on and being impacted by social and political changes.

At an organisational level, global changes in the labour market today are causing the emergence of a new occupational structure while occupational practice is developing (Bruijn & Volman, 2000). Occupations may shape organisations as occupations provide one form of internal structuring or differentiation within organisations. There are two principles that shape the division of labour and the working relations in organisations: the occupational principle and the administrative principle. The occupational principle prevails when “decisions about the appropriate bases and form of the division of labour, how to carry out tasks, and how to evaluate work outcomes

are left primarily, if not entirely, in the hands of members of a designated occupational group”. The administrative principle prevails when “decisions about the organisation of work and execution of work tasks are vested in organisational agents based on their hierarchical position” (Tolbert, 2005: 330). For Watson (1995:170), occupational groupings exist at different levels of the organisation and have implications:

- for society as a whole and for social change;
- for members of these occupational groups in so far as the groups become collectivities;
- for the individuals engaged in a particular type of work.

It is important to note the impact of occupations on an individual level. First, individuals may spend most of their time in an occupation thus making it of considerable importance to them. As Hughes suggests (1958:7), “a man’s work is as good a clue as any to the course of his life, and to his social being and identity”. Research on occupations presents good insights into the meaning of occupation and its impact on individuals is informed by sociological perspectives of constructivist and post-structuralist writers such as Giddens (1991) and Goffman (1973). In theorising the link between occupations and identity, Huot & Rudman (2010) explore the importance of occupations to being a person and to creating and maintaining an identity, which was theorised by Christiansen (1999).

Second, there is a complex relationship between the individual and his/her occupation (Krause, 1971:2). Indeed, the latter cannot be disregarded, as it is not possible to understand an occupation without understanding how the individual relates to, understands and identifies with it. This relationship is two way: occupations shape individuals but individuals also shape and make sense of occupations. Krause criticises sociological approaches to studies of occupation and the individual, as for Krause (1971) sociologists frequently “think of jobs or occupations as categories”. This is because sociologists often develop their “own set of socio-economic categories or classes to help in their particular investigations (...)



and occupations are brought together in such a way that we can expect incumbents to share in broadly similar market and work situations” (Watson, 1995:175). Early debates on deskilling and degradation of work have also touched on this issue. One example is Wood’s (1983) comments on debates on, after Braverman’s work, on deskilling. For Wood (1983), it is not possible to have “any general pronouncement” (1983:7) about job redesign, for example, as it is not easy to compare the various aspects of control that vary from one group of workers to another. He exemplifies this with the case of engineers, that after a job redesign, on the one hand, they had more control of their work pace and time, and as individuals they were more visible to management, that on the other hand, had more control over them. In addition, there is a danger in such categorisation of occupations as in the case of skills, which is usually used to categorise occupations. For Wood (1983), there is a need to make a clear distinction between individual skills and the skills needed for a particular job, “as well as in between these and the labelling of particular jobs as skilled. For certain tasks may be deskilled in content because of technological changes, yet this may not amount to the deskilling of any particular individual” (1983:7).

In addition, occupations matter to individuals because of income. For Levenson and Zoghi (2010:366), there are occupations that are highly correlated with income and this partly reflects the complexity of knowledge acquisition in order to learn specific tasks as well as that supply and demand factors are dissimilar across occupations (2010:366). An occupation is also important as it is an indicator of social class and status to an individual. Prestige and status are derived from one’s job, as well as rewards and job satisfaction, which have great impact on individuals’ lives (Watson, 1995).

### **1.3 Studying occupations – definitions and classifications**

Since occupations represent an important aspect of people’s lives, it is an important subject to study and still a challenging subject to be analysed. The various ways in which occupations are studied present issues and controversies in relation to, first the definition of occupation and, second, its classification, that is, the ways in which

occupations are grouped and categorised. Although important, it is not easy to define occupations.

### 1.3.1 Definitional issues

Although some sociologists contend that the definition of occupation is of little concern to most people (Watson, 1995), this study acknowledges the importance of the definition as it has implications for how people define other people's work. It is important to define occupations not only because of its importance as a sociological tool, but also because of its importance for the occupation holder (Watson, 1995). Definitions of occupations matter because they are used to categorise, delineate and measure the work people do.

In the English language, the meaning of the word *occupation* has varied through time. Citing the Oxford English Dictionary<sup>1</sup>, Elias & McKnight (2001:509) explain that from Middle English the word *occupation* was adapted to “denote the pursuit of mercantile employment, a trade, or craft”, but originally *occupation* was used essentially to signify “the possession of space”. The definition from Middle English is in accordance with the sociological perspective that occupation refers to an “economic” relation. Scott and Marshall (2009) explain the word *occupation* as “an economic role separated from household activity as a result of the growth of markets for labour”. This sociological statement can be clarified by examining the meaning of “work” and “job” (Barley & Kunda, 2001). Barley & Kunda argue that in pre-industrial society, work happened as people followed a natural flow of everyday life, “activities were governed by the cyclical rhythms of nature and the necessities of living: the passing of the seasons, alternations of day and night, pangs of hunger, the need to mend torn clothing, and so on” (2001:82). During the industrial revolution, work started to separate people's activities: “Segments of the day were set aside for

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<sup>1</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary brings two other related definitions:

First: “The state of having one's time or attention occupied; what a person is engaged in; employment, business; work, toil” Second: “A particular action or course of action in which a person is engaged; a particular job or profession; a particular pursuit or activity.”  
([http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.webfeat.lib.ed.ac.uk/cgi/entry/00329794?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=occupation&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.webfeat.lib.ed.ac.uk/cgi/entry/00329794?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=occupation&first=1&max_to_show=10))

work and separated from family, community, and leisure by the punching of a time clock or a blast of a factory whistle” (2001:82). People then started to separate work in time and space, as people would do work starting at a time and finishing by a set time and the work would be done routinely in a specific place. This “temporal and spatial localisation of work stimulated a change in the meaning of ‘job’ and gave rise to a larger lexicon for talking about work and the division of labour” (Barley & Kunda, 2001:82). Therefore, the authors present a clear picture of pre-industrial society and when “job” became a task with ties to time and location. Abbott (1989) explains that, at that time: “only among craftsmen and soldiers were specific jobs attached to distinct identities and roles. People ‘did’ jobs; they did not ‘hold’ them. By the mid-twentieth century, however, ‘job’ had come to mean a role in a division of labour that was held for an indefinite period of time. Such jobs had clear beginnings, but no foreseeable end”.

This understanding of *job* complies with contemporary perceptions of what the word *occupation* means, the way people use their time in paid activity rather than what they are doing at a given moment. This perception of “holding” a job can also be interpreted, firstly, in relation to the social status or rank in which people find themselves, according to Elias & McKnight (2001:509):

“when asked what kind of work a person does, or what type of job he/she may have, the answer is likely to be detailed and/or precise. Asked for their occupation, however, and the reply might reflect more upon a long-term plan or indicate events on a broader time scale. For example: a claims assessment officer in an unemployment benefit office might well respond ‘civil servant’ when asked to state an occupation. Similarly, a university lecturer, professor, or researcher might simply respond ‘academic’ ”.

Secondly, a job can be interpreted in relation to its location. As an example, Watson (1997) argues that most people who work can be assigned an occupation. However, the person may not define his/her job in relation to occupational membership, as sometimes “their location in the work organisation might be more salient than his/her occupational membership” (Watson, 1995:171). Watson (1995) illustrates with a situation when a stranger is asked “what do you do?” or “who do you work for?” as traditionally a person is located in society by the occupation assigned to him/her. However, sometimes, due to the “growth of bureaucratised work organisations the

specific tasks in which a person is engaged and the skills which go with it become less relevant for many people than the organisation in which they are employed” (1997:171). It is common to say that someone works “in an office”, or he works “at the university”, he works “for the council” and associate the person’s occupation to their place of work.

Hall provides a more generic definition of *occupation* from a sociological point of view, suggesting that “an occupation is the social role performed by adult members of society that directly and/or indirectly yields social and financial consequences and that constitutes a major focus in the life of an adult” (Hall, 1969:5). Hall’s definition presents a limitation to the concept of occupation, as Hall (1969), as well as other authors, retains the idea of occupation related to paid activities.

Lee et al. (2000) present a conceptualisation of occupation as “an identifiable and specific line of work that an individual engages in to earn a living (...)” (2000: 800). They argue that an occupation is constituted by a range of skills, knowledge and duties, which make it different from another occupation. Lee et al.’s (2000) conceptualisation, although focusing attention on a definition of occupation as the “line of work that a person is engaged in over a particular period of time” (2000:800), is also linked to the idea that people may hold more than one occupation during their lives (Lee et al., 2000). Lee et al. add that “some types of work allow for multiple ways of constructing the occupation, e.g. a biology professor whose occupation could be educator, biologist, or professor of biology”. Lee et al.’s (2000) discussion adds to the limitation identified in the previous definition presented, as it lacks attention to the relation of the work to the occupation holder, his identification with the occupation. It is important to mention, though, that Lee et al. (2000) present considerations with regards to the importance of occupation and its concept in analysing occupational commitment. They also argue that “the terms occupation, profession and career<sup>2</sup> have been used somewhat interchangeably in the commitment literature”. However, Lee et al. find more appropriate to their analysis of occupational commitment the notion presented above and they add that they “prefer

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<sup>2</sup>Lee et al. (2000:800) define career as “the series of jobs, vocational choices, and other work-related activities over the individual’s lifetime”.

occupation over profession simply because it is more general, encompassing both professionals and non-professionals” (2000:800).

This section presented a discussion on the definition of the term occupation. This discussion draws on the conceptualisation of occupations as an economic role (Elias & McKnight, 2001; Scott & Marshall, 2009), also attached to identity and social roles (Barley & Kunda, 2001), as well as a more objective and technical definition of occupations (Lee et al., 2000). This study, however, adopts Watson’s (1997:171) definition of occupation, that is, the “engagement on a regular basis in part or the whole of a range of work tasks which are identified under a particular heading or title by both those carrying out these tasks and by a wider public”. This operational definition is a useful definition of occupation and this study restricts occupations to paid employment only. This study acknowledges, however, Watson’s (1997:170) comments that a definition has therefore to “take into account that whether or not any given work activity is to be regarded as an occupation depends in part on the decisions made by those doing the tasks and also by the wider public as to whether such identity is to be bestowed”.

From reviewing the definitions of occupations, it is clear that the main definition of *occupation* is rooted firmly in the idea of paid activity (Hall, 1969; Elias & McKnight, 2001; Scott & Marshall, 2009). Those definitions are limited as they are confined to conceptualisations of work that are based on the contradictions of paid and unpaid work and public and private (Bottero, 2005), failing “to engage with the complexity of people’s working lives, and, in particular, with how work is embedded in other social practices” (Bottero, 2005:56).

Definitions such as Watson’s (1997), that an occupation encompasses various kinds of activities, paid and non-paid ones, have benefits as they present a conceptualisation of occupation that also considers the wide social relationship in which the occupational holder is involved. Although the definitions that rest on the economic labour market characteristics of an occupation, that is “the skill, pay, and labour market conditions of different jobs” (Bottero, 2005:56) that are valuable, they do not consider that the meaning of holding an occupation might be affected by the “social identity, networks and life trajectory of the people in that job” (Bottero,

2005:56). For example, an important view that occupations are more than paid activities can be seen in stratification research as it looks at occupations and their social location.

### **1.3.2 Classification issues**

Beyond issues of defining occupations *per se*, there are challenges in classifying different occupations in relation to each other. There are, of course, a number of standardised classification systems for occupations in the United Kingdom (UK) and those classifications are used for a variety of purposes. “Occupational classifications are essentially ways of grouping and ranking jobs and occupations” (Scott & Marshall, 2009: 523). Occupation data is used by government departments to provide an understanding of the workforce and the skills identified among workers; it is also used for comparative purposes, as government analysis may, for example, compare ethnic and religious populations; in addition it is used “to compile mortality statistics by occupation and for analysis of small groups in society” (Final recommended questions for the 2011 census, 2011:17). Therefore, occupation information is a major way of providing data on the labour market on socio-economic issues. “Other uses of occupation data are as a measure of deprivation and to aid service provision such as skills and training to areas of need. It is also required to monitor and help forecast future occupational structures and hence skill and training needs” (Final recommended questions for the 2011 census, 2011:17). In addition, as Levenson & Zoghi (2010:386) add, classifications are also used by organisations and employees to aid their communication on job content:

“Classifications are used by both firms and workers to facilitate communication about the content of a job, which promotes more efficient screening of potential job applicants than otherwise might occur. The job requirements associated with any given occupation (e.g. doctor, lawyer, accountant, labourer, secretary, teacher, computer programmer) also provide a road map for those seeking to enter the occupation, whether by formal schooling, on the job training, or both. Without occupation classifications, therefore, there would be much less efficient resource allocation in the labour market.”

One classification system existing in the UK is the Standard Occupation Classification – SOC. It was first developed in 1990, was reshaped in 2000 and revised more recently in 2010. The nine SOC categories are based on the concept of job and on skills (Thomas & Elias, 1989; Anderson, 2009; Elias & McKnight, 2001), as shown in Table 1.1:

SOC 2010 Major Groups	
Major Group 1	Managers, directors and senior officials
Major Group 2	Professional occupations
Major Group 3	Associate professional and technical occupations
Major Group 4	Administrative and secretarial occupations
Major Group 5	Skilled trade occupations
Major Group 6	Caring, leisure and other service occupations
Major Group 7	Sales and customer service occupations
Major Group 8	Process, plant and machine operatives
Major Group 9	Elementary occupations

Table 1.1: SOC 2010 Major Groups  
(Source: ONS, 2010)

The conceptual basis of the SOC remains the same in the revised version in 2010. It is based on the classification of jobs in terms of skill level and skill content with skill in this context defined “in terms of the nature and duration of the qualifications, training and work experience required to become competent to perform the associate tasks in a particular job” (ONS, 2010:iv). The concept of job is defined for the SOC purposes as a “set of tasks or duties to be carried out by one person, the notion of a job represents a basic element in the employment relationship” (ONS, 2010:2). The SOC is commonly used for statistical applications. Thomas & Elias (1980:1) note that there are two important statistical applications: “to show how employment skills

and activities are distributed and contribute to the economy; and to give an indication of the lifestyle, earnings or social position of workers and their households by reference to the type of work they do.” Given this aim, the classification of occupations should be:

“practical and reliable both in statistical applications and in client-oriented applications such as job-placement and vocational guidance. It should yield reliable results when used to code job titles and descriptions from sources such as censuses, surveys and vital registration and should not depend on types of information or levels of detail which are not typically present in such sources.” (Thomas & Elias, 1980:18)

However, there are concerns that the SOC fails to present clear and reliable data on occupations. Although the SOC aims to categorise an occupation within an occupational classification, it does not assist in presenting a clear and accurate coding. The lack of clear distinction in terms of occupational categories represents a challenge in analysing occupational groups. The SOC is limited in its framework by a lack of information on skills changes in some occupational groups (Anderson, 2009). However, the SOC2000 framework “accommodates all UK jobs and is a practical, albeit somewhat crude, vehicle for examining broad patterns across occupational clusters...” (Anderson, 2009:171). Another limitation in the SOC becomes evident when it is used for research purposes, as the main reason for its development was “to provide a genuinely common structure and method of occupational classification for use in government” (Thomas & Elias, 1989). In research, it is used mainly for quantitative analysis (Abbott, 2005) and researchers cannot rely on the SOC when more accurate information on occupations or on occupation holders needs to be developed.

Another criticism of the SOC relates to its outdated information, considering that occupations are in a constant process of change. As argued by Scott & Marshall (2009:524) “social and economic change continually modifies the occupational structure and limits the capacity of any particular classification to reflect this structure over time”, thus creating a tension “between the need for continuity in the application and the use of an occupational classification, thereby providing a stable framework for analysis of trends, and the need for revision of the classification, ensuring the classification is sufficiently up-to-date in terms of its definition,



interpretation and use...” (Elias & Birch, 2010:18). It is possible to challenge occupational classifications which researchers use to chart occupational trends from categories developed for other purposes and for an economy of over a decade ago. Therefore, the SOC needs to be continually updated (Thomas & Elias, 1989).

Another classification system in the UK<sup>3</sup> is the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification – NS-SEC – used for official statistics and surveys. It is well accepted internationally and considered “conceptually clear”, developed from a sociological classification referred to as the “Goldthorpe Schema”<sup>4</sup> (National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification, page 2). The NS-SEC was developed to measure employment relations and conditions of occupations. “Conceptually, these are central to showing the structure of socio-economic positions in modern societies and helping to explain variations in social behaviour and other social phenomena” (page 3). The aims of the NS-SEC are “to differentiate positions within labour markets and production units in terms of their typical ‘employment relations’. Among employees, there are quite diverse employment relations and conditions, that is, they occupy different labour market situations and work situations.” (National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification, page 3). Adapting from the ‘Final recommended questions for the 2011 census’ (2010:15:16), listed below are the main usages of the NS-SEC data, which adds to the types of usages of classifications systems, as data is used:

- to enable research and identify the impact of targeted policy initiatives on specific groups in society;

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<sup>3</sup> In the United States, there is the DOT – Dictionary of Occupational Titles, which is considered “the best source of data on the content of jobs in the US economy” (Barley, 1996:406).

<sup>4</sup> “Goldthorpe class scheme = A categorization which allocates individuals and families into social classes, devised mainly by the English sociologist John Goldthorpe. The scheme is used increasingly widely throughout Europe, Australasia, and North America, notably in the study of [social mobility](#) and in the analysis of [class](#) more generally. Because of its complex genealogy, it is variously referred to in the literature as the Goldthorpe, Erikson–Goldthorpe, EGP (Erikson–Goldthorpe–Portocarero), and CASMIN (Comparative Study of Social Mobility in Industrial Nations) typology.” (<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O88-Goldthorpeclassscheme.html>)

- to understand social patterns, local labour markets, employment and unemployment and to develop policies in these areas especially at local and regional levels;
- in the development of research and policy to understand how social positions are linked to other policy areas covered by the census, such as health, ethnicity, migration, qualifications, education and transport;
- for the purposes of resource allocation at central and local government level; used in policy development and monitoring, to improve service provision and inform various strategies such as economic development and community regeneration strategies;
- as a measure of deprivation, to measure inequalities, to understand social patterns and local labour markets and develop policies in these areas.

NS-SEC is an occupationally based classification but provides coverage of the entirety of the adult population. The information required to create NS-SEC is occupation coded to the unit groups of SOC2000 and details of employment status: whether an employer, self-employed or employee; whether a supervisor; and the number of employees at a workplace (National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification, page 3). The analytic version of NS-SEC has eight classes, as shown in Table 1.2. Contrary to the claim of being a “conceptually clear” classification, some of its classes are contested by researchers, as they might be classes that are formed by a wider number of occupations, arguably reducing the accuracy of the classification. One example is class number 3, Intermediate occupations. There is no agreement in the literature regarding the precise definition of intermediate occupations. This category describes a broader range of occupations that “fall below the rank of professional and management jobs and above the partly skilled and unskilled occupations” (Elias & Bynner, 1997). Other researchers, such as Anderson (2009), derive a skill-sensitive definition of intermediate occupations from other forms of classification.

NS-SEC analytic classes	
1	Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations
	1.1 Large employers and higher managerial and administrative occupations
	1.2 Higher professional occupations
2	Lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations
3	Intermediate occupations
4	Small employers and own account workers
5	Lower supervisory and technical occupations
6	Semi-routine occupations
7	Routine occupations
8	Never worked and long-term unemployed

Table 1.2: NS-SEC 2010 Analytic Classes  
(Source: ONS, 2010)

Both the SOC and NS-SEC are, however, useful tools for governments as well as research.

As noted by Anderson (2009:171), the SOC is considered a useful tool for “undertaking a skill-sensitive analysis of occupational transformations” and the NS-SEC enables research and policy development.

Despite the evidence of the usefulness of the occupational classification for statistical purposes, there is no consensus as to whether those classifications are useful for empirically based work aimed at understanding the content and context of a specific category of occupation. It is questionable whether it is possible to do a detailed and accurate coding of a category. When the coding is accurate, problems such as “male bias” is avoided, as argued by Scott & Marshall (2009). They question the embodied “male bias” in most occupational classifications, arguing that this bias is reflected:

“...in the way occupations are distinguished, grouped, and ranked. Occupations filled largely by women are frequently grouped together at a very low level of aggregation (as for example in the case of clerical occupations) so that they cannot subsequently be disaggregated and relocated as circumstances change. Similarly, the skill and status level of occupations dominated by women may be underestimated, possibly distorting the location of such occupations in some subsequent derived status qualifications” (2009:524).

In addition, the occupational classifications presented may not reproduce the actual state of a given occupation, considering that occupational structure is in constant change and social and economic changes continually alter occupational structure (Scott & Marshall, 2009). Indeed, classifications present and induce studies in “mechanical nature” (Krause, 1971), as they present unconnected categories and disregard its *raison d'être*. It also seems to consider more the functioning of the system in which the occupations operate than the individual in the system and their relationship and the social interactions involved. In the existing classifications, it is noted that occupations are brought in a way that it is expected that all occupation holders share the same characteristics and context of the labour market and work situation and experience. This is due to conceptualisation of the SOC, based on the *job*, the set of employment tasks, “different from classifying a person directly in terms of skills or experience” (Thomas & Elias, 1989:16).

Notwithstanding the lack of consensus as to whether those classifications are sufficient for empirically based work, they represent the starting point for any analysis of occupations. However, this study argues whether classifications contribute to a better understanding of occupations and advocates for a broader approach that allows for greater appreciation and understanding of occupations, not just in terms of job content and skills, but also in terms of how context and individual factors impact on occupations.

## 1.4 Methodological approach

The methodological approach best suited to achieve the objectives set for this thesis comes from an interpretivist philosophy, an ethnographically informed approach. It was chosen as the best way to test the framework proposed in this thesis for the analysis of occupations, and to answer the questions raised in relation to secretarial work, the chosen category for the application of the framework.

The qualitative approach was chosen due to consideration of the following factors:

- The focus of this study was to understand the labour process of a distinctive category of occupational workers – secretarial workers, through their lived experience.
- This study sought to explore perceptions and practices of the work of secretaries from their own perspectives. The questions regard what they observe in occupational practices, rather than what is commonly assumed and possibly anticipated by the researcher.
- Previous studies reveal that the most common approaches chosen are quantitative, when researchers sought to study separately the aspects involved or contained in the work of secretaries. In this study, the idea is to explore all aspects together, as all aspects of occupational work are interconnected and make sense when analysed together.
- As will be explored in chapter 2 and chapter 3, the review of the related literature demonstrated how research tends to explore workers' experience in a quantitative way.

The ethnographically informed approach was found useful and was the method that best allowed the researcher to explore the content, context and lived experience of secretaries. This group of workers bring insights into a perception of what is known of work and what is understood of it by the worker himself. This group of occupational workers need to be further studied in order to provide more

understanding to people, in and out of their working environment, of the kind of work they do and the complexities involved in them.

## **1.5 Structure of the thesis**

The previous sections in this introduction set the rationale for which this thesis was built. It is also important to provide at this point an overview of the thesis and how it is organised.

Chapter 2 starts the reappraisal of the study of occupations. It will review studies of occupations in different disciplines and will look at Labour Process Analysis (LPA) and how it relates to analyses of occupations. After reviewing previous studies on occupations and LPA main debates, the theoretical framework in which the empirical study is located will be presented. The framework proposes to analyse occupations through the workers' content, context and lived experience.

Chapter 3 will present a literature review of the secretarial occupation, the empirical focus of this research. The framework, as presented in chapter 2, will be tested in relation to secretarial work. This chapter will start from a historical account of secretarial work, its nature and meaning. It will also revisit past studies on secretarial work and their contributions and limitations. By analysing secretarial work, chapter 3 builds up the justification for the choice of secretarial work as a category for analysing occupations and sets the theoretical account on secretarial work to the methodological approach as will be detailed in chapter 4. Chapter 3 concludes by suggesting the application of the proposed framework to the study of secretaries as a category for analysing occupations.

Chapter 4 provides the methodological approach chosen for this study. Starting from the motivations that led the researcher to conduct such a study, this chapter will detail the methodological steps found appropriate to apply the framework. It will present the aim of the thesis to be a contribution to the study of occupational work through a holistic analysis of an occupation and to provide empirical insight into the occupational structure and experience of secretarial work. Alongside the implications of the aims and objectives of the study for choice of methods used, it will explore in detail the ethnographically informed methodology used to explore the content, context and lived experience of work.

Based on the research objectives set at the start of this thesis as well as on the literature review outcomes, chapter 4 will present three questions raised regarding the empirical focus of this study, secretarial work, in order to reach the aim of the thesis.

Chapter 4 presents the methodological process by detailing how data was collected with the chosen category. In addition, chapter 4 will explore the pilot experience that preceded data collection. This chapter ends by presenting the limitations and contributions of the methodological choices of the study.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 will present the findings in relation to the three framework elements as stand-alone chapters. They explore the main findings of this study on medical and legal secretarial work and will present an integrative analysis of the findings.

Chapter 8 will revisit the research objectives presented at the beginning of this thesis and will evaluate the conceptual and empirical contribution of this study. The conceptual contribution centres on the need for a holistic analysis of occupations as they are of vital importance to society, organisations and individuals. As seen in chapter 2, previous studies on occupations have focused on topical analysis of occupations and this thesis raises the argument that the literature on occupations needs to consider more deeply the actual work done and how it is experienced by the individual. It is argued that the sociology of work and occupations and the related areas that also analyse occupations present a conceptual lack with regard to the understanding of occupation as a holistic entity. The empirical contribution reveals that secretarial work was a useful category for the application of the framework. The empirical focus on secretarial work brought important insights into the debate on the centrality of the kind of work people do and their self and collective identity (Leidner, 2006). Thus, the empirical contribution thus adds to the current understanding of the present state of secretarial work.



## **CHAPTER 2: OCCUPATIONS**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter will review the existing literature on occupations. It will present an overview on what is known about occupations. It starts with studies on occupations and how they have been theorised and conceptualised by important bodies of work, as well as how occupations are commonly analysed as classifications, categories and as individual occupations. The next section presents the range of occupations commonly studied and the reasons why those studies are undertaken. In examining how occupations are studied, the next sections present examples of the different methodologies used in studies of occupations as well as other literature relevant to the understanding of occupations. This chapter concludes by proposing a holistic approach to studying occupations, an approach that acknowledges that one can only make sense of an occupation by analysing its content, in its organisational and individual context, thus combining objective and subjective factors as a means of understanding occupations.

### **2.2 Studies on occupations**

In reviewing the extant literature on occupational work it is useful to know what has been explored in the literature from different disciplinary perspectives and how these perspectives contribute to conceptualising and theorising occupations. Disciplinary perspectives highlight issues of substantive focus in the study of occupations. The next sections highlight the way occupations have been studied by using classification systems, occupational groupings and as individual occupations and how these literatures contribute to the understanding of occupations.

### **2.2.1 Theorizing and conceptualising occupations**

It has been argued that during the 1960s and 1970s there was a shift away from studies of work within organisation studies. For Barley & Kunda (2001:80), “the shift was associated with a number of trends in the discipline’s development, including a turn to systems theory and greater levels of abstraction, changing methodological norms, and increasing specialisation among students of social organisation”. Moreover, by that time, they argue, organisational theorists moved from departments of sociology into business schools and by the 1990s academic interest in work practices was the focus of sociologists of work and others such as industrial engineers and industrial psychologists. The latter look at work from the aspects of psychological effects in employment relations, how work is felt by people, focusing on the experience of work (Landy & Conte, 2007).

A more explicit critical perspective on work and occupations emerged from the gathering of industrial sociologists engaging with LPA. Labour Process “had the capacity to connect different dimensions of work, employment and industrial relations” (Thompson and Smith, 2010:12), playing a “necessary and positive purpose in maintaining a space for a critical sociology of work (Thompson and Smith, 2010:13). More aspects of LPA will be explored in section 2.5.

Studies in sociology add insight to the analysis of work and occupations. Sociological studies of occupational groups look at gender, race, nationality or sexuality issues. Analytical attention also focuses on collective identity, with very little attention to tasks or class.

A focused study on the sociology of occupations was undertaken by Krause (1971) in a very influential piece of work centred on types of occupational groupings. Krause’s study echoed through many contemporary accounts on the sociology of occupations.

Krause (1971) presented four "perspectives" for studying occupations: historical, biographical, structure and function, and conflict of interest in the division of labour. The historical perspective considers the role of occupational groups in society while the biographical perspective explores the meaning the individual gives to his activity

and the relationship between the individual and the institutions of which the occupation holder is part. The other perspectives analyse the division of labour in relation to its structure and function and to the conflicts of interests. Both aspects present analyses of occupations and major issues on work, such as the nature of the labour market, occupational categories, status, occupational mobility and the professions. Krause pursued the “interactions between individuals, occupational and professional groups, and the wider society” (Krause, 1971:1), as occupational groups may not perform the same function all the time. Four main questions were raised that directed Krause’s (1971: 1-4) study:

- What changes have there been in the historical roles of major occupational and professional groups?
- What is the individual’s relationship to his occupation or profession?
- What is the nature of an occupation’s or profession’s relation to the overall society?
- How do occupational and professional groups mediate between the individual and the wider society?

Krause’s study and the four perspectives contributed to the study of occupations in concluding that change-directed political action among groups is important in understanding changes in the field of occupations and professions, and in exploring aspects for future direction in studies of work and occupation.

Building on the contribution of the occupations literature, Hall (1983) developed a content analysis of articles on work and occupations in four general sociological journals and two specialised journals from the years 1976-1982 with the goal of addressing future directions in the sociology of occupations. Hall highlights the importance given to occupations as a central issue in conceptions of pre- and post-industrial societies. According to Hall (1983), *occupation* has been a variable and an important point of reference in different analyses in sociology. For his analysis, Hall included articles from specialised journals and articles focusing on occupations from

general sociological journals (1983:6). Below is the list of measures, and their descriptions, that resulted from Hall's content analysis. These measures were used to compare the contents of the journals in that period of time:

Measures	Description
Mobility status and income attainment	Individual and collective progression up the occupational spectrum
Negotiating order at work	Ways in which individuals subjectively arrange their work experience
Occupational socialisation	How individuals learn work roles and their attached values
Professions/professionalisation	Nature of professions, individual or collective attempts to professionalisation
Women/sex roles	Women at work, male-female differences in work roles
Unions/Collective bargaining	Collective work actions
Occupational power	Nature of, and shifts in, power among occupations within organisations
Satisfaction/Alienation	Positive and negative reactions to work
Worker participation/job redesign	Alternative forms of work organisation
Work and social organisation	Linkages between occupations and the social structure
Commitment to work	Degrees of work attachment
Leisure/non-work	Links between work and non-work activities
Aspirations	Individuals' expectations regarding their anticipated work
Race/Ethnicity	Work differences and similarities between racial and ethnic groups
Occupational differentiation	Horizontal and vertical distinction among occupations

Table 2.1: Hall's measures  
Adapted from Hall (1983:6-8)

Hall's analysis provided a historic and thematic picture of studies in the sociology of work and occupations. Hall's findings were that the trends in the sociology of

occupations were showing that research in the sociology of occupations and work could be “understood as a consequence and component of the context within and outside of sociology in which it is conducted” (1983:20). His analysis indicated that:

“...many of the scholars who examine status and income attainment would not classify themselves as occupational sociologists, but it is this area of research within the field that has witnessed the most impressive theoretical development. Students of the professions appear to have worked themselves out of the job. Analyses of women and sex roles have been common, but aside from a linkage to the status and income attainment literature, they have had little theoretical coherence. Studies of worker participation and job redesign have been hindered by an inattention to the obstacles facing such programs.” (Hall, 1983:20-21)

In addition, he questioned in which direction the field should move *vis-à-vis* the issues above, suggesting theorists move towards a more “greater theoretical sophistication and empirical relevance” (Hall, 1983:21).

Other scholars within the sociology field, such as Abbott (1988, 1993, 2005); Barley (1996, 2001, 2005), and Nelsen & Barley (1997) were also interested in the articulation of occupational work and social systems. In general, the main premise is that occupations serve as a major link between the individual and the society (Hall, 1969; Krause, 1971).

“The obvious relationship between occupations and social status, the less obvious but equally important relationships between occupations and education, political involvement, and family life, and the reciprocal relationships between general social change and changes in the occupational system all indicate the centrality of occupations in the social structure. Conflict between occupations and the social system comprises a significant part of the total relationship...” (Hall, 1969:vii)

Contemporary debates also explore economic and organisational changes within occupations (Barley, 2005; Frenkel, 2005; Graham, 2005; Hinnings, 2005; Osterman & Burton 2005; Tolbert, 2005; Leidner, 2006). Those debates focus on certain occupational groups, such as technical and service workers and blue-collar occupations; there is extensive literature on the impact of forces on those occupations (Graham, 2005), the development of occupational identities (Frenkel, 2005) and occupational control. Barley (2005) argues there is a lack of studies and lack of interest in studying technicians’ work, which is relevant to any study of occupations, and raises questions on the reasons why they are understudied. Developing Barley’s

argument, particular occupations are never or rarely studied, while disproportionate attention is paid to groups of occupations with higher status, such as professional workers. According to Macdonald (2006), this predominant focus on certain occupations, especially on the professions, might arise because of the nature of their work: they provide knowledge-based services that consumers or clients may find difficult to assess, and the latter may need to rely on the level and source of education attained by the professional or their having a license to practise his work as the basis of trust relations between the professional and client/customer. As Macdonald (2006:367) argues, “these features of professional work led functionalist theorists with their interests in the normative order of society, to focus on professions...”.

Studies in economics also theorise on work and occupations and how they are understood. Abbott (2005) draws on an economic sociology<sup>5</sup> perspective to explore work and occupations. He challenges the idea of the association between work and economic phenomena by presenting an examination of work disconnected from its paid forms. Abbott (2005:322) draws on the idea that “the varying depths of life course experience at any given time, encoded into cohorts and cohort segments presently extant in the labour force, constitute the materials on which occupations are built”. That is, he argues that work and occupations are closely connected to the life experience of a person, as it is part of the building process of the person’s identity.

After looking at the different theories and concepts on occupations given by different disciplines, it is important to highlight that occupations are often studied in three main ways: by operationalizing occupational classifications, by analysing groups or categories of occupations that exhibit key similarities, or by focussing on particular individual occupations. The next section will explore these three ways in which occupations appear in literature.

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<sup>5</sup> Economic Sociology is defined by Smelser & Sweldberg, (2005:3) as “the sociological perspective applied to economic phenomena”.

### 2.2.2 Classifications

As seen in chapter 1, occupational classification is one way of grouping and ranking occupations in order to provide an understanding about the workforce and the skills identified within each occupation. Studies use occupational classification data for a variety of purposes.

Prospective and current occupational membership encourages individuals to obtain both on-the-job training and formal education to develop appropriate skills sets for the occupation in question (Levenson & Zoghi, 2010:366). Thus, economists use occupational categories to conduct studies on human capital by using occupational classifications data: occupational data is used by institutional actors and individuals, “to facilitate communication about the content of a job which promotes more efficient screening of potential job applicants than otherwise might occur” (Levenson & Zoghi, 2010:366). The job requirements associated with any occupation are important for those who want to enter an occupation, professionals or non-professional occupations, whether by formal qualifications or on-the-job training, or both (Levenson & Zoghi, 2010).

Data from occupational classifications are also used by researchers in many fields. Economists and sociologists have researched the relationship between economic growth and technological change to changes in the nature and structure in the workforce. In many of those studies they have used statistical information on occupational structure based on skill classification (Elias & McKnight, 2001).

The changing nature of occupations in their various aspects exemplifies how important it is to develop better ways of understanding occupations and effectively understand them better. This understanding has been benefited by studies that utilise classification systems, such as the SOC. A lack of understanding of an occupation is a problem because it might represent a lack of understanding of the division of labour and the changes that occur within occupations as a result of social, political and organisational changes.

### **2.2.3 Categorisations**

Another way of looking at occupations is by categorising or grouping them. Occupations are usually broken down into broad categories in order to be described and analysed in relation to changes and variations within that occupational group. Those categories are the ones presented in chapter 1. However, the most prominent occupational category that has been explored in the work and occupations literature refers to the professions.

### **2.2.4 Individual occupations**

The other way of looking at occupations is by exploring one single occupation. Various studies look at occupations separately and usually explore occupations under the status of professions as well as non-professional occupations.

## **2.3 Occupations studied and why**

This section considers which occupations are commonly studied and the reason why they are studied.

### **2.3.1 All occupations**

Studies that use occupational classifications present data on all occupations in order to track the main changes affecting occupations as well as aspects of occupational inputs, such as gender and education. For economists, for example, occupations play a central role in labour markets, are the substance for human capital (education and experience) analysis and “are very highly correlated with income” (Levenson & Zoghi, 2010:366). Thus, economists use occupational classification in studies of income and human capital as a way of understanding the labour force.

On training matters, Freidson (2001) examines patterns in specialised training of three occupational categories – crafts, technicians and professionals – where among



craft workers the training received is on an on-the-job basis and depends on the demand of production as well as of those who finance it. Therefore, the demand for training is contingent on what work workers perform and contextual factors regarding the work location. One might argue whether in some occupations workers have been affected by changes to the extent that their traditional capabilities have been extended to include social and cognitive skills. Where social and cognitive skills are important, a holistic analysis of occupational work could generate important insights.

### **2.3.2 Professional occupations**

Academic work on occupations pays considerable attention to one category of occupations: professional work. As Watson (1995:172) argues, “the twentieth-century study of particular occupations by sociologists has tended to veer between a fascination with high-status professionals and various low-status or deviant work activities. The history of Western occupations has, however, been very much one of the rise and fall of the degree of occupational self-control maintained by various groups.” The professions still receive great attention from scholars, with well-known studies by, for example, Freidson (1986, 2001); Abbott (1988, 1989); Macdonald (1995), Watson (2002) and Muzzio (2010, 2011). Sociologists’ long-term interest in professional work can be traced to the founders of sociology in Durkheim’s discussions of authority, Weber’s bureaucracy, and Marx’s class conflict (Leicht & Fennell, 1997).

Many of the first debates on the professions were on the issue of what a profession consists of and which occupations would reach the status of profession (see for example Wilensky, 1964). This debate, however, persists in literature today, but, as Tolbert (2006) argues the contemporary debate seems to reflect more on Abbott’s (1988) broad definition of professions, that professions are “exclusive occupational groups applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases” (Tolbert 2006:334).

Wilensky (1964) focuses on the attempts of occupations to professionalise. He examined a popular generalisation that occupations would become professionalized. This “label” as he calls it, was loosely applied “to increasing specialisation and transferability of skill, the proliferation of objective standards of work, the spread of tenure arrangements, licensing, or certification, and the growth of service occupations” (1964:137). He argues that some occupations are unlikely to become professions, stating that "if the technical base of an occupation consists of a vocabulary that sounds familiar to everyone (...), or if the base is scientific but so narrow that it can be learned as a set of rules by most people, then the occupation will have difficulty claiming a monopoly of skill or even a roughly exclusive jurisdiction" (Wilensky, 1964: 148). Wilensky’s study contributed to the study of occupations and the field has changed considerably since then. Some assumptions raised by him are still useful today. One example is that despite focusing his work on those occupations aspiring to professional status, Wilensky also explored aspects such as those of occupations that try to change their name on a kind of “soul-searching on whether the occupation is a profession” (p. 144). This aspect will be further explored in chapter 3, as it relates closely to the secretarial occupation, the empirical material under analysis in this study.

### ***The term 'profession'***

The terms *occupation* and *profession* are often used interchangeably. However, Elias (1997:5) indicates a hierarchical distinction between *occupation* and *profession* when stating that:

“In the English language there is an ambiguity in both the interpretation and usage of the word *occupation* which enriches the concept and yet complicates the application of classification principles. (...)the word was used to indicate the possession of space as in the phrase *an army of occupation*. Then the usage of the word broadened to encompass the possession of time, particularly to describe the way in which people devoted time to market and non-market activities. Interestingly, a usage now regarded as obsolete references *occupation* as the pursuit of mercantile employment, a trade or craft, with the word *profession* reserved for a higher status of employment business or office.”

For Elias, while occupations could be understood as a pursuit of commercial employment, professions always referred to a higher status of employment. However, sometimes the term ‘occupations’ is used in relation to professions and the distinction is difficult to maintain. One example is when the term *occupation* is used instead of *profession* to avoid the “pretentious or sanctimonious overtone” given to the latter (Freidson, 2001: 12).

According to Wilensky (1964:138), “in the minds of both the lay public and professional groups themselves the criteria of distinction seem to be two: (1) The job of the professional is technical-based on systematic knowledge or doctrine acquired only through long prescribed training. (2) The professional man adheres to a set of professional norms”.

In defining a profession, it is possible to say that professionals form a group of workers that has formalised credentials of their respective professional knowledge and inclusion in higher education (Lopes, 2006). This group constitutes a profession. To the general notion of occupations, divided by those called *professions* and others called *occupations*, one can add another category given by Etzioni (1969), i.e. the “semi-professions”. This category is defined by those workers with shorter training, less legitimate status, right to privileged communication less established, less of a specialised body of knowledge and less autonomy from supervision or societal control than the professions (Etzioni, 1969:v). Despite the fact that those terms are

conceptually distinct, the definition of profession remains a contested field among theorists. This is exemplified by Freidson (1988) when he argues on the academic controversy on the definition of professions and the attributes used to define professions, as the differences among the “traditional status professions” (e.g. doctors and lawyers) are “too great to allow generalisations” (page 41). Most of the disagreements about the attributes for defining professions come from these differences, Freidson (1988) argues.

Given the definition that professionals are workers who are part of a group that has formalised credentials, a more generic definition for occupation can be summarised as a way of locating people within a labour process structure, or simply “just areas of tasks in a division of labour” (Abbott, 2005:322). As an operational definition to be used throughout this study, the term *occupational work* will be regarded as paid work which does not have the status of professional work, that is, occupational work is work which does not offer the worker the same high status, exclusive jurisdiction and membership control that a profession does.

There is also, as noted by Hall (1983), the issue of an existing popular idea of professionalism and the professionalism as presented in sociological analyses, which are two very different perspectives:

“Management and administrative theory and practice treat the professions as though they are a distinct category. Activities as diverse as client movements which seek to undermine aspects of the power base of some professions, and writers who seek profit from disseminating information about avoiding probate or selling one’s own real estate are seldom, if ever, concerned with sociological debates about the nature of the professions. A common basis of evaluation for many kinds of positions in organisations is whether or not the incumbents are acting professionally” (Hall, 1983:13).

The popular idea indicates that being professional means “acting professionally” (Hall, 1983), simply signifying that people are “occupationally competent” (Watson, 2002:95). Hall argued that it is important to consider this popular use as it may “contain additional elements which would contribute to a more complete understanding of the phenomena of the professions” (1983:13).

## ***Changes and professional work***

Research on professions also focuses on the changes affecting professional work. Global changes impact on the organisation–professionals relationship. Indeed, there is an intersection of the fields of interest that concern the study of professions and the study of organisations (Hinings, 2005). The two fields are sometimes related and sometimes separated. However, there is current interest in both fields together “centred on the nature of professional organisations and the ways in which they are changing” (Hinings, 2005:404). This may reflect a tendency to give importance to an associated analysis of changes within the professions that may impact the way in which occupations are usually studied.

A few lessons can be learned from this discussion on professionals that relates to the importance of studying occupations. Literature shows that studies of the sociology of work have examined various aspects and various occupations with professional status, mainly focused on describing and contesting the many characteristics that allow someone to be called a professional. There is an extensive list of attributes and organisational facts that define some occupations as professions. However, one could argue if studies on individual professions would contribute to a more holistic understanding of professions and other occupations. Although studies on professions might present an understanding that goes beyond what the public perceive as a professional, as well as an understanding that makes clear what the professional him/herself understands and perceives as being professional, it remains an open question as to whether such an approach can be applied to other occupations. Another argument has been raised that the list of features that classify someone as a professional should not be as important as how the person achieved their position as a professional (Klegon, 1978).

In addition, studies on professionalism may, firstly, contribute to subfields of studies of occupations as they may develop concepts and theories on issues such as gender, power, control and status that would also be important to the development and understanding of other occupations with no professional status. Secondly, studies on professionals might contribute to the development and understanding of occupations to the extent to which they look at some aspects of work structure. However, they are

not potentially helpful if it is considered that the organisation of professional workers, the ones with the status of professionals, differs from occupations not included in this category. Occupational workers would have to be organised in such a way as to have enough grounds for comparability and as a result “the nature and the degree to which an occupation is organised could be viewed as a major missing attribute of the more traditional model” (Hall, 1983:12).

### **2.3.3 Other occupational groups**

Recent studies on specific occupational groups centre on occupations such as care work (England, 2005), service work (Howcroft and Richardson, 2008) and retail work (Anderson et al., 2011; Darr, 2011; Felstead et al., 2011; Gatta, 2011; Grugulis, Bozkurt & Clegg, 2011; Huddleston, 2011; Jordan, 2011; Klaveren & Voss-Dahm, 2011; Lynch et al., 2011; Mulholland, 2011; Nickson et al., 2011; Price, 2011; Roberts, 2011; Tilly & Carré, 2011). Studies on retail work are examples of a large amount of quantitative research and authors argue on the significance of researching retail work as the “new generic form of mass employment in the post-industrial socio-economic landscape” (Bozkurt & Grugulis, 2011:2). The interest in retail work is due to the fact that the retail work sector has an increasing significance to society and employs a diverse group of workers.

### **2.3.4 Individual occupations**

After considering that classifications look at all types of occupations and that the literature also presents work on groups or categories of occupations, it is also important to note that the literature on occupations also presents rich studies on individual occupations.

In studies of individual occupations, it is possible to find a great variation with different disciplines that look at various aspects of occupational work. Research today looks at long-standing professions, such as doctors and lawyers (see Muzio, 2010, 2011), and those new professions, such as nurses, teachers, and others that expand the professional category. Studies look at professionals’ relationship to a changing organisation and how they are subject to change. However, the literature focuses more on analysing “professional organisations *per se* rather than professionals in organisations” (Hinings, 2005: 405).

It is also important to acknowledge the emergence of studies of some niche occupations, such as, hairdressers, tattoo artists, body work (Wolkowizt, 2009:855-856), also called the “body work economy”, which have been receiving attention in

many academic journals. However, this might demonstrate a new trend in research towards a more distributed evaluation among different occupations. That is, maybe the development of studies looking at a wider variety of occupations, professionals or not, could be a move towards the end of the tendency to have many studies in a few specific occupational groups. When Roth et al. (1973) reviewed the literature on the sociology of occupations, they faced the issue of having too many occupational case studies but not well distributed in the existing occupations. In addition, at that time, most studies were focused on the better known and more prestigious occupations that would receive extensive study while the “more lowly occupations are the less attention they would get” (Roth et al., 1973). The picture today has changed more in this respect.

Consideration of the extant literature reveals considerable richness and breadth in the study of occupations. However, there is less of a focus on how individuals both experience an occupation as well as how they constitute the occupation.

## **2.4 How occupations are studied**

As explored in the previous section, occupations are presented in the literature in relation to the SOC that looks at all occupations; in addition, occupations are also explored in regard to groupings or categories, such as professional and non-professional occupations and occupational groupings, such as retail work. There are also studies in the literature on individual occupations, presenting a vast and rich picture of many different individual occupations. This section now focuses on how occupations are usually studied.

Most studies of occupations that use classifications are quantitative. “For most quantitative analysis, occupation means the (current) task, given by the SOC codes and the triple-digit census classification. Such analysis makes strong assumptions, especially about change in the occupational system over time” (Abbott, 2005:322). Thus, what the extant literature shows today is a variety of quantitative studies on various trends in the nature of work.



The categories and groupings of occupations are studied either in quantitative or qualitative analysis. While existing literature on individual occupations includes quantitative studies that look at, for example, income, segregation, and satisfaction, most such studies are qualitative.

One example is a noteworthy work undertaken by Barley in 1996. He draws on a set of ethnographies to propose an empirically grounded model of technicians' work (1996:404). His findings show evidence of apparent problems facing organisations that employ technicians but fail to recognise the nature of their work. However, Barley's was an example of a study which focused on the nature of work. He contributed to the studies of occupations examining "new models of work and relations of production that affect changes in the division of labour and occupational structure of a post-industrial economy" (Barley, 1996:404). His core questions were "what do technicians do and what do they know?" (Barley, 1996:404) and his findings showed that "the emergence of technicians' work may signify a shift to a more horizontal division of substantive expertise that undermines the logic of vertical organising...".

The literature has been stimulating more empirical work on occupations from a wider range of perspectives than mentioned above. It is suggested that future research may well assess multiple dimensions of change over many occupations, the nature of their work and their experience, as some debates have not been sensitive to particular themes nor particular occupations.

## **2.5 Other literature relevant to understanding occupations**

Conceptual developments in the wider study of work also impacted on the study of occupations. Those contributions, as explored below, highlight a component of some kinds of occupations thus providing a useful concept for differentiating between occupations.

### 2.5.1 Labour Process Analysis

This study argues that the potential contribution of studies of work and occupations can be well developed when analysed through the lens of LPA, as it is the tradition that mostly attempts to present a picture of what people do and what is in the occupation, the nature of the work.

One important impact of Marx's ideas on modern work and organisational sociology is the use of his concept of 'labour process' which is a "perspective which combines interests in employee behaviour, employment relations and questions of work design and organisation" (Watson, 2012:69).

Historically, LPA brought together a range of post-Braverman debates on the labour process. It concerns the dynamics of work started since the publication of Braverman's (1974) *Labour and Monopoly Capital* and as noted by Smith (2009:5), "part of a labour process perspective directly given by Braverman's methodology is to look 'behind' the claims of formal classifications and espoused management paradigms and this still informs contemporary debates about a supposed break from Taylorism". Braverman's thesis was that the pursuit of capitalist interests resulted in the deskilling, routinizing and mechanising of the jobs. Considering workplace and employment relations as dynamic issues, "the notion of the workplace as a contested terrain is a central motif of Labour Process Theory" (Thompson and Harley, 2007:149). In considering the contested nature of employment relationships, LPA looks at a number of features as important elements analysing the dynamics of work:

"Work tasks and their constitution (including the routine of repetitive or fragmentary work tasks), skill use and control over the method and performance of work (including the deskilling of particular jobs and application of technologies), the intensity of work and the degree of effort exercised by workers in the course of their work, and the level and type of control exercised by management over labour and the labour process" (Webster, 1996:19).

Feminist researchers interested in the labour processes of women were usually concerned with more features than the core ones of labour process analysis (Webster, 1996:19) such as the gender content of jobs as well as the workers' experiences.

Gender is also important in relation to concepts of control systems. As argued by Thompson (1983:230), “there has been a considerable extension of our understanding of the interrelations between gender and control in the labour process”, as gender is also present in studies on job design and contemporary studies on femininity shaping control practices in the workplace. Although the focus of this study is not on gender issues and although LPA is considered a useful framework, this study considers the relevance of LPA and its contribution to the studies of occupations. However, it extends LPA to include other relevant elements in order to analyse occupations more holistically. In addressing these issues, the framework proposed for analysis will look at features that may have been studied by various bodies of thought within the LPA tradition; however, it will look at the proposed features all together, looking behind formal classifications and giving voice to the worker.

The conceptual framework proposed in this study will be empirically applied in relation to secretarial work, and will be informed by LPA. LPA was found useful and appropriate for examining the dynamics of occupational work and it is conventionally used to analyse “detailed features of work and the experiences of workers”.

LPA thinkers also debated a lack of subjectivity in the Labour Process tradition (Marks & Thompson, 2010). Identity has been the “missing subject” (Thompson & Findlay, 1996) cited in debates of LPA where concerns were related to “how to fill in the hole originally left by Braverman’s objectivism – his self-limiting choice to omit consideration of worker action and attitudes in relation to what he regarded as the long run tendency to work degradation” (Marks & Thompson, 2010:316).

Referring to the analysis of identity within the LPA tradition and as an attempt to further develop a “materialistic reading of identity”, Marks and Thompson (2010) argue that identity has become the focal point of concern across social sciences. They refer to the interest in the connection of identity to mainstream LPA by citing important work developed on the perspective of identity “that can bring something different to the debate and which are compatible with the tradition of LPA” (Marks & Thompson, 2010:318). Among those who added to this debate, they cite Webb’s

(2006) contribution to the debate on identities and organisations. Webb (2006:2) argues that “our sense of self and social identities are significantly shaped by our experiences of organisations, our dependence on them for political, economic and cultural infrastructure, and our development of new organisational expertise that reshapes societies”. It is argued that the discussion on work and the debate on identities and how they are shaped and dependent on organisations is again, as raised by Hinings (2005) with reference to the studies on professional organisations, focused on the organisational-self more than the self in the organisation. There is a growing body of insightful research that gives work the importance it has for people’s lives. The literature on identity is one of them and it will be explored in the next section.

### **2.5.2 Identity**

Another relevant literature that aids understanding of occupations is that on identity. The word ‘identity’ is itself a contested concept (Huot & Rudman, 2010) and has a combination of meanings. In sociology, identity has no clear definition,

“it is used widely and loosely in reference to one’s sense of self, and one’s feelings and ideas about oneself, as for example in the terms ‘gender identity’ or ‘class identity’. It is sometimes assumed that our identity comes from the expectations attached to the social roles that we occupy, and which we then internalise, so that it is formed through the process of socialisation” (Marshal, 1998:296).

Leidner (2006) offers two sets of meanings of identity: firstly, a set that focuses “on individuality, the life history and the social relations that constitutes the person” (Leidner, 2006:426); secondly, a set that focuses on “collectivity, patterns of shared identification”. Leidner argues that both sets of meanings can be applied to both “self-conception and how one is regarded and treated by others” (2006:426). Further to the definition of identity, it is important to draw on the difference between self and identity when analysing identity issues. Leidner’s first set of meanings of ‘identity’ is related to the meaning of the ‘self’ as presented by Webb (2006:10), as “our personal awareness of a continuity of being, which is unique, physically embodied and (...) shares a capacity for agency”. For Webb (2006:10) identity “focuses on processes of

categorising people or allocating them to groups”. Indeed, the process of categorizing others is what differentiates self-identification and identification or categorisation of oneself by others (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). People are commonly categorised by others in relation to various areas, such as race, gender, and status.

It is not different in the case of occupations; as discussed in previous sections, occupations are usually externally identified in a way that has no counterpart in the domain of self-identification: “formalised, codified, objectified systems of categorisation developed by powerful, authoritative institutions” (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000:10) – one example is the SOC.

“The modern state has been one of the most important agents of identification and categorization in this latter sense. In culturalist extensions of the Weberian sociology of the state, notably those influenced by Bourdieu and Foucault, the state monopolizes, or seeks to monopolize, not only legitimate physical force but also legitimate symbolic force, as Bourdieu puts it. This includes the power to name, to identify, to categorize, to state what is what and who is who...” (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000:10)

It is suggested here that the formal codification of occupational categories implies nothing about the variety and the nature of the work of such categories in the lived experience of the persons categorized which is related to their personal and occupational identity. The formal classifications are merely the ways which powerful institutions, like the government, use to define or identify who someone is.

Work is an important basis for identity. Although insights provided by various disciplines are useful to understanding occupations, the foci of analysis are, for example, usually issues of race, nationality and gender on which analytical attention has been theorizing on collective and personal identity, with little attention to work (Leidner, 2006). “Work, however, must be acknowledged as an important basis of identity, functioning as a shaper of consciousness, a determinant of status, an arena for self-development, and a source of social ties. People’s relation to work, hence, influences their sense of self and the sense that others have of them” (Leidner, 2006:424). It is true that “identities of workers are shaped by the work they do” (Leidner, 1993:212) and the relationship between occupations and identity may require investigation as to whether and how occupations determine identities. The answer is not yet known and this is not the focus of this study. However, this study

considers the relationship between one's personal and occupational identity in terms of how an occupation is understood by its holder and how the holder perceives other people's understanding of his/her occupation. The meaning an occupation holder ascribes to his/her occupation might be different from what formal categorisations of occupations might produce, given the limits of formal classification.

## **2.6 The conceptual framework**

This chapter has so far presented major issues in regard to the study of occupations, occupations commonly studied, the reason why they are studied and how they are studied. This study acknowledges the importance and contribution of studies in many disciplines that consider occupations as being important to the life of people and to the analysis of work. However, it is questionable whether many studies present a holistic analysis of occupations as a way of understanding them. That is, despite the richness of many analyses of occupations there is still a gap to be explored. This gap relates to a holistic study that provides a deeper and more embedded insight into people's work – their work content, context, and lived experience – by prioritising the voice of the occupation holder.

Having shown some of the major reasons for the wealth of literature on occupations as well as its importance for society, for the organisation and for the individual, one should argue that theoretical and conceptual debates in the field of the sociology of occupations should not separate conceptual developments from “empirical reality” (Hall, 1983).

This study proposes a conceptualisation of occupations that is not confined to the existing conceptualisation of occupations, which are usually based solely on skills and tasks, enforced and represented by occupational classifications as demonstrated in chapter 1. It is argued here that those classifications and the common definitions of occupations fail to address the rich and complex world of people's experience at work. According to Bottero (2005:56), “all jobs (...) are embedded in wider social relationships, and the meaning of holding a particular occupation is strongly affected by the social identity, networks and life trajectory of the people in that job”. It is

suggested here that the concept of occupation is embedded in this holistic view of occupational work, holistic meaning that occupations are not only a group of tasks, but that occupations are constituted by the *content* of work, the *context* in which work is experienced and by the individual *lived experience*.

### ***Occupations are “real social things”***

Abbott (2005) argues that occupations have three realities: firstly, that the various depths of a life course experience are the material in which occupations are built. Abbott builds his arguments highlighting that he considers occupations as “real social things”, not just a set of categories in which people are assigned, thus locating them in areas of tasks in a division of labour (2005:322); secondly, the idea that occupations are “particular and enduring groups of people”, that is, occupations involve sustained membership of the occupational holder to a specific occupation; thirdly, “conceiving occupations through their institutions – associations, unions, friendly societies, licensing boards, and so on” (2005:322). Abbott argues that the various research areas are usually differentiated by their choice among these concepts – or these realities – of occupations. Most quantitative studies consider occupations as groups of tasks, while new labour history looks at occupations as institutions, such as unions, family and employment structures, “although also amassing data on occupations as groups of people at a given moment” (2005:322). The literature on professions, however, is one that “insists on all three aspects all combined, disdaining those occupations unable to connect an enduring group of people, a set of institutions, and a task area” (2005:322).

Although Abbott’s conceptualisations on the meaning of occupation go a step further than others, his argument about where and how the notion of occupation is applied in research is one view about the development and understanding of occupations in general. This is because Abbott (2005) affirms that his notion of occupation as a “full social entity” can only be applied to the professions and crafts. As he argues: “If any occupations are full social entities – tasks, people, and organisation – it is the

professions and crafts. I focus ...on the professions, which are larger, more powerful, and growing; the crafts are in demographic decline” (2005:323). He also argues that, demographically, professionals remain longer in the occupation than other members of occupational groups.

Abbott (2005) suggests that any serious study of occupations should evaluate how and when these three elements he proposes can be put together in order to answer questions such as whether a task can be, or does a task area remain, unified across time, how groups of people remain in the division of labour when they and the institutions age and how occupational structures grow, develop and die. Many of these questions are answered in relation to professions in Abbot’s major work (Abbott, 1988, 1991, 1993, 2002).

Although Abbott’s full social entity notion is very helpful, it is interesting to consider whether the professions, as “full social entities”, are, as Abbott argues, the only set of occupations to be used as objects to further study of occupation using different dimensions and aspects of their organisation of work and of the workers’ personal experience. This study intends to take another step and develop it further. The “full social entity” concept may not only be relevant to the professions –it might also apply to the non-professions and underestimate other relevant aspects of occupations such as the ones informed by LPA.

### ***Content, context and lived experience***

Considering this an approach that does not look at occupations as just categories and building on:

- 1 - Abbott’s framework of occupations as “real social things”;
- 2 - The existing studies on occupations that contributed to the development and understanding of occupations;
- 3 - The existing analysis of occupations that lack detailed examination of the occupation from the point of view of the occupation holder;



4 - The LPA as a theoretical engine to look at occupations holistically, that given its attention to the changing nature of work; it might aid more elaboration on how occupations are perceived and identified by the worker within this proposed holistic structure of analysis.

This study will attempt to present a holistic view of an occupation, when holistic means a consideration of an occupation as more than a collection of tasks and not separable from the individual who occupies it and the context in which the role is undertaken.

This research proposes a framework that extends Abbott's "full social entities" concept and intends to look at and beyond the usual themes of analysis and categorizations of occupations. Informed by LPA, it proposes a three-dimensional analysis of occupational work, which focuses on the work content, framed by the worker's lived experience as a way of understanding an occupation; without disconnecting it from the context where work is undertaken. There is a rich tradition in the LPA that can potentially inform this study and bring new insights into the labour process of an occupation. Changes in organisations and in the organisation of work destabilise work, its content, and context and have direct impact on labour power and control. This changing context affects labour power and LPA relates to this "indeterminacy" in its tradition to analyse work:

LPA "generated fresh insights into how work relations are structured and de-structured (...) mobilized or generated in large part by the indeterminacy of labour power, This concept of an 'indeterminacy of labour power' is central to the traditions of labour process analysis and is rooted in a basic Marxist distinction between the capacity or *potential* to labour (e.g. hiring labour on an hourly rate) and the *realized* labour in the production of goods or services" (O'Doherty & Willmott, 2009:932).

The three dimensions are interconnected and together they may present a way forward to understand an occupation and its complexities. Therefore, to understand occupations it is necessary to analyse various components of the three dimensions as argued.

Therefore, this study presents an approach that with a LPA lens may reveals the richness and breadth in the study of an occupation. This approach will focus on how individuals both experience an occupation as well as how they constitute the occupation.

Building on Abbott's framework of occupations as well as the existing studies and analysis of occupations that although useful they still lack analysis on the occupational holder's perspective, this study uses them to build the a broader way of analysing occupations.

### **2.6.1 The content**

The content of the job is central to the understanding of the job itself. In looking at the content, it is argued that there is a need to understand contemporary occupations and what tasks are required from the worker for his/her distinct job. The skills required are also important to understanding the present state of a given occupation. The skill base of an occupation will bring questions regarding the occupation's knowledge base and what education and training might be like in the occupational field.

Despite the evidence of a growing literature exploring certain occupations, these studies are driven by interest in specific occupations rather than occupational work. Although growing but still lacking attention to some occupational groups, studies today lack focus on the work itself and what the occupational holder does. Abbott (2005:309) is right when he says that "...it is about workers as an unconnected, categorised mass that we know the most", not about the work itself as it is claimed here or how the work is experienced in context. This study acknowledges the importance and contribution of Abbott's "full social entities" notion, however, it will adapt his concepts to a non-professional occupation.

Based on the Labour Process main features of analysis as presented, the content dimension will be analysed in relation to: tasks, skills, knowledge, training and education.

## 2.6.2 The context

With a holistic approach, this study argues for an exploration of occupational work giving attention to the context in which work is undertaken. It will explore occupational work as a whole; this means that “a description and interpretation of a person’s social environment, or an organisation’s external context, is essential for overall understanding of what has been observed during fieldwork or said in an interview” (Patton, 2002:59). This holistic approach assumes that the context is a central aspect to understanding an occupation.

The context in this framework relates to the place in which the work is undertaken. It considers the place of work, as well as changes in the organisation or design of the work and in occupational structure and the social and collective organisation involved in the occupational work. The context will be analysed in terms of the main facts surrounding the occupational work under analysis that brings meaning to the understanding of the occupation.

Collective organisation is also important to map the way individuals work – whether they tend to work on an individual basis or more collectively – and the social location and dynamics of these possible interactions.

Still in the context of occupations, the condition of work in the organisation is an important point for analysis. It is related to spatial location (the nature of the organisation) and social location (who workers identify with). There is an unknown dimension of the growing variation in settings where occupational work takes place and the implications this diversity has for the notions of occupational work.

One example of the importance of the context in which labour is undertaken is also considered by LPA when analysing managerial control strategies. It is argued that “managerial activity should be understood not as straightforwardly imposing upon employees the work tasks ‘required by capital’ but as engaging in a competition for control with employees, albeit in the same long-term interests of the owner of the capital” (Watson, 2012:159). Watson (2012) argues that the way this managerial control is exerted on the labour process may vary according to circumstances. These circumstances are all about the context of the labour process. The context is

important and it affects labour in different ways. Examples of context variations are: firstly, managerial intentions and practices may vary from one organisation to another, that is, they are dependent on the organisational circumstances and goals; secondly, national or cultural differences also add to the study of labour process analysis.

It is clear that to understand occupations and therefore the nature of occupational work there is a need to recognise the importance of labour context. Individuals see things differently and act differently in different organisations and in different times and situations. Some occupations are inherently varied and present in different contexts. One example is the secretarial occupation, as argued by Webster (in Purcell et al., 1986).

In attempting to build from the Labour Process main features of analysis, the context dimension will be analysed in relation to: changes, social and collective organisation and conditions of work and other contextual aspects that may be raised by the occupation holder.

Gathering data on multiple aspects of the phenomena under scrutiny is important to support the holistic approach as proposed and, as argued by Patton (2002):

“To assemble a comprehensive and complete picture of the social dynamic of the particular situation or program. This means that at the time of data collection, each case, event, or setting under study, though treated as a unique entity with its own particular meaning and its own constellation of relationships emerging from and related to the context within which it occurs, is also thought of as a window into the whole...” (2002:60).

The above quote argues how the context in which the work is undertaken may help in providing a comprehensive picture of the object under analysis.

### **2.6.3 The lived experience**

The lived experience of the occupational worker is another important issue for analysis. It is believed here that the lived experience of the worker may reveal the occupational meaning for the occupation holder. The occupation holder's lived

experience relates to everything they have experienced through life, which has direct relationship to their identity. Lived experience involves all aspects of one's life, "the totality of life" (Manen, 1990:36). Arguing on the phenomenological significance of lived experience, Manen (1990:36) relates lived experience to "relating the particular to the universal, part to the whole, episode to totality".

Analysing lived experience, it may be possible to look at an occupation in terms of the totality of the occupation holder's experience in a more personal aspect as well. The occupation holder's lived experience is what shapes the sense of self, relating the individual to their personal and occupational identity, and in the context of work, to their occupation content and context. As an example, socially, occupational workers' career history and entry paths may have implications to their relation to their occupation, and each aspect may vary from one person to another.

Lived experience here is considered to be how the occupation holder feels in relation to his occupation; how the occupational worker makes sense of the occupation in relation to his/her lived experience; how the holder came to occupy the role and how he/she occupies the role.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter was to present studies of work and occupation undertaken in different disciplines, and set the theoretical reasoning and the framework that will drive the methodological decisions for this study. One important aim of this chapter, however, was to raise the argument that the literature on occupation needs to consider more deeply a detailed examination of the experience of occupational working from the point of view of the occupation holder.

The contention that occupations matters is a powerful one. Krause (1971) discussed people's relationship to their occupation or profession, and the idea that we cannot understand an occupational group by enclosing it in "a specific time and organisation" (p. 3) and not considering the individual's relationship to his/her occupation. For Krause (1971:2), this relationship "is complex, some dimensions of it being conscious and others unconscious". Krause's arguments strengthen the idea

that an occupation cannot be understood if the individual is not considered, not even the complexities involved in the individual's relationship with his/her occupation.

In conclusion, a criticism that this study raises is that the sociology of work and occupations and the related areas that also analyse occupations present a conceptual lack with regard to the understanding of occupation as a holistic entity.

There is a lack of theoretical development in the direction of understanding occupation, the meaning ascribed by the person to it, the way a person experiences and understands the occupation and the way the context in which the person is inserted may affect or not the perception of the occupation experience.

It is argued here that the holistic approach is a useful way of understanding occupations. Abbott (1993:187) states that "changes in occupations cannot be constructed without the work system that enfolds them", so occupations need to be studied not in isolation from other aspects that permeate the occupational experience.

The holistic approach of the proposed framework will study occupations in relation to the complexities that are involved in work, using three dimensions of occupational work for analysis: the work content, context, and lived experience. This approach will be applied in relation to one particular occupation – the secretarial occupation – then it will be evaluated as to its appropriateness to the study of occupations. This approach will use LPA as the core features of LPA will inform the presentation of the findings.

The empirical focus of this thesis is on the secretarial occupation. In order to understand the contemporary work of secretaries and to answer the questions raised in this study regarding occupational work, it is therefore necessary to explore the definition of secretary and the complexities surrounding this occupation and to assess secretaries' work by applying the framework proposed. The next chapter will look at the secretarial occupation as a category to understand occupational work. The empirical focus on secretarial work brings important insights to the debate, as the kind of work people do is central to their self and collective identity and to the identity people ascribe to them (Leidner, 2006:435), notwithstanding the unique characteristics of this group of occupational workers that make it worthy of analysis. These characteristics will be presented in more detail in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 3: SECRETARIAL WORK

### 3.1 Introduction

The purpose of the previous chapter was to review the literature on occupations and propose a conceptual framework for analysing occupations in terms of the work content, context, and the lived experience of the occupational holder. This proposed framework will be tested in relation to secretarial work. Before doing so, however, this chapter presents a review of the literature on secretarial work starting with a historical account of research on secretarial work and definition issues. Then, it revisits studies on secretarial work over the last decades, highlighting their contribution and limitations in general, for a particular evaluation of how far existing research on secretaries addresses the three dimensions that are important in understanding occupational work.

### 3.2 The secretarial occupation

Despite preconceptions, either by academics or the general public, that the work of secretaries could be extinguished due to technological advancements, secretaries are still found in companies today. In a contemporary non-academic book that addresses secretaries and personal assistants (PAs), France (2009) presents a picture of the 'assistant' and argues on the future of the secretarial role, as she says:

“The advance of technology is changing the role of the assistant, but it is still as important as ever. There will always be a need for assistants, either in the more traditional role of diary management and PA-type duties or as office managers, project managers, event managers and so on. Today’s assistants are expected to multi-task as well as being multi-skilled. They often have university degrees and are able to speak more than one language. They usually have the most important problem-solving skills and are the first to know exactly what is going on in the company, whether because they work for the top people and have access to confidential information or because they ‘keep their ears to the ground’ and know what’s going on in the organisation as a whole – through the ‘grapevine’.” (France, 2009:206-207).

Given the presence of secretaries today in organisations and predictions of an occupation that will be kept as part of the labour market and will develop, it is

important to know its history. Although there is much attention paid in the literature to the history and changes in clerical work, there is not much on the history of the secretarial role. From existing evidence, the next section will present a historical account of the secretarial occupation as well as presenting a discussion in relation to the definition of 'secretary'.

### 3.2.1 History of the secretarial role

According to Sabino & Rocha (2004), the secretarial occupation can be historically associated with scribes from the Egyptian era, when scribes appeared as required workers who developed important roles in bureaucratic organisation as part of social history (2004:4). The scribes constituted an important occupation in that era, as they had opportunity to follow a career in public service or as property administrators as they had a wide variety of knowledge, including mathematics and accountancy (2004:40). They used to work for the church and the state, having a privileged position because of their ability to read and write (Truss, 1992).

The scribes relate to the secretarial occupation as “they had the task of writing down the dictation of their superiors. For that they would sit with their legs crossed, stretching their skirts out as makeshift tables, where they would lay the papyrus to write on with a feather quill or reed brush” (Sabino & Rocha, 2004:5).



Figure 3.1: The Scribe  
Louvre Museum, Paris.



Clerical work emerged as a significant occupational category in the nineteenth century. “Many of these early clerical jobs were tedious and repetitive; ledger clerks entered figures and did elementary arithmetic, copyists copied documents all day long. Wages were rarely high enough to put clerks solidly into the middle class. Even job security was often out of reach. Clerks faced frequent layoffs from periodic business depressions and bankruptcies and were often hired as temporary workers to do copying, addressing, and posting jobs by the piece. Few of them realistically expected to rise to positions of executive rank” (Strom, 1992:175).

According to Strom (1992:173), in her analysis of office work from 1900 to 1930, “historical treatments of office work have emphasized the conjunction of mechanization, scientific management, and the hiring of women as clerical workers”.

Women started to appear in the office in the 1930s, when they were employed to operate machinery such as typewriters. The Second World War contributed to the explosion of female office workers and slowly they became a regular kind of worker in every organisation.

Historically, people drifted into secretarial work after studying basic shorthand and typing, often beginning in the typing pool and progressing from junior to senior secretary, then to personal assistant. For many it was through lack of opportunities in the workplace; for others it was a stopgap between school and marriage. There were certainly no opportunities for advancement beyond the limited secretarial world (Cox, 1998:ix).

In the years when women started to move into the labour force, job discrimination kept women out of highly-rewarded jobs (Abbott, 2005:324) and as a result “in the glory years the labour force was full of extremely smart and well educated secretaries, a group that largely disappeared from the labour force once the great affirmative action settlements of the 1970s made it much easier for such women to become lawyers, executives and doctors.”

### 3.2.2 Definitions: What a secretary is or what a secretary does

It is important to define what a secretary is. However, such definition is presented in the literature as a complex issue. Evidence shows that what a secretary is might be linked and described by what a secretary does. This is demonstrated from the definition of the word. The word 'secretary' derives from the Latin *secretum*, meaning keeper of the secrets (Cox, 1998); "in medieval times a secretary was the person who dealt with the correspondence of the king, or other high-ranking person, and consequently with confidential and secret matters (...)" (Vinnicombe, 1980:8-9). For France (2009), secretaries today do much more than what was usually understood by being a secretary; she argues that "(...) they were originally called secretaries because they were the holders of secrets; they still fulfil that role, but do much more" (France, 2009:207).

Practitioners' literature from the 1980s (Eckersley-Johnson, 1983) attempts to define 'secretaries' through a description of their broad scope of duties and from analysis of job advert requirements for secretarial positions (Harding, 1985). Harding (1985:59) also points out that it is important to consider that 'secretary' will mean different things for different people and that the main thing is to "recognize the distinction between secretarial duties and responsibilities rather than having a concrete meaning for secretary".

Pringle (1989:22) also points out that secretarial work can be described in "professional terms" and it is usually done by addressing communications and administration. "A secretary's task is to facilitate communication between her section or department and the rest of the organisation as well as the outside world of clients, customers, and suppliers. This task involves both written and verbal forms. She may draft correspondence herself, or work from longhand copy, from shorthand or from a Dictaphone. She may type and circulate letters, reports, papers or minutes, or pass all but the most confidential down the line". For Vinnicombe (1980:9), although a variety of tasks are associated with the secretary in companies today, the original notions of confidentiality and skill in writing correspondence are still elements most traditionally linked with the occupation. An example of what a secretary is by the skills and profile required can be seen in Appendix F.

## Titles

To further complicate the issue of defining secretarial work, today there are different secretarial titles (Stanwell & Shaw, 1974:14) in companies and organisations in all sectors. The secretarial function<sup>6</sup> has changed its title to personal assistant (PA), personal secretary, and admin secretary (Stanwell & Shaw, 1974). The titles varies among 'secretary', 'junior secretary', 'senior secretary', 'personal assistant', 'admin secretary', 'admin assistant' and there are also the specialized secretarial positions (Eckersley-Johnson, 1983:8-9) that give some secretaries titles such as legal secretary, medical secretary and chartered secretary.

This variation in job titles resulted in companies and recruitment agencies not being consistent in the way they advertise jobs (Carysforth, 1997); making a clear definition is still an obscure issue. With a brief look at websites of employment agencies it is possible to find various titles in which the position for a secretarial function is advertised. Whilst some job adverts give the title of 'administrator' or 'admin assistant', others will simply use the title 'secretary'. Carysforth (1997:13) also suggests that at the beginning of the 1990s there was a trend in organisations towards replacing secretaries and PAs with administrative assistants and administrators. She suggests that this was caused by advances in computerisation that allowed executives to do most of the routine work themselves. Carysforth (1997) identified this trend as a positive career prospect for secretaries because there would be more career opportunities for secretaries in job roles that incorporated high-level

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'secretarial function' in this study will be used to refer to the job of a secretary, the nature of the position or the exercise of secretarial work. To describe what secretaries do will be covered by terms such 'secretarial tasks' or 'secretarial practices'.

IT skills. However, Carysforth does not consider that this trend may not signify a positive career prospect as the replacement of secretaries for 'administrative assistants' may not mean a change for a better position; it might be only one result of the title variation across different secretarial jobs and the inconsistency caused by this variation.

Some authors agree that it is difficult to describe the exact secretarial role as it usually varies according to the nature of the post (Harrison, 1985:299; Thurloway, 2004), hence the importance of the context of their work. As Cohn (1985) notes,

“Secretaries are expected to handle whatever clerical and minor administrative problems their employers are likely to be faced with. Proficient secretaries, as they gain experience, usually learn to provide a variety of services beyond merely typing dictated letters. This can entail providing information on commonly used files, composing routine statements for frequently sent letters, or making practical arrangements for the solutions of petty problems. (...) this can mean the substantial transfer of responsibility from executive to secretary. Examples involve those secretaries who graduate to handling some of the duties of the executive himself and secretaries who collude in the protection of deficiency, such as covering up for an alcoholic.” (Cohn, 1985:185)

This expansion of responsibilities is very company- and person-specific (Kanter, 1977; Cohn, 1985). This may depend on the secretary's qualifications and the need of the employer (Cohn, 1985). It also can be dependent on the nature of the relationship of the secretary and the line manager. As Cohn argues, “different individuals have their own routines and require different responses from their secretaries. As a result, good working relationships are often difficult to achieve. When this occurs, executives work to preserve these ties by taking their secretaries with them from job to job.” (Cohn, 1985:185).

It is agreed that there is no single answer to the question 'what is a secretary?' (Pringle, 1989:2, Thurloway, 2004). According to Pringle (1989), statisticians as well as industrial sociologists attempt to answer this question by describing the tasks which secretaries usually perform. Nevertheless, secretary is one of the few employment categories for which there has never been a clear job description (Pringle, 1989). Describing what a secretary is may be very difficult as it has a relation to the nature of office work, which covers an amazing variety of jobs and functions. Pringle (1989) also points out that it is due to the continuous efforts to

acquire recognition as skilled workers and to improve the conditions of the secretarial occupation that it becomes feasible to answer the question “what is a secretary?” by developing a job description (1989:21).

### **Occupation classification**

Another way of defining secretarial work is by the SOC. The SOC, as discussed in Chapter 2, is used in official statistics in order to understand and monitor the contribution of “human resources to the national economy. A key attribute of employed persons is occupational skills; these are acquired partly through formal qualification, but largely through work experience” (SOC, 1991). The SOC presents a skill-based categorisation in order to define secretarial work. Table 3.1 presents the ways the SOC<sup>7</sup> categorizes secretarial work in its last version:

<b>SOC 2010</b>	
4	Major group – Administrative and secretarial occupations
42	Sub-major group – Secretarial and related occupations
421	Minor group – Secretarial and related occupations
4211	Medical secretaries
4212	Legal secretaries
4213	School secretaries
4214	Company secretaries
4215	Personal assistants and other secretaries
4216	Receptionists
4217	Typists and related keyboard occupations

Table 3.1: SOC 2010 categories of the Secretarial Occupation  
Source: SOC (2010), ONS

<sup>7</sup> For more details of SOC’s principles, concepts and criteria of classification and grouping please see Chapter 2 and SOC (1990, 2000, 2010).

Categorisation of secretarial work is useful as the occupation can then be recognised and compensated (Wichroski, 1994). However, in the case of secretaries, as Wichroski (1994:34) argues, “much of (the secretary’s) role goes unnamed and uncategorised, a problem that is exacerbated by the difficulty of super-imposing an economic model onto work tasks that are not considered labour”. These unrecognised tasks will be discussed in the following sections.

### ***Ideal typical occupation***

Barley & Kunda (2001) argue that secretaries are part of the group labelled as “ideal typical” occupations. Ideal typical work “is an abstraction that captures key attributes of a family of occupation. Like the language of work, however, ideal typical occupations are temporally bound, historically situated, and beginning to show signs of age. When the nature of work changes, the continued use of an ideal type may obscure more than it reveals” (Barley & Kunda, 2001:83). For example, an ideal type secretary may invoke an image of a lady who sits behind a desk, types and answers the telephone all day, enduring in her subordinate position and loyalty to her line manager. Today some secretarial work bears little resemblance to this image.

For the purposes of this research, a practical definition of secretary is considered as anyone employed by the job title of ‘secretary’, regardless of any specification such as legal, medical, school or other additional title that might imply different tasks and work context. This research, however, focuses on what the secretaries do.

Having considered the history and definitions involved in the secretarial occupation, the next section will examine the existing literature on secretarial work.

### **3.3 Revisiting studies on secretarial work**

Secretarial work is an occupation that has been researched in many areas of the social sciences. The work of secretaries has been pictured in different studies and they contributed to the analysis and understanding of different issues in people’s work as well as in the organisations. Analyses of secretarial work were undertaken in

the 1970s (Benet, 1972; Bowen, 1973; Silverstone, 1974, Kanter, 1977 and Glen & Feldberg, 1978), in the 1980s (Vinnicombe, 1980; Golding, 1986; Webster, 1986; Stace & Donald, 1988 and Pringle, 1989), in the 1990s (Truss, 1991-1992-1994; Strom, 1992; Thurloway, 1992; McCarthy, 1993; Pringle, 1993; Giles, Valle & Perryman, 1996, Maguire, 1996; Pilgrin, 1997; Sotirin & Gottfried, 1999; Lovell, 1999; Kennelly, 1999) and in the 2000s (Khalid, 2000; Zake, 2001; Kennelly, 2002; Leung, 2002; Kilcoyne, 2003; Swift, Khalid & Cullingford, 2003; Thurloway, 2004; Nencel, 2005; Rumbelow, 2005; Kincaid, 2005; Sasson-Levy, 2007; Beaton, Tougas & Laplante, 2007; Nencel, 2008; Skilton & Bravo, 2008; Truss, Rosewarne and Alfes, 2009 and Truss, Alfes & Rosewarne, 2010). Despite the attention given to date to empirical studies with secretarial workers in the twenty-first century, there are few contemporary accounts of secretarial work that examine its contested nature and its occupational identity. Indeed, most of the books and research published still lack empirical material that shows the workers' perception of their occupation and their work experience in relation to their work. Most of the research-based work with empirical focus on secretarial work analysed various factors involved in secretarial work, with more occurrences of gender- and technology-related themes, as pictured in a full chronological list in Tables 3.2, 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5 in the next sections. Although contributing to the understanding of specific topics in social research as well as to the understanding of one specific area of secretarial work, such as skills, the various studies lack a more holistic understanding of the occupation and attention to the secretaries' subjective experience of work and the work content.

### **3.3.1 1970s**

In the 1970s, Silverstone (1974) appears to be the first PhD thesis in the UK done on the topic of secretarial work. She presented a historical review of office work for women and analyses different aspects of secretarial work. This study attempted to analyse a few aspects of secretarial work, however, the main aim of the researcher was to examine the occupation within "the context of women's employment and the relationship between a secretary's job and occupational and social mobility" (Silverstone, 1974:viii). The study covered aspects in relation to the history of the

secretarial occupation, education and training, career selection, conditions of work, use of machinery and job satisfaction. Although it presents a good and temporal picture of the context in which secretarial work was undertaken, as well as how and why women happened to be secretaries, it does not look at the labour process and its complexities. Silverstone's (1974) methods involved a questionnaire and a survey (N=46) sent to a selection of secretaries in central London, selected according to their place of work and their membership of secretarial associations.

Another account of secretarial work in the 1970s was Kanter's (1977) ethnographic study. Kanter spent a few years working, interviewing and observing workers in an organisation in order to build a theory as well as to explain gender relations in a company. Kanter (1977) wanted to explain the complexities of those relations and the impact on people who were part of them. Kanter spent a five-year period in the organisation from where she drew her explanation and theories, by contacts with over 120 people on a personal basis and an additional 500 people who participated in her survey. Kanter starts her exploration of secretarial work by describing the work of secretaries and the personal and impersonal issues involved in that work; in her description, secretaries represented "a reserve of human inside the bureaucratic" (Kanter, 1977:70):

“(...) secretaries’ desks were surrounded by splashes of colour, displays of special events, signs of the individuality and taste of the residents: postcards from friends’ or bosses’ travel pasted on walls, newspaper cartoons, large posters with funny captions, huge computer printouts that formed the names of the secretaries in gothic letters. It was secretaries who remembered birthdays and whose birthdays were celebrated, lending a legitimate air of occasional festivity to otherwise task-oriented days. Secretaries could engage in conversations about the latest movies, and managers often stopped by their desks to join momentarily in a discussion that was a break from the more serious business at hand (...).”(Kanter, 1977: 69).

Kanter realised that secretarial work was maintaining bureaucratisation and remained the job that involved the most routine tasks in the white-collar world (1977:70) but although most of their time was spent on routine, “the greatest reward was garnered for the personal” (1977:70). For Kanter, the way in which secretaries managed organisational issues, that is “their strategies for attaining recognition and control, and their attitudes, could all be seen “as a response to the role relations surrounding the secretarial function” (1977:70). Kanter's (1977) analysis enlightened important



facts about corporate relations and changes in bureaucratic institutions at that time. However, it failed to evaluate and to explain how secretaries perceive those relations and their own status; there is a lack of secretarial voice on the analysed issues. Secretaries were portrayed in Kanter's (1977) work as a product of a bureaucratic system and "trapped as an underclass" in the pockets of male line managers. Kanter focused on understanding of the nature of the organisation, with little regard to men and women as individuals and she produced a "comprehensive ordering of the experiences and reactions of men and women in organisations, seen as functions of properties of their situations" (Kanter, 1977:292).

1970s			
Title	Year	Author(s)	Publication
<b>Secretary – An inquiry into the female ghetto</b>	1972	Benet, M. K.	Book
<b>Work values of women in secretarial-clerical occupations</b>	1973	Bowen, D.	<i>American Journal of Community Psychology</i>
<b>The office secretary: a study of an occupational group of women office workers</b>	1974	Silverstone, R.	PhD thesis
<b>Men and women of the corporation</b>	1977	Kanter, R. M.	Book
<b>Degraded and deskilled: the proletarianization of clerical work</b>	1977	Glenn, E. & Feldberg, R.	<i>Social Problems</i>

Table 3.2: Academic Studies on Secretarial Work in the 1970s

### 3.3.2 1980s

During the 1980s, considerable literature emerged on the work of secretaries in relation to technological change in the office (Softly, 1984; Webster, 1986, 1988; Stace & Donald, 1988; Thompson, 1988). During that time computers were being introduced in the office and the word processor seemed to change the work of secretaries. Many authors analysed the effects as well as presenting predictions in relation to those changes, for example, Barker and Dowing (1980) who argued that with the word processor the tasks (referring to typists) would become fragmented and it would "remove the need for skill in producing neat, well set out work"

(1980:91). Most of the existing studies were concerned with positive or negative effects of technological change in office work and would in many instances refer to secretarial work. Questions were raised on the extent to which secretaries would be affected and what the possible effects would be on the occupation and the possible responses from secretaries.

Webster (1986) questioned both the pessimistic and the optimistic perspectives in relation to the changes predicted in office work due to the appearance of the word processor. Webster's thesis analysed the pessimistic views on the introduction of word processing as something that would "bring about the fragmentation, deskilling and intensification of secretarial and typing work, marking the taylorisation of the office and the proletarianisation of office workers" (Webster, 1986:Intro). Webster's (1986) data was gathered from eight offices in Bradford where word processors had been introduced. For Webster, the "technical division of labour in the office is seen as the crucial determinant of the nature of secretarial work and as the mediator of change in the office" (Webster, 1986:Intro). However, her findings proved that no big or "revolutionary" impacts were seen as many theorists were predicting and technology alone was not enough to govern the nature of work: "technical advances are only as revolutionary as the degree to which they are taken up" (Webster, 1986:330).

It is important to discuss possible effects of technological change in organisational studies. Literature shows possible negative and positive perspectives on the effects of technology and some authors agree that it is more positive than negative. This statement confronts Braverman's (1974) main idea of deskilling. Further studies on technical change point towards a relationship between management and technology and the way that both can impact on skill (Kimble and McLoughlin, 1995; Webster 1991, 1990 cited by Thurloway, 2004:296). Indeed, Thurloway (2004:296) argues in her literature review that there is a relationship between skill and technological and managerial factors within the context of secretarial work.

Also in the 1980s, from a sociological view, Crompton and Jones (1984) reviewed the historical and theoretical debate surrounding the class location of clerical workers and administrative workers – particularly as it bears on the issue of clerical

“proletarianisation”<sup>8</sup>. They also describe the evolution of the “clerical” category – focusing largely on Britain. According to Compton and Jones (1984:43), “not surprisingly, there has been a considerable amount of empirical research on the impact of computers on clerical and administrative work. Although there is a near universal agreement that the impact of automation in the office has been considerable, disagreement still exists as to its precise nature”. The issue of proletarianisation in clerical work has also been addressed by Matheson (2007).

From a sociological and feminist perspective, the book “Secretaries Talk” (Pringle, 1989) explores secretarial office relations within a feminist perspective in attempting to give women a more visible place in research but not separating women and relations at work. For Pringle (1989), the question of what is a secretary can be answered in relation to three discourses: the first of the secretary as the “office wife”, the second of the “sexy secretary” and, the third of the “career woman” (Pringle, 1989:5). This is examined by Pringle when exploring the gender and sexuality arena that permeates the secretarial occupation. Pringle (1989:3) presents the three definitions of secretary as they are commonly represented as women and also represented in gender terms. Pringle (1989) experienced this when conducting her research. She would hear jokes about secretaries, referring to them in terms of harassment, perverts, and sex. People in workplaces where her studies were conducted thought that a study about secretaries would be a study on sexual scandals. There are many stereotypes related to secretaries and their relations in the workplace, but she argues that the secretarial skills were more relevant than gender issues. Pringle (1989) stresses that in the modernist context the analysis and measures of secretarial skills became relevant as there is no more space for familiar and sexual connotation (Pringle, 1989:5). Pringle (1989) conducted her research in Australia and interviewed a variety of office workers, not only secretaries, carrying out a total of more than 200 interviews. She was interested in the “relationship between secretaries as an identifiable social group and the discursive construction of secretaries as a

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<sup>8</sup>Proletarianisation = Although considered an ambiguous term (Matheson, 2007:52), proletarianisation can be defined “as a shift in middle-class occupations towards wage workers, in terms of: income, property, skill, prestige or power, irrespective of whether or not people involved are aware of these changes”.

category; on the relationship between power structures and the day-to-day negotiation and production of power; on the connections between domination, sexuality, and pleasure.” (Pringle, 1989:x). She questioned what was involved in “the deconstruction of present structure of class, status, and gender”. Pringle’s (1989) contribution still echoes in many different research areas in sociological studies, especially in relation to gender and sexuality issues, as she drew on discourses of power not on the labour process itself (Pringle, 1989:x).

1980s			
Title	Year	Author(s)	Publication
<b>Secretaries, Management and Organizations</b>	1980	Vinnicombe, S.	Book
<b>Word processing and the transformation of the patriarchal relations of control in the office</b>	1980	Barker J.& Downing, H.	<i>Capital and Class</i> , 10:64-99
<b>Technical change in the office: word processing, typing and secretarial labour</b>	1984	Softly, E.	PhD Thesis
<b>Some problems in the concept of secretary</b>	1986	Golding, J.	<i>International Studies in Management and Organizations</i>
<b>The effects of word processing on secretarial and typing work</b>	1986	Webster, J.	PhD Thesis
<b>Careers in Secretarial and Office Work</b>	1988	Stace, A. and Donald, V.	Book
<b>New technology, old jobs: secretarial labour in automated offices</b>	1988	Webster, J.	Working paper series
<b>Secretaries Talk: Sexuality, Power and Work</b>	1989	Pringle, R.	Book
<b>New office technology and the changing role of secretary</b>	1989	Thompson, L.	WRU Occasional paper

Table 3.3: Academic Studies on Secretarial Work in the 1980s

### 3.3.3 1990s

In the 1990s, literature on secretarial work shifted its focus to gender and employment issues such as career progression. Some theorists still looked at the issues of technology change and impacts, such as Thurloway (1992); others focused on gender issues such as Truss (1992a, 1992b, 1994), McCarthy (1993), Pringle (1993), Maguire (1996), Kennelly (1999). From those studies, the main concern and questions raised appeared to be in relation to secretary as a segregated occupation (Truss, 1992a, 1992b; Pringle, 1993; Maguire, 1996), gender and class (Strom, 1992) and altogether segregation, gender and class (Kennelly, 1999). Interestingly, those studies showed significant findings in relation to the division of labour and gender issues.

Truss (1992) studied secretarial work in relation to the ‘Ghetto thesis’<sup>9</sup>. Her main research questions were, first, if secretarial work could be termed as a ghetto occupation, second, how women secretaries experience their situation, and third, what national differences in the structuring of secretarial work shows in relation to the gender segregated market (Truss, 1992:20-21). Truss’ data involved an analysis of secretarial work of three countries: England, France and Germany. A similar study by Maguire (1996) analysed the Ghetto thesis in relation to secretarial work in New Zealand and Australia and the findings proved that the secretarial occupation progressed despite its “ghetto status” (Maguire, 1996). Moreover, while promotional opportunities remain limited and the invisibility of much of what the secretaries do is perpetuated, workers in this occupational group are likely to remain marginalised/ghettoised within organisations, prevented from making a real contribution to organisational productivity and from being equitably rewarded for doing so (Maguire, 1996).

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<sup>9</sup> The “Ghetto Thesis” is the condition of women in ghetto occupations, that are jobs “poorly-paid, of low status and (...) few promotions prospects” (Truss, 1992:16)

1990s			
Title	Year	Author(s)	Publication
<b>Women's employment and the Ghetto Thesis: experiences of secretarial work in three European countries</b>	1991	Truss, C.	PhD Thesis
<b>Beyond the typewriter: gender, class and the origins of modern American office work, 1900-1930</b>	1992	Strom, S. H.	Book
<b>A bridge across the great divide: secretarial work, careers and technology</b>	1992	Thurloway, L.	Working paper series
<b>Career paths in traditional women's jobs: a comparison of secretarial promotion prospects in England, France and Germany</b>	1992	Truss, C.	<i>Women in Management Review</i>
<b>Women's employment and the ghetto thesis: experiences of secretarial work in three European countries.</b>	1992	Truss, C.	PhD Thesis
<b>The relationship between work pressures, cognitive style, sex-role attitudes and copying behaviour in women managers and secretaries</b>	1993	McCarthy, R.	PhD Thesis
<b>Male secretaries in Doing "Women's work"</b>	1993	Pringle, R.	In <i>Men in Nontraditional Occupations</i> . Williams, C. L.
<b>The secretary as a supporter, team worker and independent: a case study for societal comparison</b>	1994	Truss, C.	<i>Gender, Work and Organisation</i>
<b>A New Deal for Secretaries?</b>	1996	Giles, L., La Valle, I. & Perryman, S.	Book
<b>Just a sec! A comparative study of the changing role of secretarial staff in Australia and New Zealand</b>	1996	Maguire, H.	In <i>Proceedings of the 10th ANZAM Conference</i>
<b>An empirical study of the applicability of the Ghetto thesis to secretarial work in Australia and New Zealand</b>	1996	Maguire, H.	Management Papers
<b>Secretarial and clerical staff career progression - Some organizational perspectives</b>	1997	Pilgrim, J.	<i>Librarian Career Development</i>
<b>The Ambivalent Dynamics of Secretarial `Bitching: Control, Resistance, and the Construction of Identity</b>	1999	Sotirin, P. & Gottfried, H.	<i>Organization</i>
<b>The development of secretarial and administrative support staff: influential factors in the identification of need</b>	1999	Lovell, M. J.	PhD Thesis
<b>Race, class and gender in women's pathways to occupational gender segregation</b>	1999	Ivy Leigh Kennelly	PhD Thesis

Table 3.4: Academic Studies on Secretarial Work in the 1990s

### 3.3.4 2000s

A study conducted within the context of secretarial work was done by Lynn Thurloway (2004). Her work examined skill within the secretarial context. The main objective of her study was to determine whether secretarial work contains skill. She conducted her research by doing a theoretical review of the literature on skill and its different philosophical and conceptual perspectives. From the literature, she derived measures of skills that were the basis of a model of skill which she tested among secretarial workers. The model developed by Thurloway shows intrinsic, extrinsic, and contextual measures that are tested in fieldwork within the secretarial context. The main weakness of Thurloway's (2004) study is the failure to address what is the nature of the role of secretaries and what and how organisational changes may impact these workers and their skills. The researcher does not take into account technological change and the possible effects on skills. Although there is an attempt to differentiate between secretaries and clerical workers, the differentiation is not clear and there is a failure to acknowledge the significance of having these differences clarified.

Other studies address different issues in the context of secretarial and clerical work, such as the work of Truss (1992; 1994) whose work analyses career paths in traditional women's jobs; Matheson (2007) who looks at the proletarianisation of clerical work; Fearfull (1996, 2005) who studies clerical workplace skills and knowledge; Leung (2001) who studies the dynamics of sexuality of female secretaries; Jordan (1996) who points out vertical segregation by sex in clerical work; Sztaba and Colwill (1988) who examine sex role socialization and denigration of secretarial work; Rosenhaft (2003) who addresses clerical work in relation to the "information society" and Beaton et al. (2007) whose work examines factors associated with attitudes towards programmes that facilitate women's transition from traditional to non-traditional careers. Those studies mention the work of secretaries in relation to the research focus they have, but they are not based on empirical results from secretarial workers. Other relevant works, with a cross-section of clerical work, office automation and gender, are those of Mills, C. W. (1956), Anderson, G. (1976), McNally, F. (1979), Prandy, K., Stewart, A. & Blackburn, R. M. (1982), Davies, M.

W. (1982), Lowe, G. S. (1987), Lockwood, D (1989), Webster, J. (1990) and Greenbaum, J. (2004).

Literature also available involves non-academic material. They usually focus on secretarial procedures in office and secretarial work, such as the work of Stanwell, S. & Shaw, J. (1974), Eckersley-Johnson, A. L. (1983), Harrison, J. (1985), Harding, H. (1986), Standley, J., Rees, C. & Thompson, K. (1999), Spencer, J. and Pruss, A. (2000), Higgins, N. & Trotman, S. (2002) and France, S. (2009). France (2009) presents a more contemporary account in the non-academic literature as she explores more of a subjective side of secretarial work. She also addresses the existing positions of secretary and personal assistant (PA) and the management of relationships in the office environment.

2000s			
Title	Year	Author(s)	Publication
<b>The effects of new office technology on secretaries' attitudes and training</b>	2000	Khalid, H	PhD Thesis
<b>Trope analysis of women's political subjectivity: Women secretaries and the issue of sexual harassment in Latvia</b>	2001	Zake, I.	<i>Feminist Theory</i>
<b>"I Would Never Be a Secretary": Reinforcing Gender in Segregated and Integrated Occupations</b>	2002	Kennelly, I.	<i>Gender &amp; Society</i>
<b>Sexuality at work: female secretaries' experiences in the context of Chinese culture</b>	2002	Leung, A.	<i>Journal of Managerial Psychology</i>
<b>The new office technology and its effects on secretaries and managers</b>	2002	Khalid, H.; Swift, H. & Cullingford, C.	<i>Education and Information Technologies</i>
<b>Identifying skills needed by office information systems in the changing work environment: perception of administrative support occupations workers</b>	2003	Kilcoyne, M. S.	PhD Thesis
<b>The new office technology and its effects on secretaries and managers</b>	2003	Swift, H., Khalid, H. &Cullingford, C.	<i>Education and information technologies</i>



2000s (continued)			
Title	Year	Author(s)	Publication
<b>Reveal codes: a new lens for examining and historizing the work of secretaries</b>	2003	Rohan, L.	<i>Computers and composition</i>
<b>Silent evolution or quiet extinction: skill and the secretarial labour process</b>	2004	Thurloway, L.	PhD Thesis
<b>Professionalization, Sexualization: When Global Meets Local in the Working Identities of Secretaries in Lima, Peru</b>	2005	Nencel, L.	In T. Davids & F. Van Driel, eds. <i>The Gender Question in Globalization – Changing Perspectives and Practices</i>
<b>Experiencing NVQs: a qualitative study of the experiences of secretarial/clerical staff at the Open University working on Customer Service NVQs</b>	2005	Judith Rumbelow	PhD Thesis
<b>The changing role and the unchanging status of the secretary</b>	2005	Kincaid, G.	Women’s Studies Monograph Series
<b>Secretarial Work, Nurturing, and the Ethic of Service</b>	2006	Kennelly, I.	<i>NWSA Journal</i>
<b>Contradictory Consequences of Mandatory Conscription: The Case of Women Secretaries in the Israeli Military</b>	2007	Sasson-Levy, O.	<i>Gender &amp; Society</i>
<b>Love it or leave it: a look at women in clerical occupations</b>	2007	Beaton, A. Tougas, F. & Laplante, J.	<i>Journal of Applied Social Psychology</i>
<b>“Que Viva La Minifalda!”<sup>10</sup> Secretaries, Miniskirts and Daily Practices of Sexuality in the Public Sector in Lima</b>	2008	Nencel, L.	<i>Gender, Work &amp; Organization</i>
<b>Do social capital and project type vary across career paths in project-based work?: The case of Hollywood personal assistants</b>	2008	Skilton, P.F. & Bravo, J.	<i>Career Development International</i>
<b>Secretarial work, skills and careers</b>	2009	Truss, C., Rosewarne, A. & Alfes, K.	<i>Society</i>
<b>Still in the Ghetto? Experiences of Secretarial Work in the 21st Century</b>	2010	Truss, C., Alfes, K. & Rosewarne, A.	<i>Journal of the Electrochemical Society</i>

Table 3.5: Academic Studies on Secretarial Work in the 2000s

<sup>10</sup> [Cheers to the miniskirt]

## ***Contributions and limitations***

As seen in the previous sections, there is a wealth of literature on secretarial work that presents various aspects of their work and thus, contributes to the understanding of this occupation as well as to challenges secretaries might face at work. Literature predominantly explores organisational and individual aspects of the work of secretaries and illustrates how assumptions regarding gender and technological changes have shaped approaches to the study of secretarial work.

The work of secretaries has changed over the years and so have the various aspects of their work. The nature of secretarial work as well as the way they perceive themselves are changing and might take different shapes in different places, contexts, and cultures (Pringle, 1989; Thurloway, 2004, etc.). The existing studies that attempt to look into secretarial work are very useful in highlighting important issues in relation to secretarial work. However, unlike studies of other occupations, they are usually focused on one subject, for example gender and gender segregation. Such studies do help to elucidate aspects of occupational work, but sometimes they do not present a clear picture of the work undertaken.

One example is the great amount of research that looks into the issue of technological changes and their effects in office work. They realised that it was a more complex issue than expected. As Webster argues (1980:114-115):

“instead of a uniform set of outcomes arising from the automation of women’s office work, it became clear that office work is much more varied in terms of work organisation and skills than was being acknowledged, and that the application of IT to women’s office jobs is a process with very unpredictable outcomes, complicated by the difficulty of applying notions of ‘skill’ and ‘deskilling’ to this type of work (...)”

This unpredictable state still exists in women’s office work and it is apparent in secretarial work. This fact reinforces the need for a holistic analysis of occupational work in order to understand people’s work and not rely on generalisations that disregard the nature of the complexities of work. A lot has been studied in relation to that, but there is a lack of a view of secretarial work with more focus on the content of the job, and its relation to the context and the lived experience of the worker.

A lacuna in the literature is also found in relation to the methodologies used in the studies on secretarial work, as most of the studies found use quantitative approaches into the study of topical issues within the world of secretarial work. They rely on secondary data or primary data in a quantitative way.

Although literature on secretarial work has examined a wide range of issues (see table in Appendix G for a comprehensive list of literature), nothing has appeared to put all or some of those issues together to provide a holistic view of secretarial work and then contribute to the study of occupations in general.

Research on secretarial workers has done little to alter the perception of secretarial work as a struggling gendered occupation with a questionable level of skill and social recognition. Understanding this occupation could lead to a better picture of the occupation today and its work division.

Examining secretarial work from the Labour Process Analysis perspective fosters a different view of secretaries than the ones found in literature so far. Understanding secretaries' work, also offers an alternative view of their job when organisational and economic changes might be shifting the course of their work.

### **3.4 A holistic view of secretarial work**

As discussed in the previous section, literature on secretarial work has presented rich exploration of various issues relating to secretarial work. This study, however, intends to enhance the existing understanding of the secretarial occupation by analysing it from a holistic approach as proposed in chapter 2. The usefulness of the already mentioned framework on the analysis of occupational content, context, and lived experience will be assessed in relation to secretarial work aiming to provide another way of understanding occupations. Considering that, the secretarial occupation has a number of distinctive characteristics. Firstly, it is predominantly gendered. Secondly, secretarial work combines technical skill with important interpersonal skills. Thirdly, secretarial work has been subject to significant technical change in recent times. Secretarial work has been found a useful category to test the proposed approach.

### **3.4.1 The content**

The work of secretaries involves many different skills, especially technical skills, communication, tacit skills, and the ability to multi-task efficiently.

According to Pringle (1989), the nature of secretarial work has changed over time as new technologies continually transform the skills and tasks involved in this occupation. However, the difficulty in defining secretarial work, together with the variety of titles and the number of skills and tasks that are related to this occupation, does not answer questions on the contested nature of secretarial work. Thurloway (2004:9-10) reviewed the literature on secretaries and identified a debate about the nature of secretarial work. There is little agreement to whether the work is routine or complex, low or highly skilled and what tasks are most and least relevant. Whilst there is an apparent lack of agreement about the nature of secretarial work in the literature, there appears to be greater consensus about the overall purpose of the role (Thurloway, 2004: 10). A general understanding of the secretarial role is that the secretary supports her line manager and works towards the company's overall effectiveness. This perspective is still dependent on the context of the secretarial work and the relationship established with the line manager (Thurloway, 2004).

#### ***The concept of skill***

The concept of skill is of importance in understanding the internal divisions in the working class, such as secretarial and clerical work. Skill operates in a complex way in respect of both class and gender divisions and, as an abstract category, it needs to be examined in relation to empirical work practices (Harvey, 1990). Harvey (1990: 128) presents a good definition of the concept of skill, dividing it into four distinct levels:

- First level: Skill as the individual's accumulated experience that adds up to the total experience of the worker.
- Second level: Skill as reference to what is necessary to perform a given job. This may or may not match the worker's skill.

- Third level: Skill as a political dimension, being that which a group of organised workers can defend against challenges from employers and other groups of workers.
- Fourth level: Skill as a sex/gender advantage. The skill attributed to a job (and hence the status of the job) has much more to do with the gender of the person doing it than with the real demands of the work.

Pringle and Game (1984:18) argue that the definition of skill is gender biased. They believe that the process to describe some jobs as skilled and others as unskilled is complex. Beechey (1988:48) presents feminists' theories that suggest that the definition of skill has to do with men's attempts to retain control of the labour process (through trade unions) by excluding women from better paid jobs.

Literature on skill debates the deskilling process in relation to the labour force and changes in organisations. Thurloway (2004: 93) points out that:

“Braverman’s prediction of widespread deskilling seems not to have been as he suggested. In relation to secretarial work, this is likely to be due at least in part by his failure to understand the nature of secretarial work. Braverman (1974) seems to centre his deskilling thesis, in respect to secretarial work, on the untested, common held assumption that much of their work comprises routine administration and typing. Perhaps Braverman’s work serves to illustrate that in order to analyse factors relating to skill and skill change, one needs to clearly define the parameters of skills that one is using prior to analysis or making predictions” (2004:93).

Braverman (1974) seemed to see the technology as having an inherent logic that would result in the replacement of elements of human activity with technology and seemed to assume that the characteristics of the factory were the same in an office. Braverman’s (1974) view also seems to underestimate significantly the strength and complexities of the social office, particularly in relation to secretarial work (Thurloway, 2004). However, his views triggered feminists to ask questions about the meaning of skill (Dex, 1985:100).

## Secretarial skills

The practitioner literature often divides secretarial skills into two groups: business skills and personal skills (Cox, 1998:127) and business attributes and personal attributes (Harrison, 1985:297) covering some skills required as well.

On the next page, Table 3.6 presents a compilation of definitions of secretarial skills described by different authors.

Author	Secretarial Skills
Stanwell & Shaw (1974:11) *	<u>Basic skills:</u> Typewriting, taking dictation, answering the telephone, dealing with mail, receiving visitors and keeping a desk diary, filing and duplicating.
Eckersley-Johnson (1983:5)	Short-hand and transcriptions; typewriting; proof-reading and editing skills; business mathematics; listening skills; creativity
Harding (1985:59)	<u>Extra skills:</u> Telephone skills; keeping diaries; scheduling appointments; greeting visitors; arranging meetings; taking minutes; maintaining files and records; making travel and accommodation arrangements; processing figures and simple statistics; handling simple financial matters; researching information; proofreading and checking; identifying priorities; making decisions.
Harrison (1985:297)	Secretarial skills Organising skills
Carysforth (1997:5)	IT Project management in research, administration and team administration Computer literacy
Cox (1998:127)**	<u>Business skills:</u> Computer/word processing knowledge; good English grammar and spelling; telephone techniques; typing/shorthand/audio skills; organisation ability; diary and meeting management; handling correspondence; past experience and track record; company market knowledge; foreign languages. <u>Personal skills:</u> Positive attitude; flexibility; Efficiency and good organisation; personality and disposition; communication and speech; techniques; self-motivation; good time management; smart appearance; confidence in own ability; innovation and creativity.

Table 3.6: Definitions of Secretarial Skills

\*The author makes a distinction between primary and secondary secretarial functions. Primary functions are the skills as listed in the table and secondary functions are the ones that require knowledge rather than skills.

\*\*Results from a survey conducted with the top 50 companies in the UK, together with financial institutions and secretarial colleges, aiming to discover the most sought after skills in the recruitment of secretaries. Results were divided into two groups of skills and listed in order of priority.

The subject of skill has been connected to the secretarial occupation since its early history up to its present configuration. Despite the unclear state of skilled or unskilled work, Carysforth (1997) points out that in 1995 employment agencies were forecasting Britain would experience a shortage of secretaries by 1996. “The problem was apparently caused by the transformation of many secretarial jobs into high-status, multi-skilled roles where informational technology skills for high-tech offices were essential” (1997:4).

In Thurloway’s (2004:302) research, the data collected presented 21 skills ranked in order of importance, in the opinions of the participant secretaries, as described in Table 3.8 below:

Rank	Skill	Responses/percentages
1	Organisation	102/24
2	Communication	100/23
3	IT skills	55/13
4	Typing	42/10
5	Prioritization	18/4
6	Initiative	14/4
7	Accuracy	14/4
8	Flexibility	13/3
9	Time management	11/3
10	Inter-personal skills	9/2
11	Discretion	7/2
12	Secretarial skills	6/2
13	Diplomacy	6/2
14	Calm under pressure	6/2
15	Articulate	5/1
16	Confidence	4/1
17	Team player	4/1
18	Willing to learn	3/1
19	Decision making	3/1
20	Self-motivation	3/1
21	Reliability	3/1

Table 3.8: 21 Most Important Secretarial Skills  
Source: Adapted from Thurloway (2004:302)

### 3.4.2 The context

The context within which secretaries work is important in understanding what they do. A lot of what they do might be related to changes in their own work as well as changes as a result of organisational work. It is important to investigate what kind of changes are affecting their work, as well as the extent to which this is affecting and changing their work.

Institutional, scientific, and social developments have direct impacts on some professions, such as law, accounting, and medicine (Broadbent et al., 1997:3); it is believed that those impacts are also directly affecting the work of secretaries and other occupations around the world. They are the ones that support the work of many knowledge workers, as cited above. Views from practitioners contrast with those of academics. When studies indicate that changes due to technological advances have a clear effect on the job design of office workers, secretaries may believe that technology itself poses no threat to their career; instead technology is seen as bringing challenges and opportunities. This idea is clearly exemplified by some authors like Harding (1985:171) and by texts on websites of associations of secretaries (EUMA, 2008; FENASSEC, 2008; IAAP, 2008 and IQPS, 2008). Some join practitioners' views, as with Eckersley-Johnson (1983: 2), who states that the secretary's role is changing due to fast and continual technological development, especially in office equipment systems. However "rather than eliminating secretaries from the office, technological developments have freed them from many time-consuming routine tasks so that they may be better employed in the more specialized areas of office work (...)" (Eckersley-Johnson, 1983:2).

This study reflects on the secretarial occupation, considering that secretaries are part of an occupational group that is changing and that might affect the nature of their work.



## ***Technology and job design***

Looking at the context of professional work, several studies reflect on the impact of technology as a substitute for labour (Broadbent, 1997; Webster, 1990-1996). It has been suggested that it is not possible to predict the effects of technology developments on professionals. According to Broadbent et al. (1997:7), besides the unique set of factors that pushes socio-economic development, “new technologies are both pulling and pushing change and these changes are having a number of effects on professionals”. New technologies can promote the development of new groups of experts and this process raises questions as to whether such new groups of experts constitute new professions. As technology raises questions regarding the emergence of professions, the same technology is capable of disrupting existing ones and empowering others.

Changes in labour as an effect of technological developments have also been linked to the concept of resistance (Crompton and Jones, 1984; Pfeffer, 1992). For Crompton and Jones (1984:56), the first generation of computers were introduced into non-manual work with minimal resistance from the workforce. Most clerks at that time probably had very little conception of what the impact would be, and in any case, the proportion of non-manual jobs was still increasing in the buoyant economic climate of the 1950s and 1960s.

The increase in office machines and the continuous development that has been happening in all major areas in technology has meant a significant change in office routines (Cockburn, 1985; Harrison, 1985; Webster, 1990).

In the secretarial context, it was believed that technology played the main part in a sharp division between men’s and women’s job in the office (Pringles, 1989:174). On the next page, Table 3.9 provides a timeline of office technology, which has led secretarial roles to change over the years.

Office Technology Timeline	
<b>1870s</b> Telephone Typewriter Carbon Paper	<b>1940s</b> Mechanical listing printing calculators Punched card systems (payroll) Dictaphone/stenographic machines with plastic belts
<b>1880s</b> Comptometer calculating machine Mimeograph machine Cash register Adding machine Pneumatic tubes	<b>1950s</b> Electronic digital computers (transistors) Electronic digital computers (vacuum tubes) Data processing – paper and tape cards Xerographic duplication Data processing – telewriters Data processing - computers
<b>1890s</b> Dictating and stenographic machines	<b>1960s</b> Magnetic tape ‘selectric’ typewriters Microchip computers Magnetic tape (replacing punched cards) Magnetic ink character recognition
<b>1900s</b> Loose-leaf ledger sheets Multigraph Two colour typewriter ribbon Addressograph	<b>1970s</b> Microcomputers Optical scanning and recognition equipment Video display terminals for data/text editing Facsimile transmission Electronic (solid state) calculating machines
<b>1910s</b> Power statistical accounting machines Bookkeeping and billing machines (Combinations of typewriter and computing machines)	<b>1980s</b> Local area networks, integrated systems Non-impact printers Software packages for microcomputers
<b>1920s</b> Adding/Subtracting calculation machine Ditto machines (gelatin duplicating)	<b>1990s</b> PCs E-mail Internet
<b>1930s</b> Bank cheque sorting/proofing machines Dial telephones Electric typewriters (earliest versions) Machine accounting systems (central records control, payroll)	<b>2000 and beyond</b> Wireless networks Voice recognition Electronic document collaboration Virtual meetings Virtual assistants

Table 3.9: Timeline of Office Technology  
 Source: Adapted from IAAP<sup>11</sup>

In addition to studies on technology developments, many authors comment on the effect and repercussions of the word processor in the structure of secretarial hierarchy and job design (Pringle, 1989; Vinnicombe, 1980; Webster, 1990).

<sup>11</sup><http://www.iaap-hq.org/researchtrends/history.htm>

Vinnicombe (1980:2) prophesied in her studies a possible division of work of secretaries: those who work in the word processing units and those who work as private secretaries or personal assistants. She presented opinions about these changes, as for some people this structural changes would represent a “dead end leading to an automated ghetto” whereas for others word processing is seen as a career ladder into a managerial position. Vinnicombe (1980:2) also predicted a possible end to secretarial hierarchy progression, which would bring profound consequences to the way secretaries have to be trained and selected.

The issue of secretarial job design has also been analysed in relation to the concept of lack of career progression. In further studies, Vinnicombe & Burke (2005:165) referred to the term of “glass-ceiling” which, in the mid-1980s, became part of the vocabulary of those discussing women and career progression. The “glass ceiling” refers to an invisible but impermeable barrier that limits the career advancement of women. Other terms also became used such as “sticky floors” and “concrete walls” referring to similar obstacles to women experiencing difficulties in promotion. They believe that during the 1980s and 1990s, women have made progress in different areas in an organisation and cite there are now more women in senior-level executive jobs and other higher functions within a company. “But real progress has been slow with only modest increases shown at these levels” (2005:165).

A number of studies have pointed to the associations between masculinity and machinery and sexual symbolism in constructing gender relations (Pringle, 1989; Webster, 1993; Crompton et al., 1995; Cockburn, 1985; Faulkner & Arnold, 1985) which has contributed greatly to advances in research on gender and technology.

Compton and Jones (1984) point out that although the impact of computerization on clerical and administrative work has been profound, they recognise that computerization has not been the only force for the rationalisation of non-manual work. “Much clerical work had already been rationalized and broken down into its constituent elements before the introduction of the computer” (1984:43), indeed, some authors see computerisation and new technology as a final stage in the deskilling of non-manual work (Compton and Jones, 1984; Ackerman et al., 1997). Considering the extent and rapidity of computer-associated changes in companies

and their effects on labour and the likelihood of even greater changes in the near future, this justifies the treatment of this proposed study within the context of secretarial work.

### ***Technology and gender***

Pringle & Game (1984) are among the defenders of the pessimistic view about the effects of technology. Agreeing with Braverman's (1974) ideas, they consider that "the gender context of technology raises questions about some of the central concepts in labour process analysis. In particular, we must reconsider very carefully the idea that work has been systematically deskilled under late capitalism" (1984:2).

Not all authors have presented a pessimistic outlook of the future of secretarial work in relation to technology, such as the ideas disseminated by Braverman (1974) with regard to the deskilling of clerical work. More optimistic views emerged from studies and writings focusing on the potential benefits of information and office technologies (Thurloway, 2004), such as the ideas of Compton and Jones (1984:44-45) who suggest technology required more skilled and responsible jobs, such as programmers and systems analysts.

"The secretarial profession has been greatly changed by the advancement of information technology. The computer is now common place, and most secretaries have found that they must have at least basic word processing skills to do their job. The typewriter is virtually non-existent. Technology should not replace flair and intuition; rather it should remove unnecessary obstacles from your work to enable you to concentrate fully on writing with the flair and drive that all good writing should possess" (Spencer and Pruss, 2000: 125)

One of the changes from technological advances reflected in the issue of flexibility in office work, especially among women workers. According to Coyle (2005:74), there were temporal and spatial changes in the organisation of work as well as the increase in the number of women in the work force and the feminisation of work. This facts were some of the issues concerning the types of flexibility discussed. For Coyle (2005:76) "flexible working time concern all those just in time arrangements that enables employers to adapt staff levels to match peaks and troughs in demand". What is argued is whether this is a strategy to control or give meaning to women's work.

### ***Work division***

There is a great variability within the secretarial occupation in terms of skills, education, and other aspects that shape the work of secretaries and their identity formation.

Firstly, there is the question of how the secretarial occupation is divided. As some other occupations and professions, such as software workers, are divided in terms of skill level and entry qualifications (Marks and Scholarios, 2007), would the secretarial occupation be divided by skills, tasks, level of education or any other aspect?

Secondly, how different are secretaries from other studied occupations? What makes them a distinctive group of occupational workers? The lack of clear distinction in terms of category, also supported by an unclear definition in the Standard Occupation Classification (SOC), represents a challenge in analysing this group. This can be considered one of the differences from other occupational groups. There is a great variation in names and definitions of the category, such as administrative assistants, office professionals, etc. Nomenclature might be an area of different perspectives among secretarial workers. While some workers clearly avoid the term ‘secretary’ – a fact also evident on websites of associations of secretaries – others may take pride in being called a secretary, as revealed by Kennelly’s (2002:613) study, which concluded that secretaries who enjoy their job take pride in the name secretary and see no need to be referred to as an ‘office assistant’ or ‘administrative assistant’. On the other hand, this movement among secretarial workers has a partial resemblance to some of the professionalisation process as described by Abbott (1988:11): “(...) they (professionals) change their names, in order to lose their past, to assert their monopoly, and, most importantly, to give themselves a label of legislative restriction”. This lack of a clear title may not be the right way of getting legislative restriction in this case, however, it might be a way of striving for losing their past, as stereotyped as it still is today.

On several secretarial practitioners' websites (IAAP, 2008; EUMA, 2008 and IQPS, 2008) there is a clear attempt to create a 'professional'<sup>12</sup> title rather than 'occupational', and an extensive discourse that encourages secretarial workers towards a future of challenging jobs and roles. In this sense, existing accounts in the literature fail to resolve the contradiction between what is understood in theory about this segregated occupation and what is the perception of secretarial workers themselves in relation to their performed work, the content of the tasks, duties and skills involved.

### ***A gendered occupation***

Building on the work division as presented in the previous section, secretarial work is also a distinctive occupational group because it is a highly gendered occupation. Nevertheless, according to Kennelly (2002:613), some women have not accepted and adopted cultural representation of secretarial work as demeaning, monotonous, simplistic, and oppressive because of their experience in the occupation.

This gender segregated occupation also brings issues related to opportunities for progression. Beynon et al. (2002: 305), in their work on the management of employment change, conclude that many of the occupational areas studied are dominated by women, and there is a persistent lack of opportunities for promotion and training. They highlight this is even more explicit in traditionally female-dominated occupations, such as clerical work, that show "a decline in opportunities for progression up a career ladder, associated with the flattening of the organisational hierarchies" (Beynon et al., 2002:305). However, the study shows that in the companies where the investigation was carried out, there is, simultaneously, a decline in barriers to women's upward mobility. The authors referred to suggest that "this greater acceptance of women entering supervisory and lower managerial positions has perhaps obscured the overall decline in promotion opportunities".

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<sup>12</sup> Professional = definitions of 'professions' have been explored in chapter 2.

The issue of gender is almost inevitable in the study of the identity of secretarial workers. However, gender sometimes can also pose a barrier to more in-depth studies of the occupation as there is a lack of recognition of this category of worker. Tolbert (2005) adds that “various studies have provided evidence that female-dominated jobs are less likely to receive societal recognition of the skills and knowledge that are required of workers, compared to similar, male-dominated jobs (Steinberg 1990 cited by Tolbert, 2005:333). That is, being a gendered occupation, secretarial work is one example of how women can contribute to organisations with technical, intellectual, and emotional labour that is often invisible (Wichroski, 1994:40).

### **3.4.3 The lived experience**

The way secretaries may be avoiding being called secretaries can bring questions to their identity as an occupational group or for their self-identity. Kincaid (2005), in her research and from her own experience as a secretary for over 30 years, questions this sense of being ashamed of the title secretary, when she reports: “for many years I felt ashamed of the label ‘secretary’, but recently I’ve asked myself ‘Why? Why should we secretaries put ourselves down?’ The way in which secretaries are regarded today has impacted on the way we secretaries regard ourselves.” (2004:8). In this sense, it is argued here that personal narratives of secretaries may highlight individual and collective pictures of an occupation and perceptions of the occupational holder in relation to their occupation.

Little has been written on the secretarial literature in relation to the personal lived experience of secretaries. Most studies tend to look at the content of their work as well as at contextual issues. The lived experience of secretaries is yet to be explored and used to bring a better understanding of this occupation. It is argued here that this thesis makes a further empirical and conceptual contribution when it presents a holistic approach to the study of occupations.

Linking with contributions from previous research on occupations as well as on secretarial work, this study intends to present a conceptual framework and to assess the present categorisation of occupations.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

This chapter had several purposes. The first was to present a review of the literature on secretarial work. The second was to present the existing literature on secretarial work. The chapter then turned to establish the linkage between the proposed conceptual framework and the analysis of secretarial work as a category to test the approach. Included in this linkage are strong issues that permeate the secretarial occupation that makes this category worthy of analysis and a category that brings insights into the importance of the kind of work people do. Finally, the proposed analytical framework for the analysis of secretarial work was considered. The framework described in chapter 2 will be setting a clear rationale for an approach to study the occupational work of secretaries, which will look at their work content, context and lived experience.

Questions were asked regarding the extent to which technical and organisational changes have brought about a destabilisation of the identity of the secretarial occupation. The social construction of the work of secretaries usually goes unnoticed and although there has been a debate about the nature of secretarial work, there is no actual agreement on whether the work is routine or complex, nor even a consensus on what secretarial work consists of. The next chapters will examine secretarial work through the proposed analytical framework, driven by LPA, and its usefulness in capturing the changing nature of work. The methodology for such an analysis will be presented in the next chapter.



## **CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides the details of the research methodology chosen for this study. From an interpretivist philosophy, an ethnographically informed approach was chosen as the best way to test the proposed framework, as described in more detail in chapter 2, and to answer the questions raised in relation to secretarial work. It is expected that this choice of method will best allow the researcher to explore the content, context and lived experience of secretaries.

This chapter is organised as follows: it starts by presenting the motivations for studying secretarial work that led the researcher to undertake this study, and then the implications of the aims and objectives of the study for choice of methods used will be examined. It focuses on the methodological process, alongside data collection methods and design, where details of the sample selection will be given and issues related to that and to the data analysis process undertaken in this research. Finally, this chapter draws on the limitations and contributions of the study.

### **4.2 Research motivations**

The primary research motivation for this study came from the researcher's experience in the secretarial occupation. The researcher worked full-time as a secretary for many years before entering university and continued working while doing a bachelor's degree in Secretarial Science in Brazil. Although "Secretarial Science" university degrees are not common in most countries, in Brazil over 100 tertiary education institutions offer them. The Federal University of Viçosa, where the researcher holds a lecturing position, is one of seven state universities in the country where an Executive Secretary BSc degree is offered and it does so free of charge, granting access to many less privileged students.

During the years in secretarial employment and as a student of secretarial science, the researcher experienced the challenges and struggles faced by secretaries and

raised questions regarding their experiences and the activities that traditionally fall under the occupational classification of 'secretarial', for some a label that sometimes may cause more confusion than bring clarification.

The researcher was interested in better understanding the secretarial occupation and having a holistic view of the occupation in the UK. Having the privileged position of being able to produce a relevant study of work due to intimate knowledge of the practices involved, the researcher sought a better understanding of the secretarial occupation in order to contribute to the research field as a whole as well as to increase the researcher's capacity in the field, offering then substantial leverage to the work the researcher conducts in a developing country.

### **4.3 Research objectives and main aim**

The objectives of this thesis are derived from the literature review and the limitations as highlighted in chapters 2 and 3. They are:

- to propose a new approach to analysing occupations in terms of three dimensions: the content, tasks and skills involved; the context in which the tasks are undertaken; and the meaning ascribed to the occupation by the individual, the lived experience;
- to apply the approach developed, its relevance and usefulness in relation to the analysis of the contemporary experience of the secretarial occupation;
- to contribute to the study of occupations and to the study of secretarial work with new empirical data.

The study's main aim is to contribute to the study of occupational work through a holistic analysis of an occupation and to provide empirical insight into the occupational structure and experience of secretarial work.

In attempting to reach the proposed aim, three questions were raised regarding the empirical focus of this study:

- 1 What is the content of secretarial work? What do they actually do?

- 2 What are the contextual factors surrounding their work?
- 3 What is the experience lived by the workers?

In answering these questions, the study intends to apply the proposed framework by exploring secretaries' perceptions of their occupational role and their identification with it. Furthermore, this research investigates how they develop their perceptions and identification from their lived experience, the content of their work and the context in which they are immersed.

The next section will present the methodological choices made in order to fulfil the objectives of this research.

#### **4.4 Methodological choices**

In order to fulfil the research objectives, this study was based on the interpretivist paradigm and adopted an ethnographic approach. In this section, the approach taken will be discussed and the methods and analysis considerations will be presented.

##### **4.4.1 Rationale for the research approach**

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study for three main reasons. Firstly, as the focus here is to understand the labour process of this distinctive category of occupational workers – secretarial workers – through their lived experience, a qualitative approach was found to be appropriate. Therefore, a deeper understanding of this field had to be gained first. Secondly, this study sought to explore perceptions and practices of the work of secretaries from their own perspectives. The questions regard what they observe in occupational practices –rather than what is commonly assumed and possibly anticipated by the researcher. This commonly happens in other studies of occupational practices and some categories of occupational work sometimes perceived and enacted by the workers and the organisation involved (Haunschild & Eikof, 2009). Thirdly, previous studies reveal that the most common approaches chosen are quantitative, when researchers sought to study separately aspects involved or contained in the work of secretaries. In this study, the idea is to

explore all aspects together, as all aspects of occupational work are interconnected and make sense when analysed together. Finally, literature review, both explored in chapter 2 and chapter 3, demonstrated how research tends to explore workers' experience in a quantitative way. On secretarial work, most contemporary research undertaken failed to present a holistic view of the occupation and failed to present what secretaries do today.

For this qualitative study, interpretivism is the underpinning philosophy. Interpretivism came as a critical view of positivists of social phenomena; they argued that insights into the social world are far too complex to be analysed and "reduced entirely to a series of law-like generalisations" (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009:116). As a response against positivism, interpretivism advocates that "it is necessary for the researcher to understand differences between humans in our roles as social actors" (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009:116) and focuses on the differences between conducting research among people and not with objects. It advocates that the researcher needs to explore the subjective meanings motivating the actions of social actors in order to understand those actions (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). Following from this subjective perspective, social constructionism comes to this study as an important way of exploring the phenomena being researched. Social constructionism "views reality as socially constructed" (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009:111). "Social actors" may have different interpretations of the situation in which they are immersed, so they perceive different situations in different ways "as a consequence of their own view of the world" (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009:111). "Thus, the goal of interpretive research is an understanding of a particular situation or context more than the discovery of universal laws or rules" (Willis, 2007:99).

#### 4.4.2 Ethnography

Due to the objectives of the study, ethnography was seen as an appropriate strategy to study occupational work –and here secretarial work, as it is a potentially strong method to better capture a worker’s experience “in the way in which they would describe and explain it” (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009:149).

Ethnography, “a popular approach to social sciences along with other kinds of qualitative work” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995:1), looks at how people make sense of the world in everyday life (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995:2). Its process involves “extended observations of the group, most often through participant observation, in which the researcher is immersed in day-to-day lives of people and observes and interviews group participants”. However, as Bryman (2008:369) argues, “some caution is advisable in treating ethnography and participant observation as synonyms, since in many respects they refer to similar, if not identical approaches to data collection (...)”. Ethnographers study the meaning of the behaviour, the language, and the interaction among members of the culture-sharing group.” (Creswell, 2007:68-69).

With more than 100 years of history (Gobo, 2008), ethnography was developed by anthropologists who found new ways to learn about cultures “which were impenetrable to analysis consisting only of fleeting contact or brief conversations” (Gobo, 2008:2). Schwartzman (1993:4) discusses “various ways that researchers have developed for learning about the cultures and structures of organisations from the inside out” and emphasizes that ethnography facilitates this process in different ways: firstly it helps the researcher to examine different dimensions of the field under analysis in order to understand participants’ perceptions and experience; secondly,

“Ethnography also requires researchers to examine the taken for granted, but very important, ideas and practices that influence the way lives are lived, and constructed, in organisational contexts. Because ethnographers are directed to examine both what people say and what people do, it is possible to understand the way that everyday routines constitute and reconstitute organisational and societal structures.” (Schwartzman, 1993:4)

Ethnographic research has been present in labour studies for many years. In the UK and in the United States, studies from the early 1970s sought to “uncover the hidden realities of the workplace, the lived experience of workers and the dynamics of employment relations” (Taylor, Warhurst, Thompson & Scholarios, 2009:8). From deep and rich narrative accounts of work, ethnographies generated insights into “social processes at the workplace whether the quotidian and alienating experiences of routinised assembly-line work, the articulation of worker grievances or its relative absence, the functioning of shop floor union organization, informal work practices and behaviours, or, in the case of feminist inspired authors, distinctively genderised modes of action.” (Taylor, Warhurst, Thompson & Scholarios, 2009:8).

A final product of an ethnographic analysis presents a “holistic cultural portrait” (Creswell, 2007:72) of the group that is based on the views of the participants (emic) as well as on the views of the researcher (etic). According to Creswell (2007:72), this final product “advocates for the needs of the group or suggests changes in society to address needs of the group. As a result, the reader learns about a culture-sharing group from both the participants and the interpretation of the researcher. The following table summarizes what the emic and etic portray:

<i>Emic and Etic</i>	
	Emic and Etic refer to two contrasting ways of approaching the study of cultures. The emic approach looks at things through the eyes of members of the culture being studied. What is valid or true is what members of the culture agree on. The etic approach uses structures or criteria developed outside the culture as a framework for studying the culture. From an etic perspective, what is true may be judged in comparison of the cultural practices to an external standard or structure. With etic research, the scientists doing the study are the judges of what is true because they are the ones who select the external standards or structures that will be used. (...)

Table 4.1: Emic and Etic  
(Source: Willis, 2007:100)

The Emic and Etic approaches to the study of cultures relates to this research to the extent to which the meaning of occupational work will be analysed through the eyes of the occupation holder; what is valid and true will be what occupation holders agree on (Emic). The researcher will interpret findings according to the framework developed outside, although informed by, the occupational group.

### ***The ethnography process***

As it is understood that an ethnographic study is not a linear process, the first ethnographic stage in this study started when the researcher started the literature review. There was a need to find out what were the right questions to ask. This need came from the understanding that “one of the differences between ethnography and other forms of research is that ethnographers do not automatically assume that they know the right questions to ask in a setting. (...) in ethnographic fieldwork both questions and answers must be discovered in the social situation being studied” (Spradley 1979:32, cited by Schwartzman, 1993:54-55).

Firstly, an initial element of ethnography was undertaken in order to illuminate secretarial arrangements that would help to inform the next steps in the methodological process. The researcher started to attend monthly meeting of a group of members of an association of secretaries with a branch in Edinburgh, Scotland, where the researcher was based. The meetings took place in Edinburgh in different locations, once a month, from November 2007 to December 2009. Those meetings were central in order for the researcher to become immersed in the local secretarial world, to hear their experiences, questioning, needs and to learn about the secretarial context in Scotland. The meetings also allowed the researcher to interact with the group some of whom could potentially be informants in this study. The meetings had a purpose to gather the secretaries, and it was a time for networking, for participating in talks, seminars, or meetings about topics of their interest and issues related to the secretarial occupation. There were also weekend meetings in various locations where the main objective was socialising and entertainment. The time spent with the secretaries proved to be very important to the researcher as, by networking and listening to the secretaries, it was easier to grasp the main issues related to the

occupation and the context in which they work. The information gathered in those meetings helped to inform the interview schedule for this study, which was again tested in the pilot study. By attending the meetings, talking to the secretaries and by observing them, the researcher had opportunities to ask open questions and to listen to issues raised by the group. That was vital to the early stages of the research as the researcher could gather information for the interviews in a way that the content reflected what was important to them, not the pre-assumptions of the researcher.

Another important outcome from this experience is that by networking with the secretaries, in an overt position as a researcher, it was possible to recruit participants for the pilot stage of this study.

## **4.5 Research method and design**

### **4.5.1 Research method**

The chosen method for this study was semi-structured ethnographic interviews with secretaries in two organisations. The literature reviewed showed that previous research in the area used mainly surveys and questionnaires to study aspects of secretarial work, as shown in chapter 3. Interviews are thought to be “useful ways of understanding how people make sense of their work and the issues they believe are important” (Barley & Kunda, 2001:84). In the ethnographic interviews, the respondents have an “opportunity to answer in a way and with content that is important to him or to her – not to the researcher” (Schwartzman, 1993:58).

In this study, respondents were interviewed by the researcher, who had a set of questions formulated beforehand (interview schedule available in Appendix A) and tested on the pilot study. The questions covered all three parts of the conceptual framework proposed in this study, with a sub-set of questions covering each of the components of the framework. These questions were informed by the literature as well as by the researcher’s contact with secretaries of the association at the initial stage of the study when networking and attending their meetings; the researcher was able to grasp ‘content that was important to them’.



#### 4.5.2 Sample and setting

Considering sampling in qualitative research and in an inductive approach, this study found that the sample would not have to be large and authenticity is the main issue here. The aim in this study, as in other qualitative research, is to gather an authentic understanding of people's experience (Silverman, 2009). Authenticity plays an important part in qualitative research as it is used to evaluate qualitative research as opposed to reliability and validity (Bryman & Bell, 2009). According to Bryman and Bell (2009:414), authenticity criteria "raise a wider set of issues concerning the wider political impact of research". These criteria are evaluated in relation to the research and its effect on the members of the setting studied:

Authenticity Criteria	
Fairness	Representation of different viewpoints among members of the same social setting
Ontological authenticity	Aid members to better understand their social environment
Educative authenticity	Aid members to appreciate better the perspectives of other members of their social setting
Catalytic authenticity	Act as an impetus to members to engage in action to change their circumstances
Tactical authenticity	Empower members to take the steps necessary for engaging in action

Table 4.2: Authenticity criteria  
Adapted from Bryman & Bell (2009:414)

The main stage of the data collection was carried out in Scotland, with interviewees located in different cities throughout the country.

In terms of representativeness, this research does not attempt to generalise an experience –which may vary according to different circumstances such as location, culture, industry sector, etc. The sample location resulted from the researcher's study base and ease of access to participants. Furthermore, the location in Scotland is justified as the phenomenon of interest here does not present different characteristics

in other parts of the United Kingdom. Participants were legal secretaries, i.e., employed by law firms, and medical secretaries, employed by the National Health Service (NHS). The selection of medical and legal secretaries for the sample is based on the fact that these two types of secretaries provide administrative support for knowledge workers. This relationship of secretaries of knowledge workers, a group commonly “associated with professional or expert labour who have access to formal bodies of abstract knowledge” (McKinley, 2005: 243) was found relevant, firstly, as knowledge workers is a group that is very impacted by changes, especially technological changes (McKinley, 2005) and, secondly, knowledge workers keep a degree of “reciprocal interdependence of work with other tasks being performed in the team or organisation” (Benson & Brown, 2007: 125). The implications of this relationship will be analysed in relation to the empirical data in this study. In addition, the SOC presents considerable diversity under the title of secretary and lists medical secretaries (unit group 4211) and legal secretaries (unit group 4212) as distinct under the major group 42 (Secretarial and Related Occupations), both groups are secretaries to knowledge workers.

The public and private sectors are represented and were chosen due to contextual issues, which will be further explored in chapters 5, 6 and 7. The empirical data were collected between November 2010 and March 2011.

The whole subject of recruiting and interviewing the secretaries was a delicate one. It was difficult to have access to the desired sample of secretaries in the chosen sectors. Moreover, time is a major concern for most secretaries as companies rely on their work during office hours. All interviewees were met out of working hours. In one instance, in a private organisation, the Human Resources department gave the researcher access to the secretaries with the condition that they could only be interviewed during lunch breaks or after work. The researcher strived to book the interview after work hours as doing them at lunch time would impose a time limit to the conversation.

The data were collected through 24 semi-structured interviews, 15 with medical secretaries and nine with legal secretaries. No men with the title of legal or medical secretary were found in the organisations researched.

The interviews lasted between fifty minutes and one and a half hours and allowed the same set of questions to be asked to each interviewee with the flexibility of adding some questions as new issues were raised and deemed worth exploring. In addition, after each interview the researcher made notes on various details of the interview conducted. Where appropriate, notes were taken after the interviews in order to avoid disruption to the interview.

With the legal secretaries, three interviews were conducted in an office at the Edinburgh College of Art, one at the law firm after the secretary's working hours and the remaining ones in a syndicate room at the Business School at the University of Edinburgh. As for the medical secretaries, nine interviews were conducted *in situ*, at the hospitals where they worked, in two different locations in Scotland and the other ones were conducted at the Business School at the University of Edinburgh.

All interviews were digitally recorded and verbatim transcribed by a professional transcriber.

Participants filled in a consent form (see Appendix C) before starting the interview.

Participants' job descriptions were requested during the interviews and were emailed by them afterwards. These were used to verify job descriptions initially occupied by the participant against the task description provided during the interview.

As a general depiction of the sample in this study, basic demographics of both groups researched are given in Table 4.3 below.

	Legal	Medical
Number	9	15
Gender	Female	Female
Age range	25 – 60 years old	31 to > 60 years old
Nationality	1 Other country 1 Other EU country 2 South African	All British
Work regime (full-time or part-time)	3 Full-timers 6 Part-timers	13 Full-timers 2 Part-timers
Marital status	4 Single 5 Married	1 Single 10 Married 3 Divorced 1 Widowed

Table 4.3: Sample basic demographics

### **4.5.3 Recruitment strategies**

In order to recruit participants, the researcher used her personal contact network, which helped to gain access to the organisations.

In one of the legal firms, once the first secretary came forward and was interviewed, others followed suit, configuring which is known as ‘snowballing’—when participants recommend and introduce other participants to the study. This is often the best method to overcome access issues. This method has its limitations, as some degree of selection bias may be introduced, as respondents are likely to identify other respondents who have characteristics similar to themselves (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009:240). However, the researcher found that this limitation could be minimised by the fact that not all participants were known to each other and their work location was not the same in all cases, as some respondents would email a group of secretaries in one organisation without personally knowing them all. Another limitation identified in this recruitment process was that, in two instances, the researcher could notice that the participant had been pre-informed of the content of questions and would anticipate answers during the interview. This could not be predicted in the pilot study as the sample then was not as closely connected as some of it in the data collection turned out to be.

The same procedure happened to gain access to the NHS trusts. The researcher’s personal contacts intermediated contacts with secretaries in NHS trusts, and those interested in participating contacted the researcher for further arrangements to meet.

All respondents received a £20 voucher as an incentive to participate in the research.

Due to the fact that secretaries in both settings –legal firms and hospitals, deal with very sensitive information, accessing secretaries was a challenging part of the research process. Secretaries usually act as gatekeepers in the company. Hence the organisations proved to be careful and concerned with this research’s intentions and to what the secretaries were expected to say about their work or the organisation.

At any communication made with prospective participants, an information sheet (Appendix B) was provided with all relevant details about the research and its

purposes, as well as what type of access was required. Participants were informed at all times that participation was completely voluntary and they could withdraw at any time they wished to do so.

#### **4.5.4 Negotiating access for observation**

Ethnography was found to be the most appropriate strategy for this study as it has the potential to better portray the worker's practices and adopting observation would contribute to best show how work practices are contextualized, clarifying to the researcher points not easily articulated by a respondent in an interview (Barley & Kunda, 2001). However, due to the specifics of the sample used for this study, access for observation was a hurdle encountered by the researcher. Although planned, access for observation in all sites researched was denied.

It was found that, firstly, in any research gaining access is always an issue to overcome in order to have full access to the desired sample. Sometimes, as argued by Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009:170), "the request for access and cooperation fails to interest the person who receives it or to reach the gatekeeper or broker who controls research access and makes the final decision as to whether or not to allow the researcher to undertake the research". This issue has a unique characteristic in this study as the sample here, secretaries, usually act as gatekeepers in organisations<sup>13</sup>. However, it was found here that not only were the secretaries the gatekeepers, in the sense that they would firstly decide whether or not the researcher could have access to the person who could allow the research to be undertaken, but Human Resources (HR) professionals (in the legal firms) and the line managers (in the NHS) were also gatekeepers. As shown in the extract below:

“...I have heard back from my line manager and sadly I am not allowed to give you access to my office. Sorry about that.”(R1)

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<sup>13</sup> Vinnicombe (1980) looks at the secretary as a gatekeeper. She evaluates the control systems and exerted control involved in the work of secretaries in keeping (and controlling) the boss' means of communication.

“I made enquiries today with our HR Department about you possibly being able to come into the office to observe the secretaries in their working environment. HR came back to me to say no.” (R24)

Secondly, the work of secretaries anywhere and in all sites chosen for this study, relates to issues of confidentiality and time, both in the medical and legal settings. In addition, the “demands of the organisation and its members may dictate the time spent in the organisation (...) by the researcher” (Neyland, 2008:24). Some of the secretaries interviewed, when asked about being observed, agreed to be observed on the understanding that it would further benefit the research. However, physical access for observation was not granted to the researcher by any of their superiors in the organisations. This situation complies with what Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009:170) say about this, citing Johnson (1975): “even when someone is prepared to offer access this may be overruled at a higher level in the organisation”. The organisations raised issues regarding confidentiality and sensitivity of the material dealt with by the secretaries, the issue of time required to do this and a fear of jeopardise the secretaries workload as well as possible interference or distraction the observation could cause to the work of the secretaries. The extracts below show examples of answers from some secretaries’ superiors who did not agree to give the researcher access for observation:

“Sorry it has taken so long to reply having taken advice from senior managers and HR. I am afraid we have to turn down your request. (...) office is very busy and unfortunately we feel this would impact on the work, plus the office takes a lot of sensitive calls etc. and we have concerns over confidentiality.” (Line manager)

“I am not sure if this can be arranged or not, I will check with my manager but know there have been issues before in allowing access to any of the depts (departments) for non-NHS Staff...” (Line manager)

“I have been unable to contact my manager direct but her asst (assistant) does not think this would be appropriate so regret I am unable to agree to your request” (Line manager)

Thirdly, in some cases, the secretaries themselves told the researcher that they would not feel comfortable in being observed and would already anticipate what they thought line management would say, as R6 emailed the researcher: “I am sorry, I

wouldn't be comfortable with you coming here to observe me. I am certain that line management would not agree to it either.”

#### **4.5.5 Ethical issues**

As in any other research process, it is important to attend to ethical issues involved as they “are likely to be of importance throughout (...) research and require ethical integrity from you as a researcher, your researcher sponsor (if any) and the organisation's gatekeeper” (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009:187). When the respondents were initially approached by the researcher they were informed that confidentiality is an important issue in the research process. Each respondent and their line managers were provided with a research “Information Statement” (See Appendix B) where they could read detailed information on the research and also be assured that any information collected about them would be strictly confidential, and no one would be able to identify them or their organisation/company from the data collected. The Information Statement was again presented to the respondent at the time of the interview. In order to comply with this important ethical measure and to assume anonymity of all respondents and organisations involved, there will be neither names involved in this report nor any indication that may make it possible to recognise a participant. In the next chapters, respondents will be identified by the letter “R” + number, e.g. R5, for technical and analytical purposes only. The organisations involved will not be defined in any way. Indeed, in order to honour the confidentiality assured to respondents and organisations without failing to address important issues on the research process, the researcher strived to:

- 1 “not name the organisation whilst still providing sufficient contextual information;
- 2 not refer fully to organisational documentation whilst indicating it had been used;
- 3 only name the geographical location at the country level;

4 refer to respondents by codes rather than use their names.”

Source: Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009:189.

The issue of confidentiality was strongly noticed by the researcher in some of the interviews. Some respondents took very strong care in not mentioning names and any other description or information about something or someone from the organisation for which they worked. This is completely understandable as the nature of secretarial work is related to ‘secrets’ as discussed in chapter 3. However, in some of the interviews they were over cautious and this brought some prejudice to the research conversation as the research could clearly detect that the interviewee did not want to give more details and gave short answers with a clear fear of saying something inappropriate. Very often, in some of the interviews, once the researcher switched the digital recorder off, the interviewee clearly felt more comfortable in talking more about something and adding extra information to an previously given answer. Notes were taken by the researcher on those occasions in order to gather more information and not lose any data collected.



## **4.6 The observation experience**

The observation experience was conducted with a group of secretaries and PAs, members of a European association of secretaries with a branch in Scotland. European Management Assistants (EUMA) is an international network of administrative support staff with branches in 25 countries. The main members are secretaries and personal assistants (PAs) from a wide range of industry sectors. From September 2007 to April 2010, the researcher attended monthly meetings as a registered member of the organisation.

Those meetings happened once a month in different locations in Edinburgh and sometimes in other places around Scotland.

In those meetings, the members have opportunities to network as well as to have workshops or talks on themes related to their work. The meetings had an average attendance of 15 to 20 people and there was always a member of the Scottish branch to lead the activities.

During the meetings attended, the researcher had various opportunities to talk to the participants about their work, particularly about the main issues that were raised during the meetings regarding issues of their work. Given the knowledge gained from the contact and networking with these people, the researcher was able to think about the related issues that were important for them and, together with the literature review, structure the interviews for the pilot study, the next stage in this study.

The literature on secretarial work, as seen in chapter 3, showed how secretarial work is complex and involves a range of tasks, and this study found it important to account for the informants' notions and perspectives on their work in their given context.

## **4.7 The pilot experience**

### ***The sample***

After a few months attending the association's monthly meetings as described in the previous section, the researcher had an opportunity to do a presentation to the

secretaries and to talk about this study. After the presentation, the secretaries were invited to take part in a pilot study and they were given forms to fill in with their contact details in case they agreed to take part. Later, the ones who accepted were contacted either by email or telephone to arrange a suitable date and time to meet with the researcher. They also received an information statement about the research.

The people involved a random sample of nine secretaries, members of EUMA. The random selection of secretaries from the pilot study was important to build a picture of the occupation as well as to develop the research instruments.

The secretaries were interviewed in Edinburgh, Scotland, during the period of August to November of 2009. All the interviews happened at the organisation where the secretaries work during their normal work hours.

The pilot study proved important to have a general picture of the occupation in Scotland, as the general picture is, as might be expected, the consequence of aggregating rather different experiences in the different areas of employment, as sectors and industries.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher and, due to time constraints, two interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber.

The respondents had another opportunity to read the information statement about the research and sign a consent form to take part in the research prior to the start of the interview. The researcher also reassured them about anonymity and confidentiality issues.

Notes were always taken by the researcher during the interviews.

## **Results**

One of the main purposes of the pilot study was to test the research instruments and get the questions right (Gillham, 2000). Overall the questions run in the pilot were easy for respondents. Some of them made the respondents reflect about something they said they had never thought about while other questions, due to the complexity

involved in the question, presented answers very similar to each other, as most respondents could not assimilate the idea or the main concern in question. Those questions were reformulated in order to be easier for the respondents to answer.

In general, the interviews went well and the pilot process was a very good method to test the research instruments and practise the interview techniques. The pilot study and the interviews transcribed from it showed the need for more in-depth semi-structured interviews at the next stage of the research process. Some of the questions could have been more deeply explored if the researcher had gone beyond the research schedule during the interview and had used more prompts to go deeper into some subjects mentioned by respondents. Therefore, the pilot indicated that a more flexible schedule would be useful to reach the answers required from respondents.

The interviews started with the first question, which was open and gave the respondents freedom to start a conversation at their own pace. On average, the interviews took between 40 and 60 minutes. The duration was adequate, especially because most respondents were taking time off work and during work to participate in the interview. However, the researcher could still feel a degree of anxiety from the respondents in terms of time constraints that often affected the flow of the interviews.

Respondents reacted very well to the interviews. They showed interest in the research and were very happy to answer the questions. Some respondents were apprehensive when talking about very sensitive subjects, such as something relating to the present company where they work or their line manager. However, even though they were very careful in touching the subjects, they managed to tackle them in a way that would not compromise their company or themselves. The researcher learnt to overcome this issue of confidentiality by spending more time at the beginning of the interview talking to the participants and explaining the research objectives as well as showing empathy and interest in their work and their work context and reassuring them of the confidentiality of the data.

The main difficulties found during the interviews were dealing with the time respondents had available for the interview. Even though the researcher had said in the information sheet that a comfortable and quiet place would be essential for the

interview, some of them received the researcher for the interview in their own office. On a few occasions the interview was stopped many times due to the need of secretaries to carry on with their work tasks, having sometimes to stop to speak to the line manager or to answer the telephone.

The pilot showed that the process of interviewing at the next stage of the research could be more efficient if interviews are carefully booked at a time and place that would be suitable for the respondent but also with no interruption of the interview process.

The pilot was also useful to test the ideas developed so far and the content of the interview schedule proposed. The semi-structured design of the interviews schedule used in the pilot study allowed evidence to be gathered on the range of perceptions of their occupation among the secretaries. At first, the researcher thought that questions regarding changes in titles of the secretarial occupation could bring insights in relation to their perceptions on the secretarial occupation. On the contrary, the pilot experience suggested that the secretaries had no problems in understanding or dealing with the many different titles found in their occupation. Some respondents indicated that titles were somehow blurred and were company specific, but no further concern was shown regarding this. The pilot study also suggested that the secretaries had very similar life histories in relation to their career history and choice of the kind of occupation. This was supported by the pilot interviews and raised the question as to whether this similarity would be the same in the context of public organisations and private organisations. Apart from issues of occupational title and the similarities in career history, the respondents also differed greatly in the extent to which they felt recognised or not by the organisation or by other people. They also demonstrated different opinions on the relationship to the line manager and some saw themselves very differently in what they do as secretaries, sometimes as personal assistants, and what changes there had been to their occupation in terms of tasks and skills. Thus, the aspects collected during the pilot interviews were useful to generate a more holistic approach in the reviewed interview schedule to be used at the next stage of the research. Those aspects found during the pilot interviews also support the conceptual framework presented in this study that suggests a holistic study of occupations.

Having finished the pilot interviews, the data recorded was mainly transcribed by the researcher and two interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber. The transcription work of the pilot interviews was a long and time consuming process. Due to the lack of equipment available for transcription, all interviews were transcribed without a proper transcription kit (e.g. foot pedal) which makes the process even longer than usual. In addition, transcriptions took a very long time as English is not the researcher's first language. For the next round of the interviews, it is vital to have available a full transcription kit in order to speed up the process and not to jeopardise the time available for the development of the research or to have the transcriptions done by a professional researcher.

Conducting the pilot study to test the research instrument also proved to be a valuable way of training for the researcher before engaging in the main study interviews. After conducting a few interviews in the pilot experience, the researcher felt more confident in conducting interviews as well as managing possible problems that may emerge before, during and after an interview.

After the pilot study, the researcher and the supervisor reflected on the results and analysed the pilot experience. Changes were necessary in terms of the content of some questions, some questions were added, and others were taken away.

#### **4.8 Analysis of data**

Given the proposed framework, the scope of the analysis in this study is broader than has often been the case in previous research. In this study, the emphasis is on the lived experience of secretaries as well as their content and context of work as combined elements for analysis. In summary, the goal of this study is to better understand the work and the experience lived by secretaries and to achieve this goal, the analytic strategy has to be one which best explores the data in a holistic manner as proposed here.

The data in this study were derived from the interviews conducted and transcribed verbatim and from memos made by the researcher during fieldwork and during the first months of observation of the group of secretaries. The data collected were then

coded separately for each respondent in the software NVivo 9 into analytic categories identified and supported by literature as explored in chapters 2 and 3. The researcher had an idea of the themes before starting the coding process, as informed by observation at the beginning of the research and by the literature; however, other codes appeared when the full transcriptions were coded in NVivo. In addition, the researcher developed analytic memos for each interview after its coding. The themes coded in NVivo were consistent with the framework proposed for analysis. The process of coding the interviews for analysis corresponded to Miles & Huberman's (1984) levels, as firstly the interviews were coded for descriptive information, secondly, they were coded for responses to specific questions asked and, lastly, they were coded inductively for reference to an LPA lens on the content and context of work of the secretaries and their lived experience.

Other themes came out as well that will add to interpretation. This study acknowledges that it is vital for the analysis process and for the use of computerised research aids to have a pre-established analytic goal and strategy as "... there is no software package that will do the analysis in itself" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996:169). The process of coding in qualitative research is important as it "enables the researcher to recognise and re-contextualise data, allowing a fresh view of what is there" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996:46). An example of the coding process in this study is presented in Appendix D. As qualitative research employs many ways of analysing data and the researcher needs to be able to inform the analytic strategy adopted for a particular study (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), an analytic framework was built as presented in Appendix E.

Moving from the handling stage of the data (when data were being coded and the analytic framework was set), the analysis post-data collection was started. Due to the characteristics of an ethnographic study, analysis has always been part of the whole research process, as they are not distinct phases (Gobo, 2008). This study used an inductive approach to explore the data as it has its strengths in developing understandings as well as its openness to a flexible methodology, "a more flexible structure to permit changes of research emphasis as the research progresses" (Silverman, 2009:127). Given the emphasis of the research on occupational work and a holistic approach in order to explore occupations, the inductive approach was found

to be the best way to conduct the analysis, and here it does not attempt to produce universal causal generalisations.

The interpretation of data in this study was a major part of the research. As argued by Willis (2007:160), “collection and interpretation of data on humans are inherently subjective. No matter how close we come to meeting detailed technical standards for research, the result is not an objective report of the truth of the matter”. In this study, the data were collected, classified, and coded. However, the analytic process is more than this and more than just “identifying forms of speech or regularities of actions” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996:108), indeed, “...analysis is about the representation or reconstruction of social phenomena. (...) we do not merely report what we find; we create accounts of social life and in doing so we construct versions of the social worlds and the social actors that we observe...” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996:108).

The data were interrogated and interpreted, which is the stage of the “transformation of the coded data into meaningful data” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996:47) and the results are shown in chapters, 5, 6 and 7. These chapters will present the key findings in this study in relation to the three elements of the framework and the medical secretaries and the legal secretaries. They aim to present a thick description of both settings studied balanced with interpretations. A final integrative analysis will be presented in chapter 8.

#### **4.9 Chapter summary**

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach taken in this research with medical and legal secretaries in Scotland. The chapter began presenting the motivations for the study and the objectives set. The qualitative approach and the methods chosen were considered the best ones to achieve the objectives presented. In order to conduct the study and test the conceptual framework, the ethnographic informed approach was applied as it was seen as an appropriate strategy to better capture and gather rich data on the work of secretaries in both sectors.

The chapter also provided a detailed account of how the research was planned, designed and carried out.

After going through the methodological steps as described in this chapter, the next chapters will present the research findings.



## CHAPTER 5: THE CONTENT

### 5.1 Introduction

This is the first of three chapters (chapters five, six and seven) presenting the findings of the empirical investigation described in the previous chapter, chapter four. It considers respondents' perceptions on the content of their work, one of the three elements of the conceptual framework proposed in this study to better understand occupations. Respondents' descriptions of their work content were presented under the themes in the next three chapters. These were mapped through a LPA lens and the inductive analysis was found to be most helpful in relation to these findings (see chapter four).

This chapter focuses on the key findings of interviews with medical and legal secretaries. It brings together the perceptions of the secretaries on their work content and presents an integrative analysis of each topic explored, that is, it presents contrasts and comparisons in relation to the work content of medical and legal secretaries, also evaluating the data in relation to the framework proposed. This ethnographically informed study of medical and legal secretaries intends to contribute to meeting one of the main objectives of this study, that is, to generate data from which to apply the holistic framework which includes the content, tasks and skills involved; the context in which the tasks are undertaken, and the meaning ascribed to the occupation by the individual, the lived experience. In so doing, the data and the framework will contribute to the study of occupations and to the study of secretarial work.

Although the interviews gave the respondent the freedom to talk about the themes important to them, there was considerable similarity in the way in which all respondents talked about their experience. The chapter is organised according to themes from an LPA lens; this process was detailed in the methodology in chapter 4. The themes addressed here are related to the tasks the secretaries undertake, the skills involved in their work, the knowledge base and the intensity of work. In addition, various issues in relation to those themes are also addressed, as described in Box 5.1.

For the purpose of this research and considering that all respondents were female, the secretaries will be referred to in this and in the subsequent chapters as “she”.

Findings in relation to the content of secretarial work are presented in section 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5 of this chapter (see Box 5.1) and summarised within section 5.6.

<p><b>Tasks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tasks undertaken</li><li>• Variety of tasks</li><li>• Gendered related tasks</li><li>• Task fragmentation and intensity</li><li>• Job description</li><li>• Role of technology</li><li>• Demand of tasks</li></ul> <p><b>Skills</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Skills needed for secretarial work</li><li>• Variety of skills</li></ul> <p><b>Knowledge base</b></p> <p><b>Intensity of work</b></p>
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Box 5.1: The content – summary of themes and sub-themes

## 5.2 Tasks

When talking about the tasks they undertake at work, both medical and legal secretaries gave interesting insights into what they actually do and how they perceive the content of their job. The themes presented in this chapter and in the subsequent ones are very interrelated and sometimes overlap. One example is when the secretaries talk about the tasks they develop and they also address issues regarding their skills. The same happens in relation to when they talk about the role of technology and also address issues on skills and the effects of change in their work.

### 5.2.1 Tasks undertaken

Respondents listed a range of tasks they undertake which require a range of skills. The list presented by all respondents did not differ in terms of content from the legal and medical, however, the degree to which they use their skills for the tasks and the amount of time spent on the tasks does differ. All secretaries, for example, undertake typing, filing and dealing with public enquiries. However, data indicates that in the private sector, the legal secretaries spend most of their time on typing whereas the medical secretaries have to type, do the filing, and liaise patients' notes with other departments or other secretaries and answer patients queries on the phone or by letter.

Below there are two tables that present the tasks described by both medical and legal secretaries. The nature of the task does not have great variation. However, the context in which the tasks are carried out vary. For example, within the legal secretaries' context there is more information technology available. However, they demonstrate that most of their job comprises typing and also some respondents demonstrated how their line managers became more independent and carry out some traditional secretarial tasks themselves.

Table 5.1 below presents a list of the tasks undertaken by legal secretaries. For comparison reasons, in bold are the variations that are characteristics of the legal secretarial area when the tasks listed are the same as the ones listed by medical secretaries in Table 5.2.

Legal Secretaries' Tasks	
	Answering the phone
	Managing emails
	Typing
	Dictation ( <b>digital based</b> )
	Diary management
	Copying/photocopying
	Filling in database ( <b>cases records</b> )
	Filing ( <b>digital based</b> )
	Printing and posting letters
	Dealing with public enquiries ( <b>clients</b> )
	Covering reception
	Managing and arranging meetings
	Liaising ( <b>solicitors, other secretaries and admin staff</b> )
	Scanning
	Events organisation
	Biding

Table 5.1: Legal Secretaries' tasks

Medical Secretaries' Tasks	
	Answering the phone
	Managing emails
	Typing
	Dictation ( <b>tape based</b> )
	Diary management
	Copying/photocopying
	Filling in database ( <b>patients records</b> )
	Filing ( <b>paper based</b> )
	Printing and posting letters
	Organising case notes
	Dealing with public enquiries ( <b>patients, labs</b> )
	Matching up patients' notes
	Managing appointments
	Doing statistics
	Liaising ( <b>council, social work, voluntary sector, Scottish Executive, solicitors, all health professionals</b> )
	Organising theatre list
	Managing waiting list

Table 5.2: Medical Secretaries' tasks

Unlike medical secretaries, the legal secretaries considered typing as their predominant task. Other tasks beyond digital transcriptions of lawyers documents,

such as events organisation, diary management and liaising, are also personal computer (PC) based and thus involve typing.

### **5.2.2 Variety of tasks**

Job descriptions present the tasks which the medical secretaries will be doing at work, and in the case of the NHS, the tasks of a medical secretary is called “key results areas”, where there is a list of tasks expected in the role (see Appendix F). This study also highlights a range of ‘additional tasks’ that medical secretaries develop at work that are beyond their job description. However, sometimes it is not easy to determine what an added task is or what it involves. Firstly, secretarial work is a job that employs a wide range of tasks, and a given task might be interpreted by someone as an added task when it is just part of another task; secondly, because additional tasks might be interpreted by secretaries as tasks which involves a more subjective area, such as a higher level of emotional skills or knowledge, that is, the demand of the tasks might be considerably different. The extract below exemplifies a situation when a medical secretary has to deal with very difficult situations and how she considers this as an added task:

“(…) general telephone duties which can involve people phoning up being really distressed, even to the point where they say they want to kill themselves and you’ve got to actually deal with that or pass it on to the appropriate person.”  
(…) R4

R4 describes an occasion when she needs to deal with a phone call of a patient threatening to commit suicide. In addition to her task of answering the phone and providing the right information, R8 needs to recognise the patient’s situation and transfer the call to the appropriate person. Sometimes, as R4 reports, nobody is available and she needs to make a decision on what is the best thing to do and also takes the call further asking more questions to the patient to better assess the situation. For R4, the added task is translated into the demand placed upon her in this situation. It is distressing to the secretary, as she describes:

“(…) it can be distressing at the time and you always come off the phone thinking did I do the right thing? At the back of your mind you think if that person was to kill themselves how would you feel? You would feel awful you

know. So yeah...it's maybe only occasionally that you get it but it's probably the most stressful part of your job you know? (...)." (R4)

The sample of legal secretaries interviewed in this study, indicated that legal secretaries perform a mixture of traditional secretarial tasks and tasks related to the context where they develop their work, which in the case of legal firms presents more advanced technological facilities for carrying out tasks. In the legal firms the secretaries' tasks and the frequency in which they are developed varies in relation to the location and team in which the secretary works, which will be discussed in the daily routine section.

The common tasks reported by legal secretaries involve answering the phone, managing emails, typing, digital dictation, diary management, copying, filing of a range of documents, covering reception when needed, as well as dealing with the public and clients.

The legal secretaries demonstrated that typing is considered the predominant task developed at work, also being related to other tasks they have to develop. For instance, when organising an event or doing diary management, a lot of typing is also involved, as reported by R19:

"90% audio typing and the rest, 10%, is just general admin – filing, photocopying, faxing. Sometimes on the telephone but not so much, and scanning, stuff like that."

The following extract shows how R25 demonstrates how diverse her work is and how it is comprised of many tasks:

...and again there's a few hats that I wear but it's all sort under the one general hat. Whereas as I say my previous job it was lots of different hats and there was not really one general hat."

The additional tasks reported to be undertaken by the legal secretaries are related to firstly, new procedures within the organisation and possibly a result of the redundancies in the past few months when legal firms were experiencing the economic downturn in the UK:

"(...) When I first started it was just what I did before, it was just typing and things, but now they're bringing all these new guidelines in where the secretaries have got to do money laundering and that's, us secretaries feel that

that should be the solicitors doing that, because it's quite an important job and if you do something wrong we'll sort of get the blame. And they're getting us to do... What's the other thing they're getting us to do (...) Oh, credit checks, checks on firms and see what their credit rating is and things like that. So they're adding more and more because they made a lot of people redundant, unfortunately. (...) I don't mind, but as long as you get full training on it, it will be absolutely fine. It's just they've added more and more..." R18

R18 exemplifies how their job has been affected by the changes in the organisation.

R18 indicates that the nature of their job is changing and more responsibility has been added to it.

Secondly, additional tasks were also related to the volume of work, more than its content:

"It contains more in the fact of I work for more people, the volume has increased, um...the actual description of what I do no, ...as I say it's more because of volume, because I work for more people I don't just work for...when I first came here I was working for three people and I now work for one, three, four, five, I work for five and a half people. One...luckily one is on maternity leave at the moment, and the half is because her normal secretary only works three days and I work for her the other two days. Yes. So it's the fact of the volume not necessarily the job description." R25

However, some legal secretaries reported that there are not many additional tasks involved in their job as job contracts today cover mainly all secretarial duties:

"No I don't think so because they've got so much in the job description to cover it all. Yes." R24

"Well, yes and no. My original job description is probably spot on to what I was originally doing, but the job has changed, the number of people that you're working for, but the job spec doesn't actually say how many people you're going to be working for. It doesn't say you'll work for two partners, you're doing this and you're doing that. It just says 'typing, helping out with scanning, copying and binding and any other duties that you might be required to do', so it pretty much encompasses everything they can ask you to do. But it has changed over the past five years and the things that we've been doing, but I wouldn't necessarily say that's not covered in the job spec, you know, with the 'any other duties'." R23

### **5.2.3 Tasks they do not undertake**

Some of the secretaries in the sample, both legal and medical, mentioned that they do not perform some tasks anymore, such as serve coffee or deal with the line manager's personal affairs, or even "just answer the phone". The findings

demonstrate that the secretaries highlight the tasks that distance themselves from the traditional stereotypical secretarial picture, such as those presented by Pringle (1989) as the “office wife”. Pringles’ “office wife” definition explores gender and sexuality issues involved in the secretarial occupation; this definition of secretary addresses the common representation of the occupation as a women’s occupation.

The respondents’ description of their role or tasks also demonstrated a defensive way in relation to this stereotypical secretary and to gender relations involved in their work, as argued in chapter 3. This situation resembles occupational claims of members of low level occupational groups, when they articulate their occupational culture when talking about their work (Watson, 1995). For Watson (1995:228), with low level occupations, the content of their work is more likely to function in a defensive way – helping occupational members cope with problems. This situation and this ideology as expressed by the secretaries present a need for society and organisations to be sensitive to the ideological accounts presented by occupational members, such as secretaries and any other occupational group.

#### **5.2.4 Task fragmentation and intensity**

While the legal secretaries perform a more repetitive range of tasks, the medical secretaries have a wider but fragmented range of tasks. This fragmentation translates into a high demand placed on them to deal with different tasks with different intensities. For example, the medical secretaries sometimes have to deal with difficult phone calls from suicidal patients, as further addressed in the subsequent sections. However, the legal secretaries perform the traditional secretarial tasks, especially typing, but with more advanced technological facilities. These are also examples of contextual factors that differentiate how their work is performed.



### 5.2.5 Job description

The sample interviewed in this study indicated that medical secretaries perform the traditional secretarial tasks and other tasks that might be related to the context where they develop their work, that is, the industry and the constraints involved in the work they do. Although the NHS has a standard job description for the position of secretary (see Appendix F), many job descriptions are partial and they fail to describe the amount of activities undertaken by a medical secretary on a day-to-day basis. The secretarial role is one type of work that has a high variation in activities (France, 2009), as it is dependent on the type of organisation and sector, and again, variation in terms of the context of the organisation. One example is the variation of tasks of a medical secretary who works in an outpatient section of a hospital from another medical secretary who is in a General Practitioner (GP) practice. In a hospital a medical secretary may be allocated to a specific department or ward where their contact with the hospital staff and patients may vary according to the area in which they work, whereas in a GP practice they might have to handle a high range of activities related to patients' enquiries and liaise with doctors and nurses. The extent and nature of the work of secretaries may also vary according to their management and the consultant(s) they work for.

In addition, when asked if they think that their job involves more than what is contained in their job description, some of the respondents mentioned that the job description presented to them would normally have a description of a duty that would involve many different activities, that is, a description that would easily be applicable to different tasks. As exemplified by R8:

“The most important part of your description is ‘and any other tasks that are deemed suitable’. [Laughter]” R8

In fact, such a clause is not unusual in practice; job descriptions cannot cover everything. Thus, what is demonstrated by the medical secretaries is that what concerns them is, firstly, the extent to which these additional tasks place more demands on them and the intensity of these demands; secondly, the significance of those tasks to their work and, thirdly, the range of tasks, whether they are the same tasks as presented in the job description or not. It was found in the data that those

additional tasks place a higher demand on them in terms of a higher range of tasks to be undertaken as well as the emotional demand such tasks might require from them.

Although the tasks undertaken by the secretaries were defined in their job description, the list of tasks they undertake is not exhaustive and they actually undertake a wider range of tasks than what they were initially hired for. It was possible to observe that in some job descriptions provided by the respondents there was usually a line describing a role that would encompass any other tasks that might be undertaken. This invalidates any chance of secretaries being able to complain about the excess workload and terms and conditions of work for which they were hired. This situation of a performance beyond what the organisation formally requires from the secretary also confirms two situations as Wichroski (1994) argued before. There is a discrepancy between the work prescribed by the organisation and the work and skills performed by the secretaries. Being the centre of the information flow the secretaries know more than is acknowledged and recognized by the organisation, however, they are still managed by a higher level of bureaucratic control. This exemplifies how important it is to know contextual factors surrounding an occupation in order to better understand the occupation.

#### **5.2.6 Role of technology**

The role of technology relates to the content of secretarial work to the extent that it affects their tasks and how management control their work.

The sample in this study showed that most medical secretaries use NHS software (e.g. OASIS) routinely for most of their tasks; however they do not have any input as to how the system should work or how it could be improved. The tasks they undertake are very controlled by their managers and their work is more about managing data in the computer system than any other input on how data should be managed. This is very apparent with the legal secretaries, as to enable them to work they have a variety of high standard IT equipment available. The secretaries' relation to technology demonstrates that the control of their tasks is dictated by management. Other aspects of the role of technology in the work of the secretaries studied will be

analysed in the next chapter as it will also be related to the secretaries' context and how technology is about changing roles.

### **5.2.8 Tasks and effort**

One medical secretary reported that the consultant she works for does not take calls from patients, so she has to deal with a lot of information regarding the patients' deteriorating conditions as well as the patient who might think she knows what is wrong with him/her.

The tasks the medical secretaries develop at work demonstrate that there is a lot of effort involved in their work. Although the tasks they develop might be to some extent repetitive in relation to the type of task to be undertaken, there is a lot of effort involved. The effort involved in their tasks is about dealing with situations that happen to them at work and are unpredictable most of the time.

In summary, both medical and legal secretaries perform a combination of tasks and they are very alike. Writing skills and confidentiality (Vinnicombe, 1980) are still present in the occupation. However, in both cases, it is anticipated that future technological developments will change their tasks and might bring an unstable state for their work. The demand on them may keep growing and more responsibility may also be involved.

The secretaries interviewed do not participate in decision or planning processes in the organisation, even though the kind of work they do and the information they deal with are crucial to inform processes of decision making in organisations.

## 5.3 Skills

As discussed in Chapter 3, previous research has looked widely into the skills of secretaries and there is a developed body of skills research<sup>14</sup>. Medical secretaries were asked to describe the skills required for their job. They were also asked to talk about what sort of personal characteristics are needed to do their job. These two questions were usually answered together and elements of technical skills were mixed with soft and tacit skills.

### 5.3.1 Skills needed for secretarial work

The majority of medical secretaries talked about typing as the main skill required for their job. For them, it is preferable to have "...a competent sort of speed and accuracy..." (R12). Respondents also demonstrated how typing skills are considered a major part of the job and related it to the fact that they deal with very sensitive and important information in the medical area, information that relies on the accuracy of their typing, as reported by R15:

"For the job ...well probably fast typing skills ...you've got to be quick on the computer because ...a lot of these letters used to be sort of ten days, letters would have to go to the GPs, it doesn't happen because there is just such a volume of work to do that. ...You've got to be really quite quick and accurate because it's not like you're just typing figures and things, it's people's health and drugs, you've got to be really careful."

As for the legal secretaries, the skills required to do their work were described by respondents in relation to technical skills and soft skills. As stated in the previous chapter, the issue of secretarial skills has been discussed (see Table 3.6) and lists of secretarial skills have been built in other studies (see Table 3.8).

The legal secretaries listed typing, communication, attentive reading, articulation, telephone manner, ability to prioritise, organisation, and flexibility as the skills required for their job.

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<sup>14</sup> See Webster, 1986; Giles et al., 1986; Khalid, 2000 ; Kalid et al., 2002; Kilcoyne, 2003; Thurloway, 2004; Truss, C, Rosewarne, A. & Alfes, K., 2009.

For the majority of respondents in the legal area, typing skills were found to be the most important part of their job, given the amount of time spent typing on a day-to-day basis. The statement below demonstrates how two respondents perceive the kind of skills involved in their work and how they associate them to the need to be a person who learns easily.

“Skills for this type of job? Well, obviously you’ve got to be a keyboard worker, and you’ve got to have a lot of common sense. Not necessarily IQ, but common sense that you can be taught. You have to be teachable, because if you’re not, you’re never ever going to learn all the ins and outs, and anybody can go and type, copy type or audio type, but to be able to retain information, it’s a case of you’re either going to have...” R20

“... you have to be a fast typer. And know how to use a computer quite well. Some firms are a bit more strict about what systems and stuff you’ve got experience in and they require to see the experience and qualifications. Others are more lenient, they don’t care as long as you know how to use Word, that’s all they want from you. But apart from that, not much else.” R19

### **5.3.2 Variety of skills**

Other skills were also cited by most respondents, such as computer skills, good communication and telephone skills. Most respondents spoke about situations they have to handle on the phone with patients as well as with patients’ relatives. They also mentioned the importance of having “telephone manners” skills as they always need to handle difficult calls. About this R12 reports: “...a good telephone manner, you’re dealing with patients that are sometimes upset and worried, so you need to kind of have a good telephone manner and be ...kind of know how to deal with a situation as it arises” (R12). In fact, respondents demonstrated they have a range of skills that encompass not only technical skills, which are more visible to the kind of work they do, but they also have interpersonal skills that are exercised in doing their tasks.

Also related to telephone skills, the majority of respondents mentioned that common sense and good judgement is also important to deal with issues they face at work:

“Judgement, yes, you have to use a lot of judgement (SIC) because especially where you’ve maybe got somebody phone up and say ‘Oh, it’s essential I see the doctor this week, oh it’s essential’ and over the years you get to know your patients and you think ‘Yes, you always say that and it’s not’, so you can

discuss it with the patient, discuss it with the doctor or say ‘Well, OK, I haven’t got anything this week, but what if I give you an appointment next week?’ and sometimes it’s ‘Oh, no, no, it’s not good’ and other times they say ‘Yes, that’s fine’. So again it is using your judgement.” R1

The above statement also illustrated how the medical secretaries are effectively involved in allocation of resources at a micro level. They need to be able to take decisions as to whether the patient has a genuine request and if needs a priority attention given by the doctor. This decision relies on their experience and knowledge of the patient history.

### **Soft skills**

Amongst the medical secretaries, the majority of answers about soft skills required for the job were in relation to the way they should behave at work. Some respondents talked about dealing with difficult people and the strain this sometimes puts on them. Those situations require the medical secretaries to be a calm and patient person. The following quote is an example of how one of the respondents tries to relate to her work as she thinks “sense of humour” is an important skill for a secretary. Her report shows how much the medical secretary has to deal with and how the hospital environment can be very stressful for them:

“I think you have to have a sense of humour. ...worked with oncology, obviously oncology is...there’s never really a happy ending, or very very rarely a happy ending ... to get through the day what I used to do was I didn’t think of patients as people, I thought of them as a set of case notes, so technically they didn’t exist and that’s how in my head you don’t get emotionally involved. ... if you didn’t have a sense of humour and able to laugh about the silly things that go on in the office ...I would spend all day in tears.” R8

Indeed, most respondents kept talking about skills such as common-sense and calmness, as to them, it was very closely related to the kind of work they deal with:

“Just I think...maturity, common-sense and calmness basically. ...basic secretarial skills, um...good typing skills, ... good organisational skills ...you’ve got to be fairly diplomatic sometimes. ... and obviously patient and understanding with the patients because sometimes the demands are intense! ...you’ve also got to be ...prepared for anything unexpected. I had someone

call just last week who told me that he was in the middle of committing suicide. He had stopped to call me back to tell me that so...I was fairly sure it wasn't a...a serious threat ...but you have to deal with that and it...it can be difficult because it's not something fortunately that we have to deal with very often... ”  
R2

When asked about soft skills, the majority of legal secretaries spoke about the importance of being a “people person”, as communication is a big issue in any secretarial work.

“As I say I think it really is the fact that you have to... to know how to ...as I say communication is a big part of it. And if you can't communicate with the people that you work with then I mean whether it be you are one person in a small office, or like here you are one person in a big office and a horde of secretaries. ...or even just in a straight secretarial pool where you're just bashing out documents. It's... you have to be able to communicate, that's very important. ...I mean we can all be...in our own little world at times, but as I say if you don't communicate then...but I think that's in any role isn't it? Other characteristics...I mean a secretarial role is...it's...it's not...it doesn't have to be technical. I mean if you wanted to really go down...I think in any job, if you really wanted to be technical about things you could be. (... ) I think you need to have for any secretarial job you need to just be able to have good ...person skills, people skills are important and I think another thing is you need to have a good manner. ...I deal with clients all the time on the telephone and you have to be able to have I think a good phone manner as well.” R25

The legal secretaries also spoke about being a flexible person and prepared to do any kind of tasks that may appear. This is exemplified in the following extract:

“You have to be very reliable and dependent because sometimes, it depends who you work for again, but a lot of partners see their secretary as PA of everything, you know, and you're expected to handle everything if they, you know, screw stuff up or... Even need the little things like ordering their dry cleaning or, some will expect you to do that, so you've got to be quite thick skinned sometimes. Because some people take it as an insult, those kinds of tasks, but...” R19

### ***Organisation skills***

Some respondents called attention to the importance of organisation skills and attention to detail. In the statement below, R8 shows how, from her perception, attention to detail is so important:

“...organisation yes, you have to be well organised ... I wouldn't say you had to be the fastest typist in the world but it helps. ... It helps to get through the work. ...attention to detail, that's something. There are times everybody makes

mistakes and there are times when you're listening to earphones and you can pick up that a consultant has given the wrong dose of medication or the wrong times, because my letters are electronically checked what I will do is I will put a wee footnote in and just say did you not mean such and such? And sometimes he'll come and he'll say yes that's right well spotted. And other times he won't and I just notice it's been changed! ...I think that's...I think that's the most important things (...)" R8

In R8's statement, she clearly does more than what is expected from her as a secretary in her typing work. Her skills go beyond a manual and routine work of typing as she uses an acquired knowledge of her particular work and highlights errors made by doctors. She uses skills that are not in her job description and demonstrates important tacit knowledge. Her ability to be able to spot errors provides additional value to her work, as she may be saving the consultant's time. Her statement also shows that at times she feels that her action was recognised by the doctors who made a mistake and thanked her, while sometimes nothing is said to her but she can notice that the doctor changed the mistake she spotted without acknowledging her. The medical secretary's ability, as exemplified in the quote above, suggests that there are additional skills that are not formally recognised by the organisation insofar as they are not contained in the job description, but which make a significant contribution to the service being provided. In addition, as R8 argues, it is "the most important" part of their job.

The importance of organisation skills was always emphasised by respondents. The respondents deal with a large amount of paperwork in hospitals and they have a great responsibility in keeping the paperwork within easy access. The need for organisation skills was also associated with the demand of work they have from doctors and other people in the office and the time they might save when their work is well organised and when they know what needs to be prioritised, as R6 reports:

"...organisational skills are a must because the amount of paper that crosses my desk is amazing, it's a huge amount. And...the tasks that he asks me to do as well you know, he'll send an email for one or he'll come through and verbally ask me to do something else. And then somebody else will come in and say can you do that, and you need to be able to remember and prioritise. So you need to be pretty organised." R6

The data so far suggests that the medical secretaries have a range of skills, such as organisation skills and judgement that establish a close link to the consultants'



workload. In developing these skills in an effective way, the medical secretaries have a very positive influence on the flow of the consultants' work and the service they provide to patients, not least the kind of organisation they work for and the demands placed on them by the organisation. The medical secretaries need to be able to make judgements when dealing with patients as well as be able to communicate effectively, and in doing so they contribute to the consultants' work avoiding further delay in the process of seeing a patient or avoiding any lack or mixed information. This is one example of how the medical secretaries, in fact, work with more skills than expected, or skills which are recognised as being part of a list of secretarial skills required to their role. That judgement is a major skill, as respondents argue, is connected with a high level of knowledge, not only on systems and processes involved in their work, but also about the work content of other people, such as doctors and nurses. Thus, their judgement is exercised in relation to a wide range of knowledge and tacit skills.

### ***Shorthand***

Another skill frequently mentioned by respondents is shorthand. It was found that the older respondents who had training in shorthand still use it as a tool in their work. They report that it is not a requirement today for the work of a secretary, however, having the skill available, they always find it helpful to use on telephone calls or when taking minutes of meetings. Not all secretaries agree that shorthand is a dying skill.

### ***Decision making***

Decision making was also cited by the medical secretaries as important. They sometimes have to manage information and patients when consultants are not present ("You need to be able to work on your own and make decisions if the consultant is not around..." R5) and this involves a high level of skill and responsibility. The skills involved, as stated before, relates to the medical secretary's capacity to judge

when a given situation, for example, requires more or less attention and which action they may take. There is a high degree of responsibility placed upon them considering the type of the work they deal with – people’s health – and the responsibility of their actions and the possible consequences a wrong decision might bring to the service or the patient him/herself. However, there is no decision making related to higher management decisions or decisions referring to their work in terms of processes and the computer system they utilise.

Considering that respondents work for different organisations in the private sector, legal firms, and the public sector, the NHS, the study indicated there were similarities and differences in relation to the skills of the secretaries. It was found that these differences seem to relate to the industry sector in which they worked. Both legal and medical secretaries indicated that their work comprises multiple skills and tasks. Respondents also indicated that their work comprises multiple tasks undertaken on tight deadlines and often they were interrupted and sometimes expected to do something urgent for the line manager, resulting in a rearrangement of priorities and plans. This rearrangement of priorities makes the secretaries a very flexible kind of worker, as they have to be able to analyse the situation and prioritise what is important and then carry out their daily tasks.

The statements of the legal secretaries presented some degree of difficulty in defining the skills required for their job and the skills they have or develop at work. The legal secretaries listed technical and soft skills. However, the legal secretaries seem to describe their skills not mentioning major skills that are associated with their work and tasks they undertake, which for them may be regarded as not relevant to formal recognition.

With medical secretaries, a range of skills, not only encompassing technical skills, were listed, however those skills are the ones more visible to people. In contrast, they mentioned some tacit skills as the major skills exercised in the kind of work they do. Secretarial work has always been problematic as there is an association with a nurturing sense (Kennelly, 2006) and many times emotional skills are not recognised by people in organisations (Wichroski, 1994) as most of them are gender based. This situation has to be considered in relation to the organisational context in which the

secretary works (Wichroski, 1994). The level of tasks and skills performed by secretaries might be associated with the degree of bureaucratic control and the size of the organisation involved.

The data suggests that, for medical secretaries, despite the constant changes in the NHS in the past, their core skills have not been affected as they still perform many of the same tasks although more skills are needed. The medical secretaries' fears of a loss of skills with the future introduction of the digital system may be a product of the demand imposed on them by the NHS. This is because, for them, the amount of work still grows and the introduction of a new system will change the nature of their work, will stop them from working with some skills they always used; but the new system may create a higher demand in relation to other tasks.

It is important, however, to take into account the major changes that constantly impact on the nature of work (Krause, 1971) and it is no different for secretaries. Changes impact on their work and on their skills. Notwithstanding, there is a degree of difficulty for secretaries in assessing the skill associated with their work.

Data indicates that secretaries find work experience important as well as the ability to deal with more complex situations and being able to use their judgment when undertaking a task. Although they make this claim of being able to exert their judgment and to deal with complex situations, secretaries are still subjected to a high level of control.

#### **5.4 Knowledge base**

When asked about the kind of knowledge required for their job the majority of the respondents answered that, in the case of medical secretarial work, it is "common sense" and "medical terminology". The answers varied in terms of perception of knowledge as something learnable or something related to personal characteristics or tacit knowledge. The secretaries answered this question often mixing descriptions of types of knowledge and types of skills.

“...I think you have to have a lot of common sense, ... especially dealing with telephone calls. I don't think it's so much your knowledge because knowledge you can pick up as you go along, you're doing something day in day out, you will eventually become an expert in these words.. ...I think in a way...a lot of it is common sense ...I think that's the most important thing. ...anybody you can teach to type, ...anybody you can teach to answer the telephone and take a message with a phone number, but I don't think you could teach anybody to deal with a doctor/consultant, that's one thing.” R8

A great amount of the knowledge described by the medical secretaries is tacit knowledge. Indeed, the above quote neatly illustrates how the respondents demonstrate that, for them, the medical secretarial occupation is formed by tasks that can be undertaken by anybody. However, there are skills that require a personal ability to deal with specific situations and people, as in R8's example, an ability to deal with doctors.

Medical secretaries are required to have knowledge of medical terms to use in the production of documents, as well as to direct patients to the right place or to the right people. Thus, the degree of knowledge of medical terms enables medical secretaries to judge whether to deal with something or pass it on to the appropriate person or department.

“say for argument's sake my consultant goes on holiday, and he will say right all the mail coming in, would you read through all the mail, and see if there's anything that you think can't wait, would you ask a consultant to look at it. Now obviously he's not asking me to make a medical decision, he's asking me just to have a look at things and if something doesn't look quite right it's...he wants me to...pass it on, deal with it. Um...which is fine, again...anybody can read something like an MRI scan report and really all you're doing is looking at the conclusion. If the conclusion says normal examination you tend to say that's fine it can wait. If the conclusion says um...may show a space occupying lesion you know straightaway to find somebody. But again you have to know what a space occupying lesion is you know? So again yeah the onus is moving more, they don't have the time to spend so yeah they rely on you a bit more to pick things up.” R8

For legal secretaries the question in relation to the knowledge required to carry out their work provided the interviewer with a mixture of knowledge they believe is required for their job. The majority of respondents said that the most important knowledge required for the job is a good knowledge of the English language, as reported by R24 and R20 below:

“Well you need to have a good understanding of the English language, maybe not so much (...) well grammar especially, but maybe not so much punctuation because a lot of people don’t use punctuation now.” R24

“I think first and foremost you have to have a really good knowledge of the English language, to be any sort of good secretary. ... because when you’re called upon to type things out, there are times where you don’t have time to search a dictionary. I know you’ve got word-spell and all the rest of it on PCs now, but even that takes time, and if you’ve made a lot of mistakes, spelling mistakes, your boss spends a lot of time, even on the spell check, to go down through and so click on it to change it to the correct spelling and everything... So I do think a good knowledge of the English language and good vocabulary. (...)” R20

When answering the questions on the knowledge required, the legal secretaries related to the notion of personal appearance. Respondents mentioned the importance of having good presentation in relation to how to approach a client either by phone or in person. R20 below discusses the need for a secretary to be always well presented as she needs to have a presentation compatible to the context in which she works, as clients might expect it from legal firms’ employees and the secretary is also included:

“And I also think for a secretary, she needs to be able to have a good telephone manner and also to present herself properly to clients when they come in. Because a lot of times, yes the clients expect the actual solicitor to be well addressed and to be polite and etc, etc, you know, they have an idea of how a solicitor should be. And when they see the secretary, if the secretary comes up and she’s got scruffy looking trousers on and maybe a jumper that’s had something spilt on it, or you know, or her hair is in a mess, she just generally looks a bit untidy, they’re going to think ‘My god, what on earth is this firm doing, employing someone like that’. ....” R20

It was also reported by respondents that it is important to have a good knowledge of the system used in the organisation, such as the software packages a legal secretary will be dealing with. “You really have to know how the system works. Because if you don’t know how to do that, then that would be it. Somebody else just couldn’t come in and do the job that I did, they would need to be shown, know the system, know the way around it.” R22

Another important knowledge the legal secretaries cited as important is to know how to deal with people. On a mixture of knowledge and skills requirements, R25 describes the importance of knowing how to relate to people:

“You have to... obviously be able to type, ... I think you have to ...good

listening skills, ...that is very important. You have to be able to have ...a good rapport with the people that you work with. ...as I said earlier my boss I was told when I had my initial interviews and what have you was told that he could be very difficult. I get on very well with him but it's the fact if I know...I can usually gauge his moods. So that I know when I can sort of talk about the family and have a joke, or whether it really is this is business today, or really step back and stay out of his way! [Laughter] ....." R25

The respondents also mentioned the need to know how to deal with people and especially clients.

"(...) I think when we're dealing with our clients we need to know them, we need to know how to approach them. Some clients are a little bit more sensitive, some want to call you and just have a long chat and you need to be able to... We have a lot of elderly clients and they often phone through because they just want someone to talk to!" R23

It was also mentioned that most of the knowledge required for the work of a legal secretary is learned along the way, that is, once the person is working in the area. For the respondents, there is no need to acquire this kind of job with an existing knowledge of what they will be dealing with at a solicitors' office. However, a pre-knowledge of things such as legal terminology is an advantage. This is illustrated by the following statements:

"Personally I think you need to know grammar, you need to know the language. You need to be able to type fast, you need to know how Word, especially Word works. Obviously you get training if you need it. I do training. And I suppose background, legal background, helps. You need to know what to do, what kind of forms you need for a particular thing. But that's also one of the things that you will learn during your job." R17

"No, not specifically. If you're starting out from scratch, then I would say no, you build up the knowledge. And if you tend to be in one field, for instance if you're in commercial property, you'll build up a knowledge of that. So if you do go and look for another job then you're more than likely to be placed in that type of job again, unless you specifically ask your agency or whatever not to place you in that, and you're wanting to gain different experience. But it's very difficult to get your foot in a different department." R21

The above statements exemplify how the legal secretaries find it important to know the English language well in order to work well and the majority affirm that the knowledge required for their job is built throughout the years of experience. Interestingly the secretaries also demonstrated how they perceive their job as a low

requirement type of job, also reducing it to technical skills to the detriment of knowledge. As R21 states, "... You don't have to know what you're doing, as long as you know how to ... copy a document and that, that will get you into the job." R21. R21 reduces the work she does and the requirements in terms of knowledge to merely knowing how to technically produce documents with no need for knowledge of the content being treated.

In addition to the terminology they described as being essential knowledge required in the sector in which they work, there is also a need to know the processes and systems involved in legal firms and hospitals. However, there is a suggestion that secretaries can be easily substituted by another person, as formal knowledge or qualifications are not required for entrance to either medical or legal secretarial positions. Indeed, in most cases, knowledge is acquired on an on-the-job basis; this was confirmed by the secretaries interviewed, and this may enhance the substitutability of the secretarial workforce. Once a position is available, anyone could start a secretarial job with no previous experience.

Examining the responses of both sets of secretaries, it is clear that there is a struggle to describe the knowledge required for their job. The legal secretaries reported that the knowledge required for their job is good typing skills and, when possible, knowledge of legal terminology. However, they all think that the major part of their knowledge in the job comes from experience built through the years of work. Some legal secretaries presented a perception that diminished their work to merely the need of having a technical knowledge in operating the machines they deal with and being able to produce the documents they are required to produce. What may have happened in these cases is that the secretaries could not detail the amount of knowledge in the field that makes them able to do such a job. From the tasks they develop and the demand placed on them for their day-to-day activities, it is clear that legal secretaries apply a range of knowledge that goes beyond topical knowledge such as legal terminology. The same happens with medical secretaries. When arguing about the knowledge required for their job, they demonstrate that they need medical terminology for the job. This shared perception may be an example of how they see their occupation and how it is sometimes reduced by themselves to a very technical

position not considering that every task they do is accomplished as a result of other abilities and of a range of skills that constitutes their occupation (Lee et al., 2000).

This perception could also be developed among the secretaries due to the sector in which they work. Both sets of secretaries work for knowledge workers. In some of the responses it was possible to notice that the secretaries position their line managers in a “higher” state as professionals, trained and recognized, while they are far away from that state. This higher state also contributes to enlarge the distance between the secretary and her line manager. This distance was first seen, as discussed before, when line managers perform tasks traditionally performed by secretaries as well as when they keep a physical distance from the secretary in the office.

It is not easy to define the knowledge base of secretarial work. It is a non-professional occupation and there are no formal credentials required. A “knowledge base” is not usually required by an employer; they usually provide a list of tasks which the person should be able to execute. To the respondents, knowledge in their area is something built over the years.

Data showed that in terms of education and training, most secretaries had either no training in secretarial work or had, especially the older ones, typing and shorthand training before leaving school.

## **5.5 Organisation of work**

During the interview, the medical secretaries were also asked to describe their daily routine in relation to their tasks and the amount of time and effort spent on each activity. Most respondents reported at first that in a secretarial job it is not possible to anticipate what is going to happen in any working day. The description they presented about their daily routine was based on what they usually plan. As reported, most of the time, given the nature of secretarial work and that line managers expect them to be ready to help and assist them at any time; their plans are not easily operationalised throughout the day. This demonstrates how secretaries are subjected to other people’s priorities and are expected to be prepared to do whatever is needed at any time, which has an effect on the control they exercise over their work. Most of



the secretaries talked about their daily routine, sometimes failing to describe it in more detail merely because they might not realise the amount of tasks developed on a day-to-day basis:

“... From the start of the day I come in...I always open the mail, first thing in the morning, I like to get that done and out of the way. I always come in between twenty minutes and half an hour early in the morning because I like to get things done, I like to be all organised before the phone starts ringing and that can start...in fact this morning it started at ten past eight and I'm not meant to start until half past but I answered it anyway. ...I always open the mail first of all, I check that everything is organised for the clinics, Doctor (name) has clinics, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday. His Monday and Wednesday clinics are first thing in the morning, so I like to have everything organised for that. ...I sort the mail out into what...whether I need to request case notes to come up from the home library or whether I have to go to different departments, phone around different departments asking for the case notes, prioritising how urgent they are. If a letter comes in and I don't think it's overly urgent, it doesn't have to be dealt with that day I will put a request in on our computer system, which is called OASIS. If not, if I think it is something urgent and it needs to be dealt with that day I will phone whichever secretary the notes are booked to and I will say 'can I get them'?. So that can take anything from two minutes to half an hour, it just depends, it depends...there are never two days the same, you never get the same amount of mail, you never get the same amount of phone calls, anything, it's always different. So it's quite hard to say how you actually do anything you know? It depends if someone stops me in the corridor and says would you like a coffee? Of course! ... I check my emails next, I like to check them and get them all organised, ...we have two deliveries of mail a day one first thing in the morning and one just before lunchtime. So...I always deal with the morning mail, the lunchtime mail I deal with after lunch obviously. That's when you mostly get referrals, things like that come up because they're all sent to the hospital via the (name) store. So the girls downstairs match them with the case notes and then they send them up the stairs. ...so that, I can more or less forget about that side of things until later on in the day. And then basically it's just starting to type ...” R8

However, in some of the descriptions of a daily routine, it is possible to notice an association between the tasks they do and how they perceive their daily activities in relation to time constraints. They often mention that they cannot predict whether they will have a routine due to different factors, such as the many kinds of interruptions they are subjected to in an office. Their statements demonstrate a perceived level of stress and worry as they strive to do their tasks within a length of time acceptable for them and for others. Most respondents stated that there is not a normal day or a routine for the work they do. They are always subjected to interruptions and to do what is asked by their superiors and their priorities, as R25 describes:

"I say there are no normal days but...saying that probably the important thing and it's important from my...boss's point of view is that I need to record his time of what he did the day before. So that's always the first thing is time recording. ... I was supposed to be on a training course at nine-thirty yesterday morning. I had um...sent an email around to the people that I work with saying I'm not going to be around this morning, this is the reason. And I had somebody who came to me about quarter to nine and said I need this document dealing with before you go on your training course, so...everything else...anything else that I was doing...that was the case I was typing some letters, um...the...it all just went and it ended up I was about quarter of an hour late for my training course because this document needed to be back with the person I work for before I could go off and do anything else..."

Their description of their daily routine also shows how the work of medical secretaries is very fragmented. The fragmentation of their work is mainly referred to in the number of times they are interrupted. This task fragmentation they experience seems to be neither positive nor beneficial for their work. Too much task switching because of interruptions may result in a low level of accomplishment as most of the secretaries consider that having a sense of accomplishment is to get to the end of day with their work done. Although interruptions may sometimes bring relevant information for the secretaries' work, most of the time they might suffer from the cognitive cost of re-engaging in a task and the time lost in finishing the task. This fragmentation, though, can be explained in relation to the nature of secretaries' work. The secretaries interact with a lot of people, internally and externally, and are more frequently interrupted.

For the legal secretaries, very unique descriptions were presented of their daily activities and the amount of time usually spent undertaking them. Below are some examples of descriptions of a daily routine of a legal secretary:

"I'll give you an average day. Yes. Well when I go in if there is any filing lying I will do the filing if I can first. We have a typing structure that if a job is marked priority anyone who is available has to do that job. So (...) you watch (...) you look out for priorities, and you know if there are letters that have come into the firm, we have to then go and scan them into the system. We have to put them into what are called case plans which are on the computer, so you've no (...) hard files apart from document folders. So anyone wanting to see a letter that you've put on (...) has to go into the case plan so you try and do these as early in the morning as possible. But then you just type things, you maybe have to go and look for things in the safe, and look things out for people but (...) mainly it's just typing letters, you type a lot of their emails, and you can call up an email and put their name against it and their signature on it, email signature and you just type in whatever they're dictating. And you save it into their email

folder so that they send it out and it's linked to that file that they're working on, to that case plan so you more or less just do that over the day. You work on documents, you work on (...) big deeds and have track (?) changes and they go between firms, and each firm if they make a change uh (...) the change you make would be scored out and then you know if you're taking something out, a deletion would be scored out and then you would just (...) whatever you type in after that is underscored and it's usually in different colours. And once everybody is agreed to that you give them a clean version and you engross the deed, you rule it up for signature, and you bind (...) you put it in covers with a slide binder and when that deed comes back all signed you put on what is called a testing clause and it just tells them how the deed has been signed, who's signed it, who's witnessed it, where and when. And then once that deed is done like that you scan it into the system again and it goes on the case plan and uh (...) then it gets (...) it depends on the type of document it is, if it's a disposition selling a house it will go to record in the Land Register. If it's a Will it goes into our safe, although a copy is scanned on to the system, we must keep the hard copy of that because it's signed and if there's a dispute over someone's Will it has to be the proper Will. And then you maybe close that case plan once it's finished with, you type up fee notes regularly, fee notes are done as often as possible. And uh (...) you (...) you just take that to the [36.28] they deal with it after that. You type any letters that go with it, but you don't type (...) you don't make up your own letters. You have to get them all dictated now when that case plan is closed you can still get on to it and see any documents which is much better than years ago when you had to order out old files that were maybe in storage. They can still see everything that's on that you know so (...) uh (...) that's (...) basically what I do, uh (...) if there is (...) you complete their diaries which are all electronic as well. And they have a good system where you invite people to meetings, you do this all the through the diary. And you have boxes that they can accept a meeting, you can call up various meeting rooms within the office, all at the same time and see which meeting rooms are free. You order tea and coffee over that (...)" R24

A lot of the legal secretarial work is also subjected to the priority of the task given by the solicitors. The respondents generally reported that, although they try to plan their day ahead it is not always possible to accomplish what they have planned and organised to be done. When talking about her daily routine, R25 talks about how she tries to plan her activities ahead and how they are usually interrupted because other things have priority for the people she works for:

"...as I say there are no normal days but...saying that probably the important thing and it's important from my...boss's point of view is that I need to record his time of what he did the day before. So that's always the first thing is time recording (...)and then...came back from my training course, went for lunch, first thing in the afternoon the document comes back saying there are some more changes can you make them and give it back to me? So much so that my list of dictation that I had from other people that I work for got longer and longer and longer. ...but...move forward 24 hours, this morning I still had a list of probably a dozen letters that had been left over from last night still needed to be typed today. ...and we try and do...unless anything is marked

urgent we do everything in time order. And it's all time stamped on the dictation, and just before I came to see you ...I noticed that there was a dictation that was sent at about quarter past ten this morning. Now I...me personally I try and at least get the morning dictation out for that day, the afternoon stuff can possibly wait. But the morning stuff you try and get out the same day, as I said there's stuff sitting there from quarter past ten this morning! And...so that's where a day can...is...you might have it planned, you might have written down what you want to do but you usually find that if you've written down a to do list that to do list is the same to do list from Monday to Friday!" R25

Within the work of the legal secretaries, it was noticed that typing is still a major part of their work routine, as R25 says: "...um...it's...but a lot of it is typing, day-to-day general typing as I say whether it be letters, or whether it be documents, it is a lot of typing which I love doing anyway so...". Although they have different tasks, typing is still the tasks that take most of their time. R19 also says that most of her time is spent in typing:

"Well, in my current job it really is 90% audio typing, that's what I'll be doing most of the day. I'll go in, check my emails, and I'll just... (...) Yes. And if there's nothing to be dealt with in the emails, like passing on a message or something, then I'll just go straight to the dictation and just work through that throughout the day. Other 10% of the day is stuff to be scanned or sent to the safe, because I'm in the trust and equity department. On the phone occasionally, passing messages. Sometimes we'll have to deal with the client personally. And the usual just kind of admin duties and stuff. But there the majority of it is audio typing. So I'll print the letter and then give it to the fee earner." R19

When talking about their daily routine, the expectation was that the respondent could give enough information in order to be able to have a full assessment of the tasks undertaken on a day-to-day basis and other issues. However, given the experience with the interviews in this study, the respondents sometimes found it difficult to put into words what they do and why they do things. The narratives of daily routines in the office were not sufficient to grasp important details on what and how secretaries develop their work and the answers were of a similar answer to what a projective interviewing would get, "stereotypical replies which omit the micro-rituals or important details on which (...) the social order is founded" (Gobo, 2008:192).

For the majority of respondents, their daily routine is very unpredictable. It is dependent on the line managers' priority. The legal secretaries explained they have a typing priority system, which they have to check every day when starting work.

The labour process of the secretaries is characterized by very fragmented tasks. This task fragmentation is, firstly, related to the nature of secretarial work, that is, the multitasking profile of the secretaries and the ability they have to develop a number of tasks at the same time; secondly, related to the amount of time the secretaries are interrupted by other people they interact with at work.

This section presented the data and some conjectures about the content of the work of medical and legal secretaries in relation to the organisation of their work. It has shown that the daily routine of legal and medical secretaries shows how fragmented their tasks are, adding to this fragmentation, how management exert control over their work as the secretaries are susceptible to the demands from their line managers at any time. Their daily routine as described presents a very intense work routine, when there are a number of activities involved and many issues in relation to how tasks are undertaken, as addressed throughout this chapter.

## **5.6 Chapter summary**

The chapter presented a description of tasks that both medical and legal secretaries undertake at work. The description allowed an analysis of their perception in relation to their work content and also related all the elements of the framework, content, context and lived experience to the themes presented.

Respondents demonstrated that there is a lot of organising and prioritising in their work. The secretaries are left to their own initiative most of the time. The medical secretaries indicated that they need to use a higher level of autonomy when undertaking their tasks and a high level of discretion when dealing with patients and patients' information. In addition, the work undertaken by the medical secretary respondents requires a high level of skills related to tacit knowledge. The data suggests that the secretaries rely on knowledge gained through their work experience over the years. Data also shows that most respondents do not present specific training on secretarial skills, apart from some respondents who took secretarial courses or shorthand courses before leaving school in the 1960s or 1970s. In addition, respondents suggest that there is a need for experience in the job that comprises learnable tasks and knowledge, but there is also a need for individual talent to be a secretary and to best perform the secretarial role.

In addition, this chapter presented data on the content of secretarial work and also highlighted the importance of considering the content of work and its context. One example explored is how medical secretaries have differentiated types of tasks as the context of their work, that is, the place where their work is undertaken differs from the one where the legal secretaries work.

These findings offer new insights into what medical and legal secretaries perceive about the content of their work. The context in which their work is undertaken is considered in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 6: THE CONTEXT

### 6.1 Introduction

Chapter five considered findings in relation to the content of secretarial work, exploring the first element of the framework proposed – the content of work. This second chapter of findings seeks to build upon the perceptions presented in chapter five on the secretaries' work content by addressing the work context. As addressed in chapter 2, context here is the place in which the work is undertaken. This chapter will examine issues considering the organisational, occupational, and technological context of the work of secretaries. The political, historical, and economic contexts are also mentioned in the analysis here and in the next chapter as they are related to the moment in which the study is undertaken.

As this chapter is about the context in which secretarial work is undertaken, it was found important to start with brief information regarding both settings from where data was collected, the NHS and legal firms.

#### ***The National Health Service***

The National Health Service (NHS) in Scotland has approximately 132,000 staff and is managed by the Scottish Government Health Directorate, which has a Management Executive that looks after the 14 NHS boards. These “boards plan and deliver health services for people in their area. The services can be hospital or community-based and boards coordinate community health services through Community Health (& Care) Partnerships”<sup>15</sup>.

The NHS in Britain has been considered a major problem for UK political and policy makers as it is recognised for being a constant object of reform (Wallace & Taylor-Gooby, 2009). Over the last two decades, the NHS has undergone considerable changes in its organisation, mainly due to political and financial pressures (Hunter, 2011; Bolton, 2004:317). More recently the NHS in England is under scrutiny due to

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<sup>15</sup><http://www.scot.nhs.uk/introduction.aspx>

the forthcoming major reforms to be implemented by the coalition government (Hunter, 2011; Lister, 2011 and Arder et al., 2011).

Medical secretaries are an integral part of the NHS workforce, with an important role in the running of the many NHS sites in Scotland, often behind the scenes. Their work is crucial to the NHS and especially to the consultants delivering services. For Perkins (2008:336), “medical secretaries have long represented a vital link between the patient and the hospital, providing a human touch that is increasingly lacking in the NHS. These people are expert guides for patients, helping them to navigate through the complex and unfamiliar world of the hospital at a time in their lives that is often stressful and unsettling”. For Perkins (2008:336), medical secretaries add value to NHS services and the service provided by consultants or doctors in their patient care. She also argues that with further training, medical secretaries “could also be the solution to many issues in service organisation, patient liaison, and data collection currently facing the NHS. So often the medical secretary is the glue that helps hold multi-disciplinary teams together.”

The role of medical secretaries is to help doctors, hospital consultants and other senior medical staff. Their general tasks involve dealing with incoming and outgoing mail, answering phone calls, using a computer to write letters or record medical notes, making sure medical samples are properly labelled and keeping on top of filing and making appointments<sup>16</sup>. Medical secretaries deal with a large amount of paperwork. The paperwork they are responsible for is comprised of patient’s notes, documents and all medical records, referrals and discharge notes (Lærum, Karlsen & Faxvaag, 2004), which they may produce, receive and post.

When recruiting medical secretaries, the NHS defines and describes the role in a standard job description (see Appendix F) and their salary is described in four different bands as allocated by the Agenda for Change<sup>17</sup> initiative.

No body of research has specifically explored the work of medical secretaries in Britain in great detail. Dissemination of information and figures in relation to

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<sup>16</sup><http://www.nhscareers.nhs.uk/details/Default.aspx?Id=1931>

<sup>17</sup> For more details on the Agenda for Change, see <http://www.nhsemployers.org/PayAndContracts/AgendaForChange/Pages/Afc-AtAGlanceRP.aspx>.



medical secretarial work in the UK are mainly provided by the British Society of Medical Secretaries and Administrators (BSMSA).

Medical secretaries, as with any other secretaries, are also subject to changes. Medical secretaries in the NHS are subject to frequent changes in management as well as to the changes that affect the work of the consultants. Maynard (2010) argues that changes in the NHS “will bring increased focus on the NHS management”. Management is about control of the allocation of resources and the primary managers in the NHS, as with all healthcare systems, are doctors (Maynard, 2010). One example of changes that affect medical secretaries is that an increasing number are not trained. Perkins (2008) argues that the BSMSA identified “a long-term decline in the number of properly trained medical secretaries as new consultants do not get assigned one, existing consultants are being asked to share as posts are made redundant and retiring medical secretaries are not replaced”. This is, as Perkins (2008) argues, part of an attempt by the NHS to reduce costs at trust level. The medical secretarial position in an environment of constant change, either organisational or political, will be explored in this chapter with the presentation of the findings of the empirical work undertaken.

### ***Legal firms***

Legal secretaries are found in legal firms throughout the UK. They assist lawyers with administrative work in various areas. According to the Institute of Legal Secretaries and PAs, “Legal secretaries and PAs are in great demand. They help lawyers with their work and they are an integral part of a team of legal professionals. Career prospects are very good, as the more experience gained, the higher your salary. Legal secretaries can be promoted to PAs or Office Managers, and some go on to become Paralegals or Legal Executives...”.

At the time of the interviews, legal secretaries were experiencing the effects of the economic credit crunch in the UK.

Findings in relation to the context of secretarial work are presented in sections 6.2 to 6.12 of this chapter (see Box 6.1) and summarised within section 6.13.

**Changes**

- Effects of change
- Role of technology

**Organisational changes****Training****Work organisation**

- Interactions
- Interactions among secretaries

**Control****Flexibility****Relationship with line manager**

- In the NHS
- In legal firms

**Work recognition****Importance of secretarial work**

Box 6.1: The context – summary of themes and sub-themes

## 6.2 Changes

Changes in the work people perform may affect the way people perceive their occupation and the meaning they ascribe to it. Having considered the skills, knowledge and tasks involved in secretarial work, attention is now turned to assessing the context of occupational work that respondents have highlighted as being meaningful to them and for their job.

As argued in chapter three, the secretarial occupation is very related to change. Changes in various areas have impacted their work and most of the literature on secretarial work in the 80s and 90s explore those changes and predict what may happen to this occupation. The main issue in relation to change, technology, still affects their work today.

### **6.2.1 Effects of change**

The medical secretaries were asked what the changes signified for their occupation. Their answers varied from pessimistic views, when they believed some changes would bring a deskilling of the occupation, to optimistic views, when respondents thought that their work would be more complex. For some, changes have made or will make the work “just different” (R2) as tasks were more time consuming previously and now something may be quicker but the workload has increased.

“Just different. I think it’s just different. Not...not more or less skills just different skills. (...) because we’re being asked to do more and more I think is the only reason. I think it’s probably going to go the other way eventually when the voice recognition system comes in. I think we’ll be deskilled.” R6

Two respondents believed that with the introduction of the voice recognition system, medical secretaries will be downgraded and the NHS may not hire Band 4 secretaries and consequently they will be deskilled:

“In a few years, I think we will, and they’ll probably downgrade or probably not hire...” R6

R1 argues that the changes brought more complexity to the work she does. She thinks that work is more challenging and more complex as well. R1 says that work is much busier now than it was when she started six years ago, and patients and their relatives are more demanding and usually they phone and want things done instantly.

### **6.2.2 Role of technology**

There was a general perception that the main change in secretarial work over the past few years was the introduction of computers in the office, which happened more intensively in the 80s, as explored in chapter 3. Indeed, all medical secretary respondents were keen to acknowledge the changes in their work due to advances in technology:

“So the biggest change is now it’s all on computer and you don’t have to use Tippex anymore or little corrective strips because we used to have little corrective strips that you would put down behind the feet so that when you hit it went blank. So that’s probably the biggest change. (...) Email. A lot of the

correspondence is sent by email now as opposed to snail mail. And the chat as well between people is email rather than telephone based, which is probably quite good because then you have a written record of what was said and what was agreed and then you can go back and refer to it if you need to.” R6

R6 refers to how technology improves the speed of work processes in an organisation. As a result, tasks can be undertaken more quickly and access to data is faster.

Another change stated by the legal secretaries relates to technological changes and its negative impact on their work. On the one hand, it was evident that some, although certainly not all, secretaries perceive changes and advances in technology to be the cause of a change of standards in the work of secretaries. For some, today secretaries rely on computers to type the letters, decreasing the efficiency of a secretary as language mistakes can happen more easily. This perception was also shared by other legal secretaries. On the other hand, all respondents in the study acknowledged that changes in computer equipment are the major changes they experienced in the secretarial occupation and that they made their work easier.

“The way that the computers are nowadays, it’s fantastic how you’ve got everything to set out your documents a lot easier, quicker. The systems that you work on are much more efficient from years ago, from typing on a typewriter with carbon copies, four carbon copies behind your letters and Tippex and things like that. From things like that. Faxing machines, photocopy machines – everything’s on the same machine, everything is at the touch of a button, if you know how to work them!” R22

However, this general perception by the legal secretaries that computers played a big part in the way their work changed over the years also came with a perception that workload has increased with the introduction of the machines and the easy access to data and information management. They do not perceive this easy access to information in a positive way. Having easy access to information could contribute to their performance as it would not restrict them to routine work.

### ***Increase of work demand and responsibility***

This view was echoed by another medical secretary who argued that technology was the big change in secretarial work; however, the technology brought more demands on secretaries:

“... I would say that the technology has changed a great deal. ... I think sometimes you're expected to do a bit more especially on the medical side of things your consultant maybe has higher expectations of what you could do and quite often you know they'll ask you to phone a patient back rather than them doing it when it would maybe be better if they could phone because if it's about medication they're the experts but they maybe pass it on to you. So I think there's a wee bit more maybe...the secretary doing a wee bit more for their doctor. I think it all depends on your relationship with your doctor as well type of thing. I would say the biggest change is definitely the technology, since I started work up to now but I would say it's for the better definitely! It makes your job much easier doing it on the computer and not having carbon copies and that sort of thing you know?” R4

This sentiment was echoed by another medical secretary who talked about the amount of responsibility she has now as she has to do more things than she used to do, resulting in an increase of workload and responsibility as well as confidentiality.

“I think it's changed the last few years for me because since I've come back I'm working for the clinical lead so I've got all that stuff to do. ...but it's also changed ...because there are a lot more things that admin staff would do that we're now having to do. I think there's...apart from there being more of it ...I think there are a lot more kind of...there's just sort of...I mean confidentiality has always been a thing from when I've started in the hospital, it always has been. I think it does just in the sense of I suppose it's more work effort because the more work you're getting the more you've got to do ...I mean I quite like the challenge because it's true it does make you realise what you can get through. For me it's just kind of the loose leaf issue is a problem because I want to keep on top of that and I used to be before but now it's just a nightmare. ...I think... more effort is kind of put into it ...” R9

The statement above demonstrates the changes secretaries also experienced in relation to their work and the work of other staff. R9 reports that she now does work that “admin staff” normally do. Changes in relation to technology not only brought changes to the tasks and skills use of secretaries but also changed the balance of roles among different occupations within organisations.

However, the increase of workload and responsibility is also seen as a challenge from the view of one respondent.

“I think it’s become more challenging with the new programs and things, the new computer programs, stuff like that, new patient management system, um...things are always changing so yeah I think it probably is becoming more challenging and again what I said about you have to be careful of patient confidentiality so you have to watch what you’re saying to people and be aware that you’re not giving information, the Data Protection Act, that you maybe shouldn’t be giving to people, you have to be very careful. ... So I think it is more challenging in that respect.” R4

The idea of more challenging work is also supported by other respondents who also emphasise the impact of changes in technology.

Reaction to the changes that affect the work of secretaries depends to a large extent on whether such changes were perceived as an instrument to facilitate their work or to give it more of a challenging component. As reported by R3, “I think I’m up for a challenge, I enjoy my job I really do enjoy my job, yeah.” Answers about their feeling and reactions to the changes in their work included views that changes meant good progress in the work of secretaries, as well as changes just made their work more challenging:

“It is challenging, I personally don’t have a problem with um...you know systems and changes to the electronic information we use because I’ve used it for a very long time. And because of my work history I have had to learn the systems very quickly when I’ve gone into take jobs so I don’t...I enjoy it. Um...I don’t know if...I don’t know if I have any more responsibility than I did two or three years ago maybe a bit more work but not necessarily more responsibility. I’ve not found that to be the case, I’ve not found it to be um...onerous at all.” R2

One respondent held the view that all changes simply mean more responsibility for them, as R9 reports:

“Responsibility that’s what it was! ... I think it does just in a sense, but I try...I’m always...I was when I was in the department before quite efficient, I didn’t have a lot of filing and I didn’t have um...you know notes went straight back to filing, I didn’t have a lot around my desk whereas now I feel there is a bit more responsibility because ...I think because patients are more aware of their rights now and complain a lot more. Usually the ones that complain are the ones that there’s actually nothing to complain about but...that’s another issue. ...so there is a bit more responsibility in making sure you’re getting everything right and that appointments are made and that they’re not going to phone up and complain and things like that and just getting things like the notes, ... so there is

a bit more I think responsibility just in making sure that everything is kind of right. I don't know whether the girls in my department believe that I sometimes wonder because...I didn't say that! ...no I do, I think there is a bit more responsibility I personally...I like that, I like having a bit of responsibility, I like having responsibility for my work knowing that everything has gone out and it's been done right and appointments are made or...you know they don't need to be seen again and the letter has gone out and everything is in the notes, I quite like that. It can be stressful ...” R9

## **Resistance**

Medical secretaries also presented resistance to changes still to come. One issue discussed by some respondents that revealed a degree of resistance is the imminent introduction of the digital voice recognition system in NHS hospitals. So far, the medical secretaries in NHS Scotland use tapes recorded by the consultants to type the letters they dictate. The new digital system will have all the dictation recorded and saved digitally and the computer itself will produce the text. This procedure has been piloted in a few hospitals in Scotland and it has been in permanent use in one hospital in the Lothian. All respondents mentioned this imminent change in their work and their views varied from understanding that it will be a tool to cut the time spent typing to negative views that it might mean the loss of many secretaries' jobs. They also understood that the new system may not speed up their work and the process in the NHS as digital voice recognition may not be that sensitive to the consultants' different accents. Therefore, some respondents fear that they might actually end up spending more time correcting the machine's mistakes than typing it from the normal way they do it.

“Yes. But it's actual voice recognition, it actually records...I was working with that all the time. So we didn't...you don't type the letters yourself any longer, the machinery does it, you actually get the printed version of it and then you correct it so that's a big change. (name of place) was one of the first in NHS Lothian to actually use that, so I was using that for a while so... I think so but again it's the cost implication, it's a big cost implication. But it certainly speeds everything up. It really does, it makes your job a lot more boring in a way if you like typing. But it is faster, even though I type very fast it's a lot faster than I am I know that. And it's very...after the machinery has got used to the person's voice, the consultant or the junior doctor... it's very accurate. It still makes a lot of mistakes but...but certain typists who I remember from (name of place) actually weren't very accurate either! So it's better than they are. But it could never be relied on 100% though because it can make mistakes with his and hers, and with numbers. But the medical terminology it will always get right. It has a dictionary and it works well. ...” R10

“They’ve run lots of trials and they’ve said it’s a good thing but we’re all quite sceptical. A lot of the consultants are not English, or even Scottish so accents...and even if they are Scottish regional accents can vary so the computer might not necessarily pick up accents and there might be a lot of mistakes but I don’t know. I think we’ll just have to wait and see, but when that does happen I think it will de-skill secretaries because we’ll no longer be typing(...)” (R6)

“And that’s the main thing isn’t it? The main part of the job is typing and if we’re not doing that anymore then I guess we’ll be glorified filers or...something else” (R6)

Although to the outside observer secretarial work might appear to have been deskilled due to the introduction of the computerised office, most of the secretaries would not say so. Studies in the 80s, as seen in chapter 3, have explored changes and predicted changes in secretarial work with the introduction of the automated office, but the secretaries today reveal that those changes meant more challenging work not deskilling.

### **6.3 Organisational changes**

Another issue related to the implication of changes in their work is related to the changes that happened in the NHS system, political or organisational, leading to changes in their work. However, for R7, it is just a case of getting used to the changes until the next government makes more changes in the NHS and consequently, changes in relation to their work:

“Each time they bring in a new...a new system it’s challenging but once you get to grips with it (...) But the majority of the time once you get into a new system because the health service they always keep bringing in different things. (...) And then along with each government comes a different way of doing it. (...) you didn’t have the waiting time guarantees that you have now do you know? When the next government comes in they change it all again! And then you...you get restructured and you get used to a different way of thinking.” R7

As R7 argues, the medical secretaries are used to working with the consequence of frequent changes in the NHS and they have to adapt to the changes. Those organisational changes, as exemplified by R7, result more in changes in the nature of



their tasks, however, secretaries are part of an occupation that has to easily adapt to changes. This is more apparent in the context of public service.

In the context of legal secretaries, the changes discussed in relation to their work revealed that changes in the organisation have led to changes in the control of their work. They report having lost their freedom as now regulations and law may seem to have been directing the way companies have to do their business. Some respondents talked about these changes and the impact in their work, as R24 reports below:

“You’ve not got the freedom that you had, you know it’s all partly because well in our kind of work the Law Society has rules and regulations, everything has got to be done a certain way so (...) documents at one time which you would have typed from scratch are all coming in as styles. So (...) you’re just not (...) it’s just not what I thought a secretary would be you know? Just (...) in this job if I’d maybe gone into banking I think it would have been similar. But I think if you went into corporate firms it may have been different but uh (...) I think they’ve gone kind of Americanised you know? Just the way they work as well, but uh (...) Uh (...) well I would say I’ve gone back down more to typing, (...) I was allowed to sign letters, just pp it, you’re not allowed to do that in this office because things have maybe gone wrong. And there are only certain people allowed to sign for the company so (...) even if you’ve pp’d it that wouldn’t matter. You know so (...) I would say that its more regimented now, and you’ve not got the (...) you know (...) you just type, give them the work and that’s it. It’s not (...) it’s more clinical in a way, it’s not (...) relaxed anymore. And you know it’s very much into the computer which it wasn’t before, it was the hard diaries you know but uh (...) so they have great systems you know that you can work but uh...” R24

This lack of freedom reported by the legal secretaries, usually the older ones with more time and experience in the role, is clearly connected to a sense of ownership to their work and all things that surround them in an office. The following statement shows how R24 perceives the changes in her occupation as results of changes in the way organisations today function and changes in the way and conditions secretaries have to work:

“(...) but I really did like being a typist and secretary I was interested in meeting people and (...) getting a job (...) at the end of the day it was job satisfaction to see a bundle of nicely typed work you know whether it was a pile of letters, documents, and you felt you were assisting the people that you worked with and for. You know but (...) now (...) you had respect as a secretary you know, especially when you did the shorthand and that because your work was your work, your typewriter was your typewriter and nobody was really allowed to touch your typewriter without your permission. You could go and say but that is my typewriter and nobody would say to you no it’s not it’s the firm’s! ... it was my typewriter because you had to clean it, you had to look after it. It was your

work, your equipment you know? But uh (...) now I could go in tomorrow to my work and I could be told oh we're moving you and you would have absolutely no say in it apart from leaving. You know and (...) we have our desks (...) we have a tidy desk policy, you're not encouraged to keep personal things, uh (...) this is just so that you can be moved to another floor or to another desk somewhere. You're not even encouraged to keep your spare shoes there but I do, I mean I have them in my wee (...) we've got a wee pull out cabinet and you know (...) but I mean I would have all different types of dictionaries and reference books and things you know which I had built up over the years. Books that assisted me with my work, but you're not encouraged to do that now. Of course you've got the internet now but (...) I did like the thought of working in a nice job and secretaries (...) it was always classed as a clean job ...” R24

It is evident that organisational changes impacted on the labour process of legal secretaries. This has been sensed by them over the years with the introduction of regulations and has resulted in a perception that they have lost their ownership of their job and its status has been downgraded to a more controlled type of job.

After talking about the main changes in relation to the introduction of computers in the office, R21 related changes to the evolution of secretarial work. In her perception, secretarial work is not dependent on changes to change its nature:

“... I think a secretary's job is a secretary's job. I don't think it will ever evolve more than what it is. I mean you sit and you do your work. Actually your life revolves around your boss, or whatever your boss gives you, that's what you do. I think what differs is from a typist, a typist would just be sitting and typing, and a secretary will probably have a little bit more jobs to do. Might be doing a bit more diary work, making appointments and stuff... I think you're incorporating everything.” R21

The above quote highlights the legal secretary's perspective over her work and presents a perspective that the nature of secretarial work does not change due to other changes. That is, there is a perception that they have to do what they are told to do, no matter what the circumstances. It resembles the picture of the office-wife, as argued by Pringle (1989), and shows a secretary who accommodates with her work and her relation of submission to her boss.

For the legal secretaries, the changes in the context of legal firms impacted on the nature of their work. New rules and regulations will not allow secretaries to act for their line managers even when they genuinely know what they are doing. The work of legal secretaries became more “regimented”, as one respondent argued, and they lost some of the discretion they used to have in undertaking their tasks. In addition,

the context of more regimented firms implied legal secretaries having less responsibility over their work and they were kept on more routine tasks such as typing, as respondents state.

### ***Threats***

The digital voice recognition system poses a new threat to secretarial work, greater than that of word processing posed in the 80s. It is argued whether the voice recognition system will impact on secretarial work meaning more or less work effort. From the medical secretaries' perspectives, the change for the digital recorder system threatens the ownership of their work. In summary, perceptions on the implication of changes for secretaries vary. Some secretaries think that changes in their work will mean more responsibility while other secretaries see changes as a deskilling process. This threat of deskilling is exemplified by the introduction of digital voice recognition in the NHS and the uncertainty it brings to secretaries as to whether it will deskill them. The NHS might not hire more Band 4 secretaries or it might make their labour process more complex, as secretaries may be freed to do other tasks or maybe new tasks will emerge. When asked about the changes they experienced in their work, one secretary said that "secretarial work is always secretarial work (R21). On the other hand, some respondents brought to light the differences between what a secretary does and what a PA does, showing a degree of dislike for their work and their position of secretary.

## 6.4 Training

Secretaries get very basic training and sometimes none. In the case of medical secretaries, they sometimes undertake a course on medical terminology before or after getting a job in the health service. However, the training is not a *sine qua non* to enter the role.

The medical secretaries were asked open questions about training. They were first asked how they learn new things. These questions opened an avenue for discussion in relation to the reasons why they look for training, where they get their training from and the content of training provided, if the training is either occupation specific or related to another area of office work.

As the findings demonstrate, most of the medical secretaries had no previous training in secretarial work. Some of them, usually the older ones, had training in school when they were offered shorthand or typing training. It would appear that most of these secretaries have been very inactive in developing their career, in some cases remaining in the same position and the basic functions for many years. Within the NHS, medical secretaries develop organisation-specific tasks and knowledge such as medical terminology and knowledge of hospital services and procedures. This makes them so specialised that many stay in the same job for years until they retire. All respondents reported an intention to stay in their jobs until retirement; few indicated a willingness to train to support advancement or promotion to a higher grade within the NHS. Interest in training appeared to be motivated more by personal interest than present and future demand on secretarial tasks.

The NHS offers medical secretaries a variety of training, however, none specifically focused on secretarial roles. Most of the training provided is related to the computer systems they use or implement in the health service. The NHS offers “protected learning time” to staff five afternoons a year and they can choose what courses they want to do. They are expected to attend at least two of them. The main concerns the secretaries have are regarding the medical terminology they deal with as well as the computer systems. The following extract exemplifies how the medical secretary talks about training:

“We go for training for computer based...anything that’s done with the computer they will send us on courses. We go on fire risk courses; we go on manual handling courses, things like...all the mandatory courses that we have to do. ...medically how do I find out information? Well I’m in the very fortunate position because my desk is within the doctor’s room, the ward doctor’s room. So if there is something that I either don’t understand, I can’t pick out a word, I will play the tape out, I will ask the doctors to give me a hand. Or I will say to a doctor oh what is this, do you know what it is and they’ll say no, we then go to Google and look it up! Or he gets out the medical dictionary, we have MIMS (...) We do phone a lot in amongst ourselves ...and say have you heard of this word? ...I think that’s about all training wise, we really have to do a lot of it on our own. We have to do a lot off your own back.” R8

When asked about secretarial specific courses, the majority of respondents said that they have never been on a course when working for the health service. Most respondents expressed no interest in going on a secretarial specific course as they understand that after years of experience there is not much more to learn. This was a common issue raised by respondents, as R1 reports:

“Not really, because by the time you get to this stage, you are expected to have had a certain amount of experience. Because we’re grade 4, what we call grade 4 secretaries, and so most of the girls have started off like I did as a receptionist at grade 2 and worked up to a 3 and a 4, or come in from an external post with the skills and experience already in place, yes.” R1

The medical secretaries have accommodated to the knowledge they have and they rely mainly on experience and on-the-job learning, not on training or prospects of further training.

## **6.5 Work organisation**

The organisation of the work of medical secretaries varies according to the place of work. Across the respondents in this study, all secretaries had different kind of teams. Some worked in small offices, varying from hospital wards or outpatient sections. They normally shared an office with other secretaries, but some shared with consultants and some worked on their own. The number of consultants in each team also varied, as the secretary in the majority of cases would work for only one consultant, however some respondents were found to work for more than one

consultant. The majority of respondents described having a work team usually formed by two, three, or more secretaries and one or two (or more) consultants.

“... I’m in a room with seven other secretaries...there is eleven of us in total, two of the girls in the room that I’m in are part-time so there’s actually nine of them that I share an office with but obviously the part-timers swap days. There’s another secretary who’s in a different office through the way so... I spend every day with at least seven other people!” R9

As R9 describes, she works in a team of secretaries. However, respondents demonstrated that although they have this team confined to the secretarial staff, the idea of ‘team’ is clearly divided between the health professionals and the secretaries:

“Yes it’s a (...) team but its...it’s very obvious that the secretaries are a team and the consultants are a team. ...and they don’t really mix and the (...) liaison nurse goes in between the two.” R6

R6 states that the relationship between secretarial staff and health professionals is somehow divided by their occupational categories. The medical secretaries do not perceive themselves as part of a big team although they interact most of the time with the consultants.

The organisation of the work of legal secretaries had few variations in the firms studied. Usually a secretary or more secretaries are in a team with a solicitor, a senior associate and a trainee. However, it does vary from one department to another. All respondents work for more than one person. The respondents demonstrated that they have a strong sense of collaboration among the teams as they tend to help each other, especially and mainly with typing, when possible.

“In my team is the (...) the solicitor that’s the partner, two senior associates, and a trainee, so (...) that’s my team. But I have to know what the other teams are doing as well in case I’ve to pick up work for them. But they’re a very nice team to work for, the solicitor is very nice, and the two associates are extremely nice. One of them does most of his own work himself and the trainee she’s doing a lot of her own work herself because she’s coming into it now and the computer is there, and (...) I think this is (...) they must be encouraged to do a lot themselves. But we as secretaries are trying to encourage them to give us more you know? Because there are times now when you know (...) there are times when you’re really really busy and there are other times when you’ve got very little to do. And that’s how you have to help other departments, which it’s nice to be able to help other people but while you’re helping other people your work can be coming in fast and you’ve started helping them so you’ve got to finish it. So (...) it’s not a case of you come in at the start of the day, you’ve got work to do, you work your way through it. It’s the work is coming in all the

time so (...) or not for ages and then all of a sudden it comes in. So (...)” R24

The above quote demonstrated how the secretaries need to be aware of what happens with the other teams, as R20 reports:

“It is, it’s one big team, because the two sections will very often have one big meeting to let us know how the whole of the private client department, as a whole, is working.” R20

This may also be related to the way some offices in law firms are set up. In one of the firms studied an open plan office was created in order to offer this interaction between people and between teams, as perceived by R19:

“Not really. It’s all kind of open plan, yes. It’s encouraged that everybody just gets involved in every department rather than each partner has his own secretary – they’re trying to discourage that, they’re trying to make it all mixed.”

The organisation of work of medical secretaries shows a very clear distinction and separation among health professionals and the secretaries as they do not consider them as one team. With legal secretaries, the same might happen, however, managerial control is exerted on the secretaries in a way that a sense of collaboration and interaction among workers is more perceived than direct control on their labour process. In addition, managerial control in legal firms is also demonstrated by the way in which the layout of the offices are now set and, as reported by the secretaries, they are now much more watched by the employer than before.

### **6.5.1 Interactions**

When asked about who they interact with, the medical secretaries said they interact mostly with the consultants they work for and other secretaries in the same department or hospital and medical records staff. The person who they interact least with, however, is reported by the majority to be their line manager. Interaction among medical secretaries and other workers varies from one hospital to another, from one clinic to another. For example, in some places, medical secretaries have no contact with ward staff whereas in others they might need to be in constant interaction.

The legal secretaries reported that they interacted mainly with people from their teams, mostly with other secretaries, general assistants and also with people in the reception. They reported having less interaction with people from other departments. The issue regarding the layout of the big law firms was also something mentioned by the majority of respondents when they were asked about who they interact with in the office and who they interact most and least with. In this case, the fact of working in a big open plan office was seen as a negative point in relation to interactions in the office. As reported by R22:

“All my team. Just anybody that I do work for. It’s a big office, so you don’t speak to everybody, just mostly the people within your team and my friends within the office. And generally the people that are kind of sitting round about me.” R22

In the law firms, there were also found to be secretarial pools where a number of secretaries work for a large number of people. However, the collaboration is apparent on the work of those who work in pools.

### **6.5.2 Interaction among the secretaries**

Still with the theme of interaction, it was also possible to associate the relationship the secretaries have or used to have among them to how management implement controlled strategies.

The majority of medical secretary respondents interacted with other secretaries, usually by telephone, in order to ask for help about notes information as well as helping on issues of medical terminology. In one site, the medical secretaries reported that due to new procedures in the organisation, they were not encouraged to leave their desks and talk to each other, as stated by R8:

“...but we’re not encouraged to leave our office now, we’re not encouraged to be away from the desk very often. ...so we’re not really encouraged to stand and talk to one another in the corridors or anything you know? What they did was they employed what are called runners, if we need sets of notes we’ll phone up, someone will bring the set of notes to us, before if we needed a set of notes we would go to the home library or to wherever the notes were and get the case notes ourselves and bring them back to the office. But...as I say we’re not encouraged to...we have someone that takes our mail to the mail room, whereas before we would do that.” R8



Interviewer: “Why do you think they have changed that?”

“I really don’t know ...I think it was to stop a lot of people wasting time, hanging about in corridors talking, ...which of course we would never do! ... But the thing is we don’t see each other now so...which is sad, we used to all be very very close, all the secretaries were close. Now the secretaries start and we don’t know who they are... They’ll come in...we’ll see them in the (place) canteen and ...someone will say oh that’s so and so’s secretary and we say oh when did she start? Oh about three years ago you know! ... We don’t get told.”  
R8

This change in procedures had an effect on the work of the medical secretaries and the way they interact with each other as the fact of meeting and knowing each other was always a benefit to their work. Knowing each other would help them when interacting for learning, for finding solutions and thus contributing to an effective delivery of their services. Networking accounts for an important part of the interaction secretaries have with each other. This interaction may bring an occupational identification and a sense of collectiveness. Not knowing the other secretaries may represent a sense of more individualistic work when there is no ‘familiarity’ involved and work interactions will demand more from them than it would before. This is exemplified by R8, when asked what the effect of this situation is to her work:

“It makes things awkward yes, it was easier before when you could phone up and say hi it’s(name) you know I’m needing such and such; can you do me a massive favour? Now it’s hi it’s(name) from ward X are you doctor so and so’s secretary? Or Mr so and so’s secretary. The familiarity yeah that’s not there anymore...” R8

Although in some places the procedures tend to avoid secretarial interactions in person, such procedures are not universal, and at some sites there is a positive interaction among the secretaries that favours the way their work is undertaken and the satisfaction they have at work, as reported by R2 below:

“On a day-to-day basis constant interaction, ...because ...if one of us for instance goes along to medical records you just ask someone else to pick up your phone, so you come back and ask if there have been any messages, someone might pick up a fax from the fax machine and bring it to your office. It’s constant. ...because ...we’re up and down to various parts, mostly that one

corridor, we're all passing one another all the time so there is, there's constant interaction between us." R2

As suggested by R2, there are positive interactions among secretaries, which are demonstrated in actions, as well as a positive attitude among them. This example of interaction among the secretaries in this location results in secretaries being socially and occupationally satisfied. Among the respondents who said they were happy working as a secretary and would not change occupations were all the secretaries interviewed in this location.

When the interaction among the secretaries is not a strong asset of their work, some secretaries reported a feeling of isolation at work, as they tend to be in their own office most of the time, interactions happening mainly by phone or email:

"Well obviously if someone is off sick or someone is on annual leave we have to take a turn at taking some work, or taking their phone calls, so we do that. We have interaction at coffee breaks and lunchtime so we can all chat about anything that's maybe happened or whatever. But failing that you're very much in your own office doing your own job most of the time as I say unless somebody's off sick or annual leave or whatever, then you're picking up other stuff so it can be quite an isolating job. If we didn't all meet at lunchtimes and coffee breaks and that it could be quite isolating." R4

The legal secretaries described the occasions when they interact with other secretaries and the kind of interaction they have.

In the case of the legal secretaries, one type of interaction they have with one another is by attending meetings. R20 below illustrates that the secretaries have meetings with the group as well as the partners they work for. R20 states that in those meetings they feedback to management about the system they work or other issues that might be affecting their job. This is one example of how the secretaries present their input in terms of what is best for them to work more efficiently:

"We have meetings with the secretaries and the PA who's in charge of all the secretaries. Plus the partners, we have meetings with them about once every two months because what we do at those meeting is the secretaries will thrash out there and say 'This particular system isn't working, what we need is this, that and that'. They will put that to the partner. 'Well the fee earners may not agree with that and that', 'Well, if they don't, it's going to take longer for the work to come back, this is how we'd like it done because that's more streamlined and you'll start getting your work back a lot quicker'. So we've just started a new system now which is working and it's working really well, because the secretaries have instigated it. It hasn't come from management, it's come from

the secretaries, so I would say at (law firm), at long last, they're getting their act together to get their work more streamlined, more efficient, so that jobs that come in, they are in, done, out. There's no hanging about and I mean that's working." R20

For most of the secretaries interviewed their interaction with other secretaries does not mean more than helping each other with tasks:

"...if somebody is not very busy um...and they have the capacity to pick up typing for people it's always a case of can I help? Um...and that's probably a big thing, um...other than that it's probably more a social side..." R25

This interaction is perceived by them as being beneficial as the response from others when help is required is usually positive:

"...we all get on very well. I don't have a lot to do with them work-wise. We'll maybe meet and have a coffee or something like that, but we don't have a lot to do with each other throughout the day, unless, like today I was really busy and I had to send an email to them all saying 'Would you mind giving me a hand with some of my work?', so they're all very good." R18

"Other departments and that, yes. Sometimes... Well, on the basis that, say for instance that maybe that department is short on secretaries or PAs or whatever, then they will ask other departments' PAs and secretaries to help out. On that basis, yes(...) Just work-wise on that basis really!" R21

Another interesting point raised by the interviewees is that face-to-face interaction occurs in places such as the toilet or places where the secretaries go for other reasons and happen to meet up with other secretaries:

"...The interaction usually takes place in the toilets if you see them. Because obviously that's the one place where everyone comes together. As I say, just because the firm is so big and it's quite spread out, I think. Or it's the GA station that we have. There's a sort of a hub in the middle of the department where the General Assistant is, and they'll do the mail and lots of other things. And so they've got the office supplies there as well, so it's usually where we just see each other as well. And otherwise if you do need to know something specifically then you would go and see them, just at their desk." R17

Again, there is an apparent effect of the size of company and the way the office is laid out to the way the secretaries interact. The fact that in some of the cases, they work in an open plan office does not facilitate a close and frequent interaction among them, as stated by R17:

"we just come by each others' desks as well. It's just that at the moment the new office that we're in, it's quite big so it's usually faster to just email." R17

Other kinds of interaction happen between secretaries in different divisions of the same company; as the interaction occurs mainly by email, in most of the cases the secretaries do not even know each other:

“Yes, we do interact with them, even with other secretaries within the firm, not necessarily all of them, but what we’ve got is we sort of have a sister division and what that basically means is that if one division is really, really busy and another isn’t, they can maybe help that division with the dictation. But we just tend to ask the entire firm’s secretaries who can help, and often they’ll come and so you have that interaction with them. I mean I wouldn’t necessarily know who the secretaries are. I might know them by name perhaps, but not necessarily by face. Because there’s also Glasgow, so they will help as well.”  
R23

Overall, the interaction between the secretaries as described by the interviewees is no more than the help they offer each other in covering the work to be done. Some interviewees reported having some kind of social events, however, those are very rare and it is not something that all secretaries take part in. When asked if they have any kind of social interaction, R21 says:

“Not much really. No, nothing. Just work-wise on that basis really. That’s all the interaction. We work in open plan and we’ve got three levels – we’ve got private clients on the one level and we’ve got litigation and finance on the next and then we’ve got corporate on the next level. So walking to the tea room or to the bathroom, we’ll probably say ‘Hi, how are you?’ and that. And then if we have maybe a Christmas function or a firm function, like a Burns Supper or a sports day or whatever then maybe, if they come along, yes we’ll interact with them that way. But other than that, no...” R21

The data gathered presented information on various secretaries in various locations, either in hospitals or legal firms. With both cases, the medical and the legal secretaries, there is a unique organisational setting that influences the degree of integration, either social or occupational, among the secretaries. The picture now presents secretaries who work geographically apart and they tend to know only the secretaries in their team, in the case of the legal secretaries or the secretaries in their ward or floor, in the case of the medical secretaries.

Overall, however, when describing the kind of interaction they have, some secretaries demonstrated a sense of isolation, which in some cases has been encouraged by the organisation itself. It may have strong effects on the work they do,

as networking plays an important part in the work of secretaries. One example is in what happens in one of the sites researched, where the secretaries are not encouraged to walk around the hospital and talk to each other. When having this new measure, the hospital hired someone to do the work of bringing and taking things from one secretary to another. This new procedure resulted in secretaries not knowing each other anymore and thus, a task might take longer to be done. Networking is something very important for the secretaries and, as a community of practice, a lot of their tasks and day-to-day work benefits from the interaction they may have among themselves. A management procedure as the one in the site studied jeopardizes this secretarial interaction, which in practice contributes to the work they do. This lack of interaction may contribute to a lack of integration as an occupational group. The secretary may perceive herself as a disconnected and isolated worker.

## **6.6 Control**

The medical secretaries were asked if they feel they have a degree of autonomy and control over the work they do. It was found that the majority of medical secretaries have a high degree of control over their work tasks as well as how the work has to be done. The medical secretaries are able to plan their routine according to what they find important to be done first as well as use their own initiative to make decisions and deal with patients and their relatives. They reported having this kind of control over their work even though their work is fragmented due to interruptions, as discussed before.

When talking about control and autonomy, the secretaries came out with various issues. Firstly, they related it to the control of their activities, and some respondents expressed that they do have freedom to do things in a way that best suits them get their job done, an issue also identified as an example of flexible working, which will be explored in the next section:

“I have autonomy in that I decide how I structure my day. I prioritise my workload...and I’m responsible for ensuring that things go out in a timely manner ...day-to-day tasks I could change the procedure of to suit myself. There are obviously ...many policies and procedures laid down on how things are done ...and they affect I suppose the quality of the work that goes out and

that's fine, but on a day-to-day basis yes I think it would be... I believe if any of us have suggestions as to how we could improve things ...we'd be heard, I don't know that they would agree but I think we'd be heard yes(...)" R2

Secondly, the question of control and autonomy was answered in relation to the ability of the secretary to exert her own ways of working in the office. The following example shows how the secretary controls the office in her way, so that even the consultant accepts to follow the way she sets up the office:

"... I very much...Doctor (name) is very much...when I first started in that job he came into the office and said don't ask me anything about this position because I don't know. And that's very much how he is, he's the consultant, he goes off to his clinic, does his part and he brings what I have to do back to me and I'm expected to get on with it. The same with...if people phone up to change appointments or whatever I would just change them in the diary, I don't have to run it past him first, then tell him to change his diary, change my diary, ...I come in the morning, I decide what I'm going to do that day, and I just get on with it and he just lets me get on with it and there's not a problem. He never comes and says I want this done now or that done now, it's a case of he just leaves me to get on with it so yeah I do feel very much in control of my own job definitely!" R4

This is also shown in R1's statement below of how she set up the office to work for the new consultant who had no work experience:

"Yes. To let you understand, this post, when I came into it, the consultancy was actually vacant and the previous consultant had gone to (name of place), so it was vacant and we had a locum. So when it moved up here it just so happened that a new locum was starting, so I set my office up and I basically – and this sounds terrible – I basically told him what to do. Because he was a locum, he'd never worked in (area) before. ... He didn't know anybody or anything. ... so I basically had to set up the office and say to him 'this is what we do, this is how we're going to do it, this is when we do it'. My new permanent consultant started in December and, bless her, she's just slotted in with what I had set up. She said 'I'll let it run for 2 or 3 months and then we'll start to make changes', which is fine, because it's her job. I'm her secretary, I have to do what she decides. But so far, yes, it's just... So, yes, I think I do have a bit of autonomy! I'm a bit of a bossy boots at heart!" R1

R1 states that when the new locum came in she said how things are run in the office and she imposed herself and her knowledge on the newcomer. She finds it something that demonstrates her ownership of the job and a sense of autonomy, as she says.

In general, most of the medical secretaries felt confident they have enough control and autonomy over their work in the way they can best do it. Also relating it to

flexibility as reported by R7: "... I can make suggestions yes sometimes they'll get taken on, sometimes they won't but if it's me that's doing it and it's not going to affect anybody else if I want to make that change I'll just do it anyway."

When asked about having control and autonomy over the work they do, the legal secretaries displayed a somewhat negative perception in relation to their control over work. The majority of legal secretaries said they have no control over their work both in relation to the workload they deal with on a day-to-day basis, and due to the fact that their line manager is the one who demands and dictates the pace of work.

"...yes is because I can ...go through my list and I know that as I say you go through it and do it on a time basis and you carry on and do that, and now is the fact again of volume of work. You know...you might have a set...mindset, you come in in the morning, you know what you've got to do. I will do this tomorrow, I will come in and know that I've still got a list of things that I've got to type up. Um...but...it could then be that suddenly there's just a sudden influx of work that must go out that night in which case everything else gets put to the bottom of the pile. Or it might be just...just be the fact that um...something just takes over you know? You never know what the boss's day is going to be like. He has got a clear day tomorrow but it suddenly could be that sort of at ten past nine he's got a meeting at half past, and it throws you...for something like that, it can throw you. Um...when it's such a short timescale like that, it would be alright if you suddenly said half past four I've got a meeting, then you think right well I know I've got to organise that, um...but I've got a little time to do it. You know if I don't get it done until ten o'clock I'll finish what I'm doing now. But um...it's...as I say it's just...you don't necessarily have control no. It's nice if you do but you don't always get it!" R25

They also demonstrated that they lack control over their work due to the position of their superiors, devaluing their position as secretaries and subordinates:

"Yes, there has been a couple of occasions where I'll be like really annoyed with a certain procedure or just that's not working or it takes too long the way it's being done, so I'll suggest like a new way of doing it and it has been taken into consideration a couple of times. But in general, not really. I don't think secretaries' suggestions... (...) I think just, you know, it's just partners, they'll say they want everything done their way and... I'm alright with it because I've just kind of accepted that's the way it always is, and obviously it depends where you work. Sometimes you can work with a really nice bunch of people who are not really like that, but then you'll work with other people who just completely look down on you because you're a secretary. But it's never really bothered me." R19

R19 suggests that she perceives her occupation as low status and she is treated according to this idea of a devalued position. However, R19 states that this kind of situation does not affect her.

The secretaries described having autonomy to decide the priorities of the tasks to be undertaken on a day-to-day basis, however, they are always susceptible to changes in their set targets and priorities. Their autonomy is restricted to what they do and when, but it is subjected to other people's interference.

Respondents also demonstrated that there is a degree of conflict and ambiguity in the development and control of their work. Although having discretion and autonomy to develop their work, secretaries still suffer from conflicting information with and from management. One example is in the case of legal secretaries: one respondent had an apparent conflict with work assigned by her line manager as he is a younger solicitor without much experience in a legal firm. The respondent was an older secretary with years of experience and she has difficulties in accepting work passed on to her by the line manager as she knew he was not doing something correctly. Another example is found within the medical secretaries, as the majority of respondents described having problems in relation to the line management, for example, conflicting tasks given by the line manager and the consultant. The contradicting assignments given by the line manager and the consultants are a source of stress to the medical secretaries. Thus, their tasks may be affected as well as the pace of their work due to conflicting orders.

## **6.7 Flexibility**

Contradicting statements showed the secretaries think they have flexibility in dealing with their tasks. The medical secretaries stated that they do not have flexibility in their work: "No. There's no flexibility. There's no flexibility in this job." R4. The issue of flexibility was demonstrated by the secretaries to be related, firstly, to remote work. They reported not being allowed to work from home. The main reason for this, as reported by respondents, is the need for the secretary to be at the site in office hours and when doctors are there. In addition, they mention the unavailability



of the system where patients' details and notes are recorded to be accessed by them from home, the need to have the dictation equipment and also the sensitivity of the information they deal with.

“... I would love to! (work from home) I suppose the nature of the work, because your case notes are all here and if you could type at home you'd have to have a transcriber for your tapes.” R1

Secondly, although they report that the organisation is not flexible in terms of working hours and remote work, the medical secretaries are expected to be flexible. Some reported that they are flexible as they sometimes spend time before and after shifts in order to do their work, when other people do not do it, thus there seems to be a variation in work intensity among them. One example is R8's statement, in which she argues for a lack of flexibility as she does more than others, but what she actually demonstrates is that the extent of the demand placed on her is both acknowledged and denied:

“No I don't think it's flexible. ...I think you are expected...it's not actually written down but I think you are expected to do more off your own back. ...like I come in half an hour early every day. I leave later at night, ...some girls don't do it they just...but that's just how they are. ...I just think I like to have that bit of time in the morning just to...to make sure everything is just so and I don't like to leave at night until I've finished what I'm doing.” R8

Thirdly, the medical secretaries interviewed also defined flexibility in terms of the possibility of working shifts. They feel that the NHS is very strict in this sense not allowing them to make other shift arrangements, as reported by R2:

“...I work full-time ...and we're not allowed to work any flexitime at all, ...so it makes it slightly difficult if you're trying to organise an appointment, if you need just a couple of hours ...it is all down to individual managers how you work so it would be nice to think that you could do a half hour extra and build up a couple of hours for something you've got to do when you do work five days a week. And management are quite happy for you to work back to get something done that's really urgent but not prepared to give the same to you so there's not an awful lot of give and take. ...I find that quite annoying because I think we do work very well for them as a team ...I think we're very capable. Most of us are the same age, you know the same age group, and more mature and just get on with things. But we're not given the credit or responsibility to take the time and pay it back. I think I see it as a lack of trust. That can be quite stressing.” R2

Fourthly, the secretaries report that in some cases the consultants are flexible to the

extent that they would allow the secretaries to do some time arrangement; however, the strict practice regarding this seems to come from the line management, as reported by R2 who said she has spoken about it to her consultant:

“...it’s been an ongoing discussion from the time I’ve been here... But the consultants work from nine to five and we have to be here to cover the consultants at all times which is you know...the consultants aren’t always here from nine to five and most of them would be more than happy to make arrangements with you individually so... that is the line that management take but I don’t think it’s valid. However, that’s my personal opinion.” R2

Finally, on relating flexibility to their work itself, the medical secretaries said they have flexibility to do what they want at their own pace, as reported by R7 and R13, which may conflict with some statements on their ability to control their work. The flexibility they say here is the freedom they have to organise their work tasks and set the priorities, however, they are still subjected to interruptions and urgent requests that may affect their plans.

“My job itself is flexible because it’s me that decides what I do and when I do it.” R7

“It’s flexible in that I prioritise my own work so I know what is more pressing and what can be left to do something else.” R13

Both statements above acknowledge that these medical secretaries are able to decide what to do and prioritise the work that has to be done. However this flexibility is still subjected to the uncertainty of their routine, as they report, due to interruptions or other emerging work they are required to do.

The issue on remote work was also raised in relation to issues on flexibility in the work of legal secretaries. The legal secretaries felt that, as much as flexibility refers to working from home or working hours, the company was flexible in some circumstances, as reported by R17:

“I think I am allowed to work from home. I have done it before if I’ve had a really big project and I felt that I didn’t have enough time (...) I’m not sure if I was allowed to take, for instance, the Excel spreadsheets with me. But I do have access to the system from home.” R17

But they also said that due to the nature of legal work, it was not possible to be flexible in terms of changing things or doing things differently:

“I don’t think it’s really that flexible in terms of working in a law firm, because you’ve got structured documents that you need to stick by and so there’s not really much that you can change. You can perhaps try changing formatting or something like that, but because the firm has got a set format and the way you do things and that, no I don’t think there’s a lot of flexibility and that.” R21

Flexibility was an issue that raised different responses among the interviewees. They described having a lack of flexibility in relation to hours of work, their eventual need to arrive late at work or leave early for any flexibility to work away from home. The latter was described by the majority of the secretaries as being related to flexibility. On the one hand, the legal secretaries were shown to have a degree to flexibility in case they need to work from home for any reason. On the other hand, the medical secretaries took the chance to speak about remote work to express the total lack of flexibility they have. The medical secretaries said they were not allowed to work from home and this was partly due to the need to access the system and the issue of carrying all the tapes to be transcribed and sensitive information on patients.

The closeness of the issue of flexibility and the lack of flexibility to work from home or to deal with working hours demonstrated that although the secretaries argue they have some degree of control of their work, it seems the work of secretaries is very controlled by the organisation. This could happen because of the need people and organisations have to control their flow of information. Due to the secretarial occupation and its close links with secrecy, they are always subjected to other means of control of their work and actions. It is also argued whether this may be linked to the organisations not being reciprocal with secretaries in terms of trust.

Loyal secretaries keep secret and trust their bosses. Most of the legal secretaries said that, although this practice is not encouraged by the company, some secretaries are allowed to work from home. They reported that in specific situations this might happen, as reported by R18:

“We are allowed to work from home, yes. They can set you up at home. A few of the girls do it, but they’re cutting down on that now. I don’t think they’re liking it so much because when... You don’t get to work at home full-time, you’ve got to come into the office maybe two days a week, and I think they feel that when the girls are at home, the other girls are getting all the hard stuff to do, all the copy typing, which really these girls should be doing, but they’re at home so they can’t get it anyway.” R18

This passage highlights how R18 feels a difference in the way some secretaries work and the disadvantages in the way she considers she is treated. This practice exemplifies that companies may privilege some people and they avoid this kind of situation in fear that employers will not work as they should.

For the medical secretaries, the NHS is not flexible in terms of remote work and work shifts even though they are expected to be flexible – which they usually are. Here appears another managerial control on secretaries as they report that for the consultants they work for time shifts could be easily negotiated between them, but line management will not allow such a practice.

For some of the legal secretaries who are granted eventual remote work, flexibility is perceived by them as positive in relation to their shift arrangement. However, in relation to their labour process, there is not much that can be flexible as in the way the organisation works and the ways the computer systems work: everything is very much standardised and cannot be changed.

## **6.8 Relationship with line manager**

### **6.8.1 In the NHS**

All respondents said that they report to their line manager and expressed their feeling about an existing tension in this respect. The medical secretaries, although supervised by a consultant they work for, are officially supervised by a line manager who in the majority of the cases is located in another building or, if in the same building, on another floor or office. The relationship with the line manager seems to be quite convoluted. Respondents have a general feeling that the line managers are too far from them and from understanding the work they do. They report often having a tension between orders they receive from the consultants and from the line managers. The respondents' perception is that consultants are considered more in a position of line manager than the official line manager as the consultants are the ones who are close to them, who see them and see and understand what they do.

“...my manager is (name) who works downstairs but as far as I’m concerned Doctor (name) is my manager, my consultant is my manager because...well he knows what I do. My ... manager doesn’t. She wouldn’t have a clue!” R8

“Yes. Uh huh. Yes. The consultant. I mean that’s not your line management, we’re managed by an admin manager but on a day-to-day basis you are responsible to your consultant because they’re generating the workload.” R2

The line manager is seen by the medical secretaries as someone who is far from them, not only in a physical sense, but far from their work reality. One respondent reported that in a different trust she used to have a line manager who would come to her often to ask how she was getting on and what she was doing, “but you’re just really left to get on with it there (in her present workplace)” as R6 says.

One respondent brought up an issue of having to report to someone in the position of line manager but in reality the person used to be the secretary of the line manager who is doing line management work on behalf of the previous person. This has created a visible tension as the secretaries argue on the person’s ability to be in that position:

“So at the minute that is a wee bit of a...bone of contention I would say because it’s like another secretary coming and supervising you ...rather than someone who is a bit further up the chain type of thing you know? ...When it first happened we were all a bit how come she’s doing that sort of thing, because it was just a case of you were told ...will be coming, she’s now going to supervise, she is the line manager while I go away and do this sort of thing. ...we did all kind of think well what experience has she got, what qualifications? Why is she better to do it than anyone else? But saying that I mean we did come to accept it and we have come to accept it but there obviously was a small incident and it’s now a case of you know well she had no right to come and say that to us, and there’s a bit of bad feeling now so...” R4

The issue with line managers in the NHS is also brought up when respondents talked about the relationship they have with the person they report to. In the case of the medical secretaries, there was always an unclear definition as to whom they actually report to, the consultant they work for or the line manager. Indeed, this blurred relationship was evident when respondents talked about their relationships, always being explored by the respondent in relation to both the consultant and the line manager:

“...how would I say? With Doctor (name) I would say Doctor (name) is...there is obviously respect there because he is a consultant you know, that’s how I was

brought up, it doesn't matter that he's younger than me. He's a consultant, he has to have respect and that's that. Uh...but...I would say we were working friends, um...we get on well, um...we have a good laugh, I think you have to be like that. You have to have a certain amount of friendship um...and he's not a grumpy consultant, he doesn't shout, he doesn't bang doors; he's very very placid you know? Um...but I would never over step the mark, you know how far you could go with him. Um...we do...we have a laugh, um...we have a moan [laughter], we moan a lot! Um...but as I say our office...the whole ward as an area we all get on very well, we get on well with junior doctors, the specialist nurses, we all interact with one another. Other consultants come up, I mean it's a well known fact ward (number) doctors room is the best doctors room to work in in Scotland. (...) Just...because... My line manager ...my line manager ...to me is fine but my line manager is a bully like most managers. Um...she...she...she'll chop and change, she can blow hot and cold, one minute she will be very nice and then the next minute she's yelling at you. ...I don't have a problem with my line manager and we very rarely see her, because both the secretaries in the office, we've been here a long time, we're very experienced, she doesn't have a reason to come upstairs. If something was to go wrong yeah fine we would get her involved, but we very rarely see her." R8

The following statement presents the various aspects of the perception the medical secretaries have in relation to line management; this view is generally shared by the other respondents:

"Line management I have mixed feelings about, sometimes it...we tend to get mixed messages from them I think. And I don't think that...they entirely appreciate the job that we do here.... I think they underestimate how good a team we do have. ...and we only seem to hear from them when they want to wave a big stick at us. But we don't ever hear much in the way of thank you! We don't want, thanked every day but it would be...it would be nice if there was a thank you and appreciation along with the finger wagging." R2

R2 exemplifies how this is a conflicting relationship between the medical secretaries and their line managers. The medical secretaries seek recognition from management and what they have is only a manager who does not appreciate and recognise them or their work.

This relationship with line management breaks the traditional picture of the secretary as loyal to her line manager. The data indicate that the tension between the secretaries and line management might be an indication of a reaction from the secretaries to a lack of identification with their line managers, sometimes as a result of changes and procedures applied by management. There is no more sense of protection (Wichroski, 1994) they might get from line managers. This situation can be another aspect that adds to the sense of isolation reported by the secretaries,

isolation and a break from the loyalty they have with superiors.

### 6.8.2 In legal firms

The legal secretaries interviewed are supervised by the lawyers they work for, usually one or two. When asked how the relationship with them is, other issues were raised by the legal secretaries. The majority mentioned that the relationship in general is good; however, it is possible to perceive from their statements that there is a kind of respect from the secretaries for the lawyers. One secretary demonstrated that when she has a good relationship with her line manager and the way she now, after years in the job, accepts things from the line manager even though she knows things are wrong. There is a relationship of respect, as she states:

“He’s very nice and he’s very nice to me and I’m just nice to him you know? He was very nice to me when I was ill. He wouldn’t hear of me staying in the office, I don’t think they wanted it either but he actually (...) possibly passed it on to me you know this last bout. But (...) no he’s very nice and I don’t think I would have problems with him. I mean I’ve always said to him if you don’t like the way I’m doing something because I’m set in my ways, because I’ve worked so long doing the work I do, if you don’t like the way I’m doing it please tell me. And tell me how you would like it changed, if I don’t think it’s right you know (...) because he’s like (...) he’s very good at his job. He’s a terrific lawyer but he does a lot of things that I know are wrong in grammar, things like that. You know (...) that (...) I know something really should be a new (...) and he’ll make a statement and he’ll put a question mark. And it’s not a question but (...) I’ve gotten now (...) years ago I would have said I’m sorry but that’s not a question, you don’t put a question mark there, now I just type it which I wouldn’t have done before. But (...) it’s his way, he’s the partner so I just do it.”  
R24

A good relationship with the line manager was also demonstrated and related to the fact that the secretaries feel that they can suggest things and they are open to listening:

“It’s very good actually. Yes, it’s good. Because most of them are very amenable to suggestions, particularly if they’re constructive. I mean obviously they don’t like to hear you moaning and groaning about everything, but if you go to them and say ‘Look, could we perhaps try this?’, even if they open it to the other partners and they’ll come back and see what they think. So you do have an input in the way that things are going on.” R20

Another important aspect for the secretaries was the fact of having an approachable line manager:

“...very good as I say I think I...after nearly seven/eight years of working with him I can gauge his moods, um...so I do know you know when I can get on to the personal side or steer well clear of that. ...we get on quite well I think. (...) you know if I had a personal problem or what have you yes I could go to him. (...) with the coordinator it’s very much the same, similar situation, you know she’s ...she pops along at least two or three times a week because she works at a different end of...in a different department from us. ...but she comes along two or three times a week just to see how we’re doing, if she sees that we’re ...struggling ...with what workload we have or she’s aware of the struggle, the workload, she will you know pitch in and help or make a suggestion. But she is very approachable as well which I think is important because if you don’t have anyone who’s approachable like that then your life can be a bit of a downer.” R25

“I’ve got a lot of respect for him and he’s very good, very good if you’ve got a problem or anything like that. You can just go to him. And we get on really well (...) So I know I can go to him.” R18

R21 states a very close relationship with her line manager to the point that she know how her line manager is feeling. This is an example of how secretaries may develop a good response to their bosses as a result of a good relationship (Cohen, 1985). In addition, secretaries have for some time been considered as an extension of the boss (Pringle, 1989) and this reflects who the secretaries may identify themselves with.

“She is approachable but she shows you very quickly when she’s panicking and stressed. If she’s happy, you’re happy. If she’s not happy, you’re not happy, type of thing.” R21

In addition, the above quote also exemplifies how much tacit knowledge is involved in their work. The secretaries’ commitment goes beyond the organisational goals and the secretary and the lawyers develop a relationship that has a direct influence on the work provided by the secretary.

Although a few cases of problems within the line manager-secretary relationship were mentioned, the majority of the respondents said that their line managers are good and generally the secretaries demonstrated a good attitude towards their line managers. They listen to them, they are approachable and understanding. They very often mentioned respect and approachability as a characteristic of their direct manager. The physical closeness of the secretaries and the line manager today in big



open plan offices might facilitate this relationship. Some of the secretaries, when speaking about their relationship with line managers, on various occasions mentioned the fact that they sit close to each other, as R22 says:

“I think it’s quite good, he’s really quite easy going and he’s got a family of his own so he understands what family life is and he’s quite happy as long as the work is getting done. We get along great. We sit like this” (R22 showed to the interviewer how close they sit next to each other)

Physical location may also impact the fact that line managers now see more what secretaries are doing and see how busy they are, as R17 says:

“... In (previous place) my boss used to have her own office and she was not in sight of any of the people of our team. Whereas now she sits right behind me and the other people are right behind me as well, so I feel that since we’ve moved and she’s been sitting behind me, she sees a lot more of what I do and she now realises that I am busy and because I think before she didn’t think I was that busy. But now she can see, I don’t have to say anything, she can see what I’m doing.” R17

These quotes exemplify how the legal secretaries feel more attached to their line managers as they are physically located next to each other in most cases. It is a relationship that can be good as one side knows what the other does. Their work may become more visible.

While the majority of respondents had a generally favourable impression of their line managers, some criticisms appeared in relation to the way they were treated by them. In most cases the secretaries showed high ability to deal with problems in relationships with superiors.

While the legal secretaries experienced this relationship of respect between them and the lawyers they report to, the medical secretaries experienced a conflicting relationship with line management in the NHS. The case of the conflicting situation experienced between secretaries and line management also exemplifies how control has been exerted negatively over the worker. This is also related to the context of public service in Scotland, where the NHS has had various political and organisational changes that result in these experiences among workers and effects in their labour process.

## 6.10 Work recognition

One medical secretary translates what most of the medical secretaries feel in relation to their work recognition, as they perceive being recognised by people who work with them and recognise the value they have as being the main mediator between the patients and the hospital or the consultant:

“I think...that work recognition as far as my work colleagues are concerned, the people that I work directly with, they realise how hard I work, the type of job that we do. ...to them it's more or less invaluable. You're the link between the patient... By the people that I work with yes definitely!

The interviewer: “And how about the management in the NHS?”

“No. I think the management think we can be replaced. ... they think that our job is typing. I think I'm a psychologist, a psychiatrist, agony aunt, best friend, cheerer upper! ...and I think that they...that management are looking to have the typing taken away from the medical secretaries. They're already downgrading the medical secretaries, when they take a medical secretary on now they only pay them as a grade three, whereas I'm paid as a grade four. So that's the start and gradually ...I think down in London they took all the typing away from the medical secretaries and sent it to India!” R8

“The other secretaries they all know what goes on, the consultant really appreciates what you do, he does always say that. ...the further up you go I don't think they appreciate it much, they just expect it really. You don't get much appreciation from higher up (...) And outside...I mean you do get patients and relatives phone up, we really appreciate the help you've given us and that's nice. It doesn't happen a lot but it is nice when it does happen...” R5

The above quotes exemplify how the medical secretaries feel recognised by the people who are closer to them, the consultants and other staff. It also shows how they perceive a lack of recognition by the management. “The NHS (...) I don't think so I think you're just a number really.” R13.

The closer someone is to the secretary, the more this person sees what they do and consequently they feel recognised. Indeed, data demonstrate that the medical secretaries are more sceptical about what the management thinks and whether they recognise them.

“...I think as a team we recognise what we all do and I think that probably on a day-to-day basis means much more to me than what my line management ... and the people that I work with on a day-to-day basis are the ones that I have good relationships with. ...and just concentrate on that.” R2

Another medical secretary responded to the question on the issue of work recognition in relation to how she is treated by the consultant she works with:

“I don’t think the consultants appreciate me at all. Maybe they do but it doesn’t feel like that. They don’t make you feel appreciated, you’re there to do their typing and that’s it. I don’t know if it’s because they ... consultants, because when I did my wee stint in general surgery with more medical consultants, they were a lot friendlier, and a lot more down to earth. What did you do at the weekend? And are you doing anything nice this weekend? Did you see such and such on TV? Whereas...where I am in (location) you don’t get any of that. You don’t get you know if you’re going off on holiday for a week they don’t say are you doing anything nice or anything, they just say see you when you get back.” R6

Most of the respondents associate the issue of work recognition to what people, and especially line managers, say to them in relation to the work they perform, different from relating their work recognition to things such as salary increases and other benefits that would make them feel recognised. The majority of the legal secretaries mentioned events when line managers said a simple ‘thank you’ and how that made a lot of difference to them.

“I...since I moved here a lot better, um...I came from a company who as I say, if it wasn’t in somebody else’s job description it got dumped on me. Um...and you didn’t get any recognition at all for doing anything. Here you at least get a thank you and a thank you can be a big boost, it really can, especially if you’re having a bit of a rotten day and you know...” R24

Some of the legal firms have an appraisal system in which once or twice a year line managers feedback the secretaries on their work grading them in a points system. The results of this are also important to the secretaries as recognition for their work.

“(...) twice a year and it’s just a review of your job and how the company feels that you’re getting on and things like that. (...) and you get a points system, so if you get all 1s, that’s very good and they look at reviewing your salary and things like that, and it’s just from my boss in the company to tell me how they think I’m doing. So very, very well, I’ve got 1s for absolutely everything, so that was really good.” R18

One respondent related the issue of recognition to the possibility of promotion. For her, she does not have the possibility of being promoted as a secretary. In her opinion the secretarial occupation lacks a structure that defines who secretaries and PAs are as very often these two titles overlap in terms of tasks.

“...I feel very valued. I mean in other places you don't get anything. I've had some jobs you just don't get any recognition at all or any praise, you know, if you've done a good job on something. But here they're very good to their employees I think. Yes. We usually have a monthly meeting, like the admin team, and all the secretaries, and the partner will usually say 'This was done very well, this was done very well'.” R19

One respondent mentioned that sometimes she does not feel recognised for what she does. However, she highlights that being in a more autonomous position as a secretary people tend to recognise the work she does and value it more. As R23 says:

“...we've become more autonomous and we've got the ability to now show our own initiative, people are realising that actually 'they're quite good what they do for us'. And are appreciative more. I think it's difficult to be valued. I think undervalued is the word I was looking for. I think now we're valued more because people realise just how much we do do for them and how much more we're willing to do for them if the ability is there. I think it can change on a daily basis sometimes. You go 'Ah' or 'Grrr'!” R23

Work recognition seems to be of serious concern among the medical secretaries. They do not feel recognised and feel they are treated as a number. This translates into how the medical secretary perceives herself as an occupation without other prospects, especially mobility prospects. However, what appears to happen among the secretaries is that when they struggle with work recognition, which is usually linked to their relationship with the line manager and the recognition they gain from them, the secretaries move between employers. There appears to be considerable movement of secretaries between employers in organisations, which perhaps is because of their dissatisfaction or simply the lack of upward mobility.

The lack of career prospects and the lack of recognition appear to be the main source of dissatisfaction with their occupation. This is because the secretaries have upgraded their skills and improved and increased the scope and quality of their work (OECD); they have not been recognised by increased status and earnings, as seen in either public or private sectors.

## 6.11 Importance of secretarial work

The medical secretaries' views on the importance of their job varies as they think that, firstly, their work is becoming more important as workload still increases and the consultants, more than ever, are relying on secretarial work to assist them.

“...in my opinion ...I think it's more important because the workload is increasing so much the consultants don't have the time, they don't have the time to spend actually going over things, and a lot more onus is placed on the secretary to fob patients off.” R8

Indeed, as a result of changes in the health system, as well as the increase in the consultants' workload, they need secretarial help to meet their targets.

“...I think it's very important in the NHS. I think that...the secretaries oil the wheels of industry; I think that they keep everything going. Because they need us. They need us.” R6

Secondly, medical secretaries also think that it is as important as it has ever been: “wouldn't say it's more or less important than it's ever been” as R7 reports and R10, who says: “I would say it was still important yes...”.

Thirdly, for R14, her job is not important for the NHS as she perceives that the NHS does not publicly recognise their work, either by talking about them in the media, or by talking about any increase in the number of secretarial staff.

Finally, R11 argues that her work is becoming less important because a lot of people now have access to the system that contains the material medical secretaries work with and the digital voice recognition system will also, as argued before, deskill them. This is a concern expressed by R11, below, showing she worries about losing control and may lose responsibility for things with the introduction of the voice recognition system:

“...I suppose...in a way less important because there are a lot of people who have access to things or computer systems so...the clinical staff for instance, the nursing staff, they can all access, or they should be able to access what we can access and I think once we go...once the letters start going out electronically then...you know we won't have so much responsibility once the voice recognition comes in so I think it's getting less, it will become less.” R11

The perception of the importance of secretarial work varies for medical secretaries. For some it can be viewed in a very positive way as for them the occupation has always been and will continue to be important to organisations. For others there is a view that the occupation is not important, either because they do not feel recognised by the organisation or due to the imminent changes that threaten their job.

Most legal secretaries stated that their work is becoming more important in the firm. Few respondents feel that if they could be replaced, most people could do what they do. Nevertheless, not everybody will have the skills to do it as they do. One respondent mentioned that the solicitors could have access to the dictation system and could do their own typing. However, that is not what they are trained to do and the results would not be good.

“...it just is! (important) I think that... what I try to do especially from...a personal assistant point of view with the partner I work for, is to take away the laborious administrative work away from him. My attitude is he is out there seeing clients, getting money in to pay for me to work. If I wasn't there to take away all the laborious horrible stuff from him that he could sit there and do hours of paperwork...then...I'm not doing my job properly if he has to do that. That's my role is to take away all of that from him, whether it is typing a letter, to booking a meeting for him, to...time recording you know?...it's those things and...I'm not trying to give myself a big head here or anything but...my...appraisal I think it was last year, or the year before, he actually said that he feels that he can just give me things to do and I will just get on with it, without him having to explain, whether it be him standing over me, or dictating to me, explain what he wants doing. Which is a good...we've come to a good working relationship like that. But yes ...I think that it's probably more so by role.” R25

The above statement exemplifies how the secretarial labour process is perceived by the legal secretary as a role that cannot be replaced. She understands that what she does could not even be done or replaced by her line manager's independence.

Another respondent said that the job is becoming more important as they have more work to do. The workload keeps increasing and the legal secretaries agree that it is still becoming more important: “I think it's getting more important. As I say, I'm getting much more to do...” R18. This statement exemplifies how the idea of work importance was constantly shown by respondents in relation to the amount of work that they have to do and the effort involved in it.

The importance of secretarial work is also exemplified by R23's statement in a way that she perceives her job as important even though her line manager will not recognize it or acknowledge her for doing a good job.

"I think sometimes our fee earners forget just how important it is, and that's 'let's walk out for a day and that will remind them just what we do for them'! But I sometimes think to myself that perhaps the art of being a good secretary is that the fee earners don't even realise that you've done it, because you've done it and they go 'Oh, I didn't know you could do that'. 'Yes, I've been doing it for years; did you not know I did it that way?' 'No'!" R23

Together with the perception that the secretarial occupation is important, the legal secretaries also perceive their occupation as equally unrecognized and, as R23 reports above, invisible for some people.

For the medical secretaries, while they believe that their occupation is important to the organisation, they also believe that it might suffer negative effects from the introduction of new systems at work. For the legal secretaries, the importance of their job is related to how they see their occupation as an essential asset to the line managers that cannot be replaced. The legal secretaries also related the importance of their occupation to the fact that workload is increasing and so is the effort involved in their labour process.

## **6.12 Chapter summary**

The findings presented in this chapter respond to research question two: what are the contextual factors surrounding secretarial work?

As this question is not directly addressed within the literature (chapter three) on secretarial work, the analytical framework was initially used to map the themes for analysis. Then, given the great extent of issues in relation to the context of their work after considering individual perception of their context, LPA was found to be the best approach to map the themes that would better present the contextual factors important for this study. Again, many of the themes raised were closely inter-related to the content and the lived experience of the workers.

The medical secretaries have experienced many changes in work, either in relation to the secretarial job itself, or organisational changes. Generally the secretaries see technological changes as the main factors affecting their work and work context. The changes they list resulted in an increase in workload as well as a destabilisation in the organisation of their work, especially in relation to the kind of relationship they used to have with the line manager and with the other secretaries. The data demonstrated that the context of their work is rich in details that help to have a better understanding of this occupation, especially if their work is placed in the context in which they do it as well as the lived experience they individually present and integrate with their content and context.

Chapter five considered findings in relation to the content of secretarial work. This second chapter of findings sought to build upon this by considering the context in which secretarial work is undertaken. The next chapter (chapter seven) goes on to consider the lived experience of the workers. It will present data on the secretaries' perceptions of their lived experience also relating it to the content and the context of their work.



## CHAPTER 7: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE

### 7.1 Introduction

The findings of this study have been reviewed in relation to the first element of the proposed conceptual framework, the content of work and in relation to the context of work in chapter six. This third chapter of findings addresses the lived experience of the worker, when the workers can relate to everything one has experienced through life, to the content and context of their work also having a direct relationship to their identity.

This chapter explores the lived experiences of medical and legal secretaries. Exploring the lived experience of occupation holders, it is argued here to be possible to better understand an occupation. It is argued here that occupation holders will be better understood if one considers the totality of their occupational experience, not only the tasks and skills involved in their labour process, but also the lived experience involved in the occupation.

Different from chapters five and six, this chapter presents the data on the lived experience of medical and legal secretaries and closes by presenting a conclusion about the themes that emerged in this third element of the conceptual framework. The focus of this chapter consider the importance of identity and work, and that for Leidner (2006) work should be a base for identity, in addition, considering also that the workers identities are shaped by the work they do (Leidner, 1993) this chapter bring other issues into discussion. The issues discussed here come from the operational definition of identity as identified in chapter 2 and from the importance to recognise the relationship between one's personal and occupational identity as to how people understand his/her occupation. That is the meaning ascribed to the worker's occupation going beyond formal categorisation of occupations, which here, is interpreted as the lived experience of the occupational holder. The lived experience, as argued in chapter 2, encompasses how identity is lived and maintained, from how the occupational holder started his/her occupation to how the occupation is maintained throughout the years.

Findings in relation to the lived experience of medical and legal secretaries are presented in sections 7.2 to 7.6 of this chapter (see Box 7.1) and are summarised within section 7.7.

**The lived experience of medical and legal secretaries**

- Careers history
- Reasons for entering the occupation

**Identity**

- Occupation identification
- Identification with line manager

**Gender**

**Problems and pressures**

**Prospects of change of occupation**

Box 7.1: The lived experience – summary of themes and sub-themes

## **7.2 The lived experience of medical and legal secretaries**

As discussed in Chapter 2, the lived experience of the worker, that is everything a person has experienced through life, has direct relationship to their identity and may reveal the occupational meaning for the occupation holder and this, together with the content and the context of their job, might present a better way to understand an occupation.

The framework proposed in this study suggests that a person's identity and the work undertaken might have strong connections. This connection might be translated in relationship between the person's lived experience and the kind of work in which he/she engages. The purpose of this section is to analyse a person's lived experience in relation to the content and context of her work in light of the framework proposed.

Most research on secretarial work has focused on the technical or mechanical skills and tasks of the job. From what this study has presented so far, the work of secretaries involves more than technical skill and more than what is formally acknowledged in their job description. A focus only on the technical content and context of the job bypasses other important components of the work of secretaries which may relate closely to the way they identify themselves as people as well as occupational workers.

### **7.2.1 Career history**

In order to start a narrative of the lived experience of the secretaries interviewed, the first question asked was an open question when the interviewees responded about their life experience since leaving school until their present job.

The majority of the medical secretaries interviewed indicated that when they left school, they either did not know what career to pursue or did not find enough job opportunities for them. They would either simply pick a job that was available at that time regardless of personal inclination or would pursue further training in office work.

The quote below illustrates how R1, who is over 50 years old, presented a portrait of her career story and the distinct features of her career story representation:

“Well! Quite a convoluted road, really. I left school and didn’t know what I was going to do so I worked in a shop for a year and then decided I would do teaching. So I went to college and did the training to be a primary school teacher, which I did for a couple of years and then left to have my own children. And then when they were little I went back doing supply teaching, fitting in around the children, and as they got older I went back to teaching full-time and then in 1989 I just decided that there was too much stress in it, so I gave it up. It’s hard to believe it’s 21 years ago! So I gave up the teaching and did nothing for about a year and, when I say nothing, you know, I was a housewife and mother, and then I decided I need to do something and I’m not designed to sit at home. So at that time our local secondary school had a course where you could go back into the classroom with the pupils. So I went back in and did computing and office studies... And while I was doing that course there was a vacancy advertised at my local GP surgery, so I applied for it and got the job and transferred the course to a night class. So I finished the course at the night class. I then worked in the GP surgery for nine years before joining (place). I started off as a receptionist within the same health centre, but instead of working for the GP I now worked for the health board...” R1

The above quote illustrates some aspects of a career timeline that has some common experiences found in the narrative of the other medical secretaries interviewed. Indeed it exemplifies how the secretaries often left school having no or few career options to pursue.

The issue of ‘what to do next’ was similar across different age groups studied. The fact of ‘not having jobs available’ was not only a characteristic of older secretaries who lived at a time of scarce job opportunities and few jobs available for women. On the contrary, even younger secretaries experienced a lack of job opportunity and maybe a lack of career orientation either from parents or from the school system. This issue was evident in some of the young secretaries’ narratives as quoted in the extract below, from R6, 34 years old:

“...And it was really my parents that had kind of steered me in the direction of banking or financial services. So...um...I was made to fill in a CV and sit down and write letters off to the various banks and building societies...Because I had some good qualifications, I had higher grade qualifications but not good enough to go on to do university courses, or college...no I probably could have gone to college. I don’t think the careers advice at school is very good. I think that that could be a lot better because I had no clue what I wanted to do and I just relied on my parents really to steer me. They thought banking might be...or insurance might be quite a good career choice.” R6

All secretaries interviewed reported unique career history and different experiences and facts in their lives. However, a few issues were found to be common regarding their career history. Common factors are related to the experience they had in various kinds of jobs and industry sectors in which they were first employed, which might have been due to their lack of choice and opportunity or their lack of career prospects after leaving school. Their perception of a variation of job experiences was actually a positive aspect for their career and it was perceived as an added value to them. “I just picked up whatever I could and I was lucky that I could um...and because I did a lot of temping I got a lot of experience so it was easy just to go...you know fairly easy for me to go to something new...” (R2). R2 points out her experience in different jobs, due to the lack of career prospects, and how this was an added value to her, making it easier to get new jobs and to adapt to a wide range of jobs.

Despite the many job changes the secretaries experienced, changes in family circumstances and even an admitted desire for a life out of the house, 11 respondents said they had a time in their career life when they stopped working in order to have children. Many perceived this career break as a natural process in life and no issues were raised on this aspect of their life trajectory nor any negative feeling or perception was elicited by the secretaries. The following quote exemplifies how the secretaries spoke about the time when they stopped working in order to have a family:

“...and I went to work... then I moved west with my then boyfriend who became my husband and I worked for (name) and then we moved again back to (place), and by that time I had my first child. I went back to work when my second child was in primary school part time and my husband had gone back to university after the children were born.” R2

In addition to the interruption of working to raise a family, it was reported that the secretaries also moved a lot in order to comply with their husband’s work re-allocation. This situation was reported in five interviews.

Table 7.1 below represents a summarised pattern in which the life trajectory of the secretaries was described. Each option in each column can be linked to one of the options in the next column to form and exemplify a life trajectory of a secretary in

this study. The options are commonalities found in the interviews of the medical secretaries:

Period when secretaries reported not knowing what to do after leaving school		Period when career was put on hold		Working life back on and re-insertion in office work	
Left school aged 16 or 17	Went into different jobs*	Got married	Had kids  (or / and)	Went back to part-time work*	Moved up to secretarial position (from typing post)
Finished secondary school	Did secretarial course**			Went back to office/secretarial work*	Got a job in present organisation
	Went into office work*		Moved away to follow husband's job relocation		
	Got a job as a junior shorthand typist				

Table 7.1: Life trajectory of medical secretaries

\* temporary or full-time, various areas and industries

\*\* either Medical Secretarial Diploma or Secretarial course

One could argue whether the exposure the secretaries had to many changes throughout their life has contributed to be able to work in a kind of job that is also closely related to change. The changes they have experienced in life may have led them to be more adaptable to change. Another aspect of the career history of the secretaries is that they carry out many aspects related to the gendered side of secretarial work. They show characteristics which, for years, have been related to the

conception of what a secretary is. For example, the ‘office-wife’ character and the caring relationship with the line manager and other aspects of the job.

Few differences emerged in relation to the legal secretaries’ report of their career trajectory. The legal secretaries followed the same pattern as the medical secretaries in terms of a variation of jobs at the beginning of the career. That is, some legal secretaries also mentioned that they did not know what to do, and as they were keen on some aspects of office work, working as a legal secretary came as a good option for the career they could pursue and one of reasons mentioned is that it has better pay than other secretarial jobs. The following extract shows how R17 (over 30 years old) entered into secretarial work, although not knowing what to do after leaving school, as R17 reports “...I am very fond of typing, so obviously that kind of job, secretaries, they do lots of typing. So that was one big part of it and I just like the office environment...”.

The following extracts are examples of the career history of two legal secretaries who are over 50 years old and who experienced historical moments in the UK when, as discussed in chapter 3, the career choice of a woman was affected by the historical moment and highly determined by parents’ or teachers’ guidance.

“... at the time I left school I was at a junior secondary, (...) I chose to leave with the (...) school leaving certificate because the secondary school that I attended they did a commercial course and from day one at secondary you got book keeping, shorthand and typing. (...) I started off as a junior. I had a terrible first day because I wasn’t even allowed to sit down uh (...) what you did was you went in in the morning and you were given a list of the other typists’ and secretaries’ food requirements for their lunch and you went and you got their shopping. You went to the bank, two of you went to the bank, both of us fifteen-year-olds for the day’s uh (...) cash flow. And on the Friday you got the whole office’s salaries from the bank(...)...uh (...) but when we came back from the shops we had to make everyone’s tea and coffee and I had gone to sit down and I was told by the head typist we don’t sit down in this office when we’re office juniors. (...) So I got another job (...) and I got a very nice little firm where I was a junior shorthand typist/telephonist. And I got a good grounding in that office and uh (...) as well as working a really old fashioned switchboard I would take down file notes for one of the cashiers. And then I would help him type up accounts from all the notes that had been typed from various entries and things.(...)I also typed short letters and things like that (...) I got married in 1969 and I stopped work in 1970 to have my first son and I went back to help them in between times to do what they called issues where they were issuing new stocks and shares and things to existing shareholders (...)And then they were taken over by the Bank of Scotland so I was asked to go back and help at the Bank of Scotland so I did that for various times and then I had

my second son. So when he was at nursery, which would be about 1976, I went back to work (...) and this time it was in a refrigeration engineers (...) so I was there for maybe two or three years and then I decided that I would like to go back and work full-time because we wanted to buy another house...” R24

“(...) I went to a school in (name of region) called Public Secondary School for Girls. The reason I went to that school is that it was the only school in (name of region) that taught secretarial skills, i.e. shorthand and typing and accountancy. At that time, this is back in 1966, employers were in the habit of phoning schools to see if there was any girl eligible to leave and to start work (...). At the time there was myself and another girl whose names had been put forward by one of the teachers. We were given a typing test, I won, so I went up for the interview. I was 15 at the time. The guy (...) gave me a job as junior shorthand typist which meant you were a general dogsbody. Duties (...) at that time included not only taking your shorthand, typing your letters, and generally making tea and coffee for everybody, but my job first thing in the morning was emptying ash-trays, taking all the rubbish down to the bins. On the Friday afternoon I had to clean the big photocopying machines which at the time were all liquid. Cleaning the sterner machine, which meant taking all the skins that they used for duplicating things, making sure that they were all packed away flat and cleaned, putting fresh ink in, which was a really messy job. But that was the way juniors were in those days. If there was a messy job, a junior got it to do. (...) Two months in that job they had what they called the ‘credit squeeze’. I was made redundant at the ripe old age of 15. (...)”R20

R24 and R20 describe examples of the career history of secretaries and they also describe the type of tasks they experienced when they started working. The next section will examine the reasons why respondents entered the occupation.

### **7.2.2 Reasons for entering the occupation**

The reasons for entering secretarial work are closely related to the context in which they lived and experienced when leaving school. As mentioned in chapter 3, in the 60s there was a lack of job opportunities and women, especially, went into office work either due to the influence of parents or teachers.

Following a conversation about how the secretaries got into secretarial work, respondents were asked what the reason for entering secretarial work was. The interviews with the medical and legal secretaries indicated that the main reasons for entering secretarial work were:



Reasons	
	Liked working with people
	Easy job to get into
	“Next best thing” if wanted to stay in the hospital environment
	Fell into it
	Lack of options
	Made them feel good
	Lack of knowledge of options
	Safe and steady income
	A job that suits

Table 7.2: Reasons for entering the occupation – Medical Secretaries

Reasons	
	Liked the office environment
	First job that came up
	Fell into it
	Lack of knowledge of options

Table 7.3: Reasons for entering the occupation – Legal Secretaries

The reasons identified by medical secretaries demonstrated that most respondents entered the secretarial occupation either because there was no other option available at that time or that it was “the next best option” (R3 and R7), when their first career choice, usually nursing or teaching, was not possible to pursue. But clearly the reason for doing secretarial work was for some an option to, first, avoid unwanted ‘bad’ jobs. The extract below, from R4, who is just over 50 years old, is an example:

“Because I didn’t want to work in a shop, and I didn’t want to work in a factory, and I didn’t want to work in a bank and at that stage when there wasn’t much...many other options when I left school um...that’s really why I thought right I would rather be a secretary. So that’s why I went down that route (...)”  
R4

Second, secretarial work was an option to pursue as their first desired job was not possible, usually because of a lack of qualifications to do what they really wanted, frequently reported being in the area of medicine, but being a secretary would still make them stay in the hospital environment as they enjoyed it:

“I didn’t really know anything about it, didn’t really want to be a secretary at all, I liked the medical side of things but I didn’t want to be a nurse. I knew I couldn’t stomach being a nurse definitely not. I’m not clever enough to be a doctor so...this was the next best thing.” R8

Third, secretarial work, for some, was the most appropriate option as they did not have advice on job opportunities or proper career guidance available. According to R10 and R15, they claim they did not have the knowledge of the existing career options. As in R15’s example:

“...I think all these years ago you know if you didn’t stay on at school and do ‘A’ levels and things like that you didn’t get sort of like career advice so much in those days you know? To sort of get you know that chance to do things, what they would like to do. I used to always think ...I would like to be a vet, that was interesting working with animals and stuff and I thought hmm I don’t know if I want to do a course for all these years ...so I think I just decided on secretarial work because ...it was a decent job then and you know it paid quite well and I did enjoy it, I enjoyed shorthand, it was very interesting. ...so I thought it was quite good actually to get into a good job, civil service or something then but not thinking I would stay there all these years. But I think time just goes on and that’s what you do, ... I’m not saying I’ve been 100% happy with it I just wish I had done something different over the years ...” R15

The statement above, if contrasted with the issue of knowledge base for secretarial work, can show a perception of secretarial work being a job that does not require knowledge. R15 justifies her choice of secretarial work on the basis of the status given by the job, the financial reward, as well as her unwillingness to do a course to be a vet, as she reports, and spend a few years on training.

The medical secretaries demonstrated in the interviews that, alongside the already mentioned reasons for choosing to be a secretary, they also demonstrated to have a desire to serve. It is evident in the following extracts that the secretaries also present a kind of nurturing sense and social reasons for pursuing such a career:

“...after I’d had enough of the banking because ...it’s not about people, because if you complain about your job they just say well we’ll get someone else to do it and you’re off out the door. There’s no love! And I wanted to do something I felt made a difference, so I thought either going into work in a hospital or going to work in a care home or something like that to make a difference to people to make me feel better.” R6

“...and I was more interested in the fact that I was going to be working for a charity than really the type of work I did. ...And it just led from there.” R2

The above statements demonstrate that previous experience of the medical secretaries in addition to a nurturing desire to serve people may have led them to choose secretarial work as well. These reasons are also reflected in the kind of work they do, at the health service.

It also appeared in the sample that having family members who are or used to be a secretary also influenced the choice of occupation of the medical secretaries interviewed. 34% of the sample reported having close family members who used to be or still work as secretaries, as shown below by R7 who also mentioned this fact as a possible reason for her entering the secretarial occupation:

“...I liked that side of things, I was never ever destined to go into medicine ...probably my mother was a secretary which is probably why I kind of went into that sort of thing and I also did very much like the medical side of things although I knew I was never going to go into the medical profession as such so...this was...probably the next best...” R7

It was reported not only by the older secretaries that the option for secretarial work was the option when they did not know what to do, see R19 (27 years old) report:

“It was really the only job that... I just, I didn't really choose it, I just kind of fell into it. I left school and I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I didn't know what I wanted to do at uni so I didn't want to apply if I wasn't sure, so the aim was to take a year out and think about it, but then I just kind of fell into that work and just kept going and I didn't bother until now.” R19

Similarly, the legal secretaries demonstrated that most respondents did not choose to be a secretary, they reported that they “fell into it” as reported below:

“So, yes, that's how I actually ended up doing that. It wasn't a conscious decision or anything, it was just handed to me in that way.” (R21)

The reasons identified showed that the lack of knowledge of the options available at the time they left school resulted in choosing an occupation based on what their parents wanted for them. This situation is described by R24 as below:

“Well (...) you more or less did (...) in my day what your parents suggested, uh (...) I had wanted to be a nurse and uh (...) my mother she said oh no, no, no, she said you're not strong enough to be a nurse. (...) Now I possibly could have stayed on at school because I had the grades to stay on at school but I wanted to go out and work and (...) so I did as my mother suggested you know as you did and I (...) but I really did like being a typist and secretary I was interested in meeting people and (...) getting a job (...)” R24

It was also reported in various moments of the interview that some legal secretaries regret the choice of career, especially as reported by the older ones, as at the time they left school they had enough grades to carry on school and pursue another career or to stay at school and get more grades. This is illustrated by R24, when she states that she regrets not getting more grades:

“We were fifteen. I actually left school at fourteen because the school leaving age was fifteen and I was fourteen in the summer holidays but you know by that time I had gotten a good education for commercial work whereas a lot of people who went to senior secretaries (...) didn’t have that, they had to go on to night school to learn secretarial (...) so I think some it maybe held them back but I do sometimes regret not having gone on and done ‘O’ levels and things like that. I mean I could have gone on to do it I suppose in later years but by that time I had seen it wasn’t really necessary for the type of job I was in. I mean you now hear of graduate secretaries...” R24

A high number of legal secretaries interviewed, two thirds of respondents, reported having family members who are or used to be a secretary, either their mother or sister(s) or a close relative like a cousin. This fact was also thought to have influenced their choice of occupation. Some respondents (such as R18) mentioned that all family members in her house were office workers; her father, mother and brother were administrators and that probably influenced her choice of career, as she (R18) says: “I think it (family being in office work) probably did, how I went down that line. Because I suppose because the whole family done it, so when I went to the Job Centre I was looking for an office job. I wasn’t really looking for anything else. Yes.” Below are examples of respondents’ perception on their family members’ careers and the possible influence it had on their choice of occupation:

“... I’d always fancied, you know, when I was growing up, I’d always fancied being a secretary because my cousin was a secretary and she knew how to do shorthand and I was always fascinated with that. That she could do these little squiggles and she knows what it means and I thought ‘I wish I did’. Right from an early age. And I found that I had a flair for typing as well. She had a typewriter, a very, very old one, one with the little black keys with gold lettering on it, and I just used to muck about with that sometimes and I did find it easy to type (...)” R20

“My sister was a secretary and my mother had this respect for people who worked in offices and she felt you know (...) it was (...) you know (...) I also had hankering to maybe be a hairdresser but no no she knew somebody who was a hairdresser and they had bad skin because of it and there were all the reasons

but she kept saying that she would really like me to become a secretary.” R24

R25 presents many reasons why she chose to be a secretary and argued about her early desire for office work which remained until later life, as she says:

“I love working in reception um...I enjoy meeting people, um...so reception was ideal for me. And it’s something I had always wanted to do from being a child you know? People change...kids change their minds um...but I’d always wanted to be a hotel receptionist for me though um...thinking back on it now, it was more the fact that the hotel industry does not pay well. The commuting from where I lived to where I was working was um...not great, the hours are pretty unsociable. Um...and I just wanted to get into a nine to five job![Laughter]It might sound boring but that was...that’s what I wanted to do and um...as I say I have um...I have always used a typewriter, I’ve always done secretarial right through my school as well. Um...even before we did secretarial work at school I even...my mum always had a typewriter so I’ve always fiddled about.” R25

Still in connection to reasons for the choice of occupation, the topic of choosing to work in legal firms came out from respondents in different moments of the interview. Some reported a case of opportunities available at the time they were looking for a job, as:

“There’s no special reason. I mean I tried getting into the medical side of it, but never ever got offered a job as a medical secretary. I’ve tried going into the financial spheres, like the banks and things, but ‘You’re a legal secretary’. Basically just a secretary, you know, secretarial skills is basically the same the world over, ‘Yes, but you’re trained as a legal secretary’, and I’ve said ‘Oh, it’s just something I kind of drifted into’, you know. But it just seems I’m always back in a solicitor’s office.” R20

While others mention the good pay offered by legal firms:

“I don’t know. I think... I went to the Job Centre and this is where I got the office junior job, and I think I just quite enjoyed it and so each job that I went for was always in solicitors’ offices because they paid better. (...) Yes. If you go into legal positions you get better pay, yes. If I went to work at the university or the hospital, the pay is not as good there.” R18

## **7.3 Identity**

Technology has significant impact on the work of secretaries. Although it has changed in a positive way the work and the way tasks are undertaken, technology has also brought some issues about work identification. Both medical and legal secretaries spoke about line managers who, to some extent, work and do things on the computer that was in the past given to the secretaries only. It is felt by secretaries that they do not have control of their line managers' work anymore as some of them will not pass information on to them. Contrary to what used to happen in the past, when secretaries had much more control over the work of the superiors, today it is perceived that secretaries are not so attached to their line managers as a means of freeing them to focus on business. In the past, a secretary would deal with every single detail of a line manager's life and the line manager would "consider her not as an individual but an extension of himself" (Pringle, 1989:8). In summary, the findings suggest that the secretaries are not 'extensions' of their line managers anymore and this is important as it is evidence of how this occupation is experienced today. This study differs from previous literature on secretarial work as here the focus is on two groups of secretaries that are analysed in relation to the service of knowledge workers. It is argued that this disconnection of the secretary-boss relationship is related to them being secretaries of knowledge workers, because knowledge workers tend to keep a degree of interdependence of work tasks (Benson & Brown, 2007).

### **7.3.1 Occupational identification**

Most of the medical secretaries reported feeling part of a secretarial group. This identification with the other secretaries was expressed when they stated the way they interact with each other and the feeling of collaboration they have among themselves. The sense of being part of a group of secretaries is related to the community of practice they are part of, as R8 reports when asked if she feels part of a secretarial group:

“...with the older secretaries, the ones that have been here a long time. Whereas the younger ones because as I say we don’t get out and about now we don’t get to meet people, you don’t have a rapport with these girls. So...on the odd occasion that you do see one of the older secretaries, I’m talking about the ones that have been here ten years plus um...its fine, yeah, yeah, you could phone them and ask them anything and they’ll always help you (...).” R8

R8 states that she identifies better with the older medical secretaries in the office than with the newcomers, as the contact they have with each other today differs from the contact they used to have a few years ago.

The views of the legal secretaries in relation to feeling part of a secretarial group varied among them. Some respondents said they did feel part of a group of secretaries to the extent that they helped each other. Other secretaries reported that they were isolated and there was not such a feeling of a cohesive group.

On the one hand there were positive feelings of feeling part of a group. R18 exemplifies her view and her feeling of being part of a secretarial group:

“Do I feel part of it? Yes. I do. They’re very nice ladies and you just know that you can go to them if you need to and vice versa, they can come to me. And we just help each other, so it’s nice. And actually, when I’m not too busy, I’ll go to other departments, like (place) and (place) and just say ‘Do you need me to help you?’ So we quite often do that.” R18

As R18 reports above, the sense of collaboration is the main factor that makes them feel part of a group. On the other hand, negative feelings were demonstrated in relation to this issue. As R21 reports below, there is an identification on a broader sense of being part of a group of secretaries, but when this is in respect to the team they work for, it seems that this identification is jeopardised by personality differences (see R23 report below as well). Another fact is that for some secretaries their perception of ‘just being a secretary’ does not imply to them being part of a cohesive group if they do not have social interaction that builds up a relationship among them:

“Do I feel part of it? In the firm that I’m in, possibly. In the team that I’m in, possibly no. In the firm that I’m in, yes.” R21

“I don’t think so. I’m just a secretary! We certainly don’t have a band of secretaries who will meet up, like, on a monthly basis and have a lunch or something. I think that’s just you’re secretaries within a division.”R23

“Yeah I do but...I think in our office there’s...this is not really to do with the work it’s more kind of the personalities in the office, ...I think some people...it’s not that you don’t get on, because you kind of...tolerate that’s not what I mean, we kind of get on you know, we get on because we’ve got to work together but there are people that kind of are quite cliquey in the office and that can impact on things.(...)But as I say I just take people as I find them and that’s all I can do but I do feel part of a group most of the time. There are moments of kind of...oh yeah I’ll just sit here, nobody has noticed me!” R9

There is a sense among the legal secretaries that to identify with other secretaries is more something that happens on a personal level than an identification as an occupational group. This identification as an occupational group, however, is demonstrated in other aspects of their work and the work interaction they have as discussed before.

### **7.3.2 Factors affecting self and occupational identity**

Although the secretaries are not extensions of their line managers’ anymore, and although organisational changes and changes in the organisation of their work resulted in a different relationship with their line managers, the secretaries still keep a high level of commitment and loyalty to the boss. This is especially evident among the legal secretaries, as they were very conscious and careful when speaking about their line managers and the organisation they work for.

#### ***Changing roles***

As seen in chapters five and six, technological developments changed secretarial tasks and also facilitated more control over their work by management. In addition, the secretaries are experiencing an imbalance of roles usually and historically undertaken by them and by their line managers.

Another example of how the secretaries’ self-identity and occupational identity has been affected relates to the issue they raised on their work and on the work of PAs.

When discussing the tasks and added tasks involved in the work of legal secretaries, an issue of the title of Personal Assistant (PA) and legal secretaries and their related



tasks emerged in seven interviews out of the total sample of nine respondents. It is important here to note that in the sample of legal secretaries, although the same methods were used for the recruitment of legal secretaries, the sample presents variation in job titles. Three respondents have the title of PA and the other six respondents were all legal secretaries.

The difference between the tasks of a PA and the tasks of a legal secretary was not clearly presented and it is difficult to measure or describe. As discussed in Chapter 3, it is difficult to describe the meaning of the word 'secretary' and the same applies to the title of PA. The latter might be usually understood as someone who works for one line manager. The three respondents with the PA title work in a team and their work is not exclusive to one line manager. When asked what her tasks were as a PA, one respondent answered:

“...under the PA heading ...it is a case of being a personal assistant to the partner I work for....I keep his diary, I make sure that he has ...the documents that he needs for whatever meetings he goes to... I arrange meetings for him; ...it's...basically a case of making sure he has to be where he needs to be with what he needs to be with” (R21)

The apparent lack of a clear distinction between the tasks of PAs and the tasks of legal secretaries resulted in a discussion among some of the respondents. Some respondents reported that secretaries classed as 'just' legal secretaries undertake the same tasks as the ones classed as PAs. As an example, the following extract exemplifies what some of the legal secretaries think about the work of PAs in comparison to secretaries:

“I'm trying to think what the PAs do. I don't know. Because sometimes I wonder why I'm not a PA! Why am I a legal secretary? We must do more or less the same. I think they do a lot of personal stuff for their bosses and things like that...” R18

“Yes, just the difference of level, because I mean a PA can be servicing through a high profile person in your company, like the CEO, whereas a secretary would probably just be servicing a junior partner or an associate or senior solicitor or something like that. In my mind that's what I think that would classify the level of that.” R21

“Well in our firm I think we've only got legal secretaries and PAs and I think that... It's a bit difficult really because I think the legal secretaries do some PA work and then I chat to some of the PAs and you go 'Well I'm doing that anyway', so... (...)You know, like I say, I don't exactly know what PAs do. I

mean I know there's probably different levels of PA as well, you know." R23

In many responses it was clear how difficult it is for the secretaries to know exactly what a PA is and what the work involves. R23 shows that she is not sure what a PA is and yet, she still tries to keep the title of PA associated with her secretarial title. This shows a need to keep the titles, however blurred in terms of meaning, but it is important to them in terms of status:

"And then I look after two, well three partners actually at the moment, so I'm sort of their PA, but I'm not at PA level yet, just secretarial/PA level. So I take their calls, I do their diary management, but I don't do everything for them, which I always kind of think is a bit more PA."R23

The following quote also exemplifies how the secretaries perceive the status imposed by the PA title:

"...I think PA would be...I suppose it's a little bit more fancy than secretary, but I suppose if you come down to it they would still consider you as a secretary. That's my experience ..."R21

Another issue raised in regard to the differentiation of PA and legal secretaries is about the lack of criteria used by the organisation to class someone as a PA. This issue raised concerns among the legal secretaries in relation to what they need to do to become a PA and, in some cases, why they are not yet a PA as the work they do is the same as the work others with the PA title do. For R22, a person may not be made a PA because she works on a part-time basis and it is usually up to the line manager to decide whether someone is made PA, as she reports:

"(...) If I forced it (being made a PA) enough and I moaned about it enough...Because... I know I say 'moaned about it', but I feel because I'm part-time, although they would say that that's not an issue, because that would be discrimination, because everybody should be treated the same, whether you're part-time or full-time, but I think it's just the need of that person, that secretary being there with the person full-time. I think it does make a difference. My personal opinion.(...) So I've asked them, on my last one, because while I was developing my role, I should have really been a PA by now, because there's some people who have got it and some people have not, within the company. So by now I should really have it, I would think. If it was a developing role. And I think it's just because I've not pushed it enough. (...) Because I'm doing more things now, I worry, I've been asking questions why, am I going to start..? Because there's some people getting made up to PAs and some are not and I want to know...There's not really a structure, a secretarial structure. There is for solicitors, if you want to be a solicitor, then a senior solicitor, then an associate and then a partner, but there's not a structure for the

legal secretary, to push you up the ladder. There's never been a process set in place. (...)They've not done it. There's not a...If you wanted to be like a secretary and then a legal secretary and then a PA, there's no x, y and z that this is what you have to do to get there. (...)There's no plan to say this is what you have to do to get there. Whether, I think it's just recognised with the person who you work with, what they feel about you as a person, if they think that you're doing enough to become a PA. I think...And that's what I want to find out, what are they doing that I'm not doing? That I should be doing to get that..." R22

One of the legal secretaries who holds a title of PA presented some description of tasks she undertakes which exceed tasks of a secretary, making it easy to differentiate, to some extent, what she does from what other secretaries do. She basically describes that she does as a PA more than what is in her contract. She does the basic secretarial duties and eventually she develops projects and deals with contracts and specialized software packages.

"(...) I don't think that our secretaries do the same things as I do. (...) I think for my own position I'm feeling confident because I'm doing things that other secretaries don't and so I feel that I've got a niche for myself." R17

What is apparent in the secretaries' perception is that the issue of the PA is not only about a relationship between title and tasks undertaken by them, which is not clear in most cases. On the contrary, it is more about the status such a title brings to them than it is to define tasks and differentiate work.

## **7.4 Gender**

Due to the historical and the different perspective on gender issues in previous studies in relation to secretarial work, the issue on gender was raised in this study as well. The interviewees were asked about the common stereotype of secretaries. Due to the fact that most secretaries interviewed and most of their colleagues are women, they were asked if this has any effect on them. The majority of respondents, aware of the stereotype given to secretaries and secretarial work, said they haven't had any experience in relation to that and that the fact the majority of secretaries are women had no effect on them or their work. Some of the respondents said they have heard of or worked with a male secretary in the past.

The legal secretaries were also asked about gender issues. They were asked whether the fact that all the secretaries in the law firms were women had any effect on them. The majority said that the fact that women are the majority in their occupation has no effect on them or on the work they do. One respondent reported a joke she heard in the past and she said it does not affect her anyway:

“But, yes, some people will just be like ‘Oh what do you do?’, ‘I’m a secretary’, ‘Oh!’, yes, that kind of ‘Want to be *my* secretary?’ kind of thing. Yes, I’ve had experience of that. I just laugh it off! If you’ve seen the movie ‘Secretary’, that’s where they all get it from I think so... It’s not bothered me, no. Because I was aware of that perception of it before I started working in that field, so it’s never bothered me.” R19

Although in the question on gender and sex-typing issues no major concerns appeared among the legal, nor the medical secretaries, it is argued here whether gender issues are demonstrated on other aspects in this study.

The interviews seemed to contrast with interviews carried out by other researchers in the past, such as Pringle (1989), who interviewed female secretaries and very often came across gender issues and other facts in relation to sexuality. Both medical and legal secretaries surprisingly showed few concerns in relation to sexuality issues although there was some evidence of gender as an underlying issue in terms of perceptions of a masculinised boss–secretary relationship. Perhaps there is now greater separation between secretarial work and sexuality – although clearly gender is still a significant influence on secretarial work, given the predominance of women. The picture today does not differ from what Pringle (1989) found in her extensive study of office relations as well as what Webster (1986) found in her case studies. Men are still not in the picture and the occupation is still highly segregated, as Pringle argued “men are rarely called secretaries. They are described as a personal or research assistant, sometimes simply assistant, a computer operator, or a trainee of some kind. It was only with the dropping of the label ‘male secretaries’ that it became possible to locate men in these positions. We would frequently hear that there had been a man in this company or department who did secretarial work but now had moved on” (Pringle, 1989:171). Many of the secretaries interviewed mentioned the same thing as Pringle found in her data years ago.

## 7.5 Problems and pressures

The medical secretaries spoke about the problems and pressure they find in doing their work. Table 7.4 below shows the list of problems and pressures as presented by all respondents:

Problems/ Pressures	
	Attitudes of general public/patients
	Workload
	Covering other secretaries
	Lack of support from management
	Filing
	Time constraints
	Abusive patients
	Conflicting procedures – consultants and line management

Table 7.4: Problems/pressures for Medical Secretaries

Table 7.5 below lists the problems and pressures the legal secretaries stated they have at work:

Problems/ Pressures	
	Workload
	Working in a big office
	Urgent work that emerges at any time
	No salary increase
	Deadlines
	Working for a large number of people

Table 7.5: Problems/pressures for the Legal Secretaries

The workload and the demand from patients are considered to be the main sources of

problems they face at work. As R8 reports, patients are always so demanding that the medical secretaries have to be careful and measure what they say or answer to them:

“How demanding, they want everything done there and then, they are...their illness is the worst in the world and it’s...sometimes it’s very difficult to bite your tongue and say you know there are hundreds and hundreds of people much worse than you but I suppose if you’re ill at the time it is your illness you’re concentrating on yourself, not on anybody else.”R8

Political changes and possible cuts in the NHS are also considered a source of stress. The information they get that the NHS is not replacing people who are retiring and the possibility of moving people to another premises makes them anxious about the future of their work.

“I think the health service is juggling things about you know, cutting jobs here, I don’t think you can lose your job, we’ve been told our job is safe, but I could maybe be moved to the (location), or to (location), or...this is ridiculous that they’re telling you that it’s part of this agenda for change and you’ve got to do it ...they’re just more demanding you know, it’s not as enjoyable really, a lot of pressure put on you, even ...when I worked in the (location) you know you could go into work and you knew what you had, your volume of work and you just worked through that, you were allowed to get on with it. ...And it’s just a bit soul destroying because I think morale is really quite low. And the stories you know...throughout the health service, cutting staff ...” R15

The problems and pressures found in the work of medical secretaries refer mainly to the internal factors in relation to the organisation. The control exercised by management and the conflicting relationships and the work effort involved in their labour process as a result of those relationships are very high.

The legal secretaries spoke about the main problems and pressures of their work relating more generally that workload is a major factor. They also reported that deadlines are also a big pressure for them. Having to deal with last minute requests to a very short deadline.

Another issue raised in relation to problems related to their work, was stated by R18 about the office environment. R18 states that it is difficult to work in a big office as she feels, as has been raised by other respondents in the other sections, she is not noticed by other people.

“Really just, I suppose you just keep your head down and get on with your work and be polite to people, which I found it quite difficult going from a

small office to this great big office. I found that difficult. Because it's such a big place, people just walk past you and they don't smile and they don't say hello, it's just... And you think they're being rude, but it's just the way it is in a big office, I suppose." R18

Another older respondent reported that for her one of the major problems she has at work is to deal with the "youngsters". She talks about a tense relationship that sometimes may happen when young people come to work and try to teach her things she has already mastered.

"Me personally, I find that sometimes if the youngsters – and by the youngsters, I mean ones that have maybe just qualified and are new solicitors – and they come in and they think they know everything and they try to tell you... 'You weren't even born when I started work! You come along and who do you think you are, telling me to do this, that and the other. I've done more of these than you've had hot dinners'. And sometimes if you try to tell them and say 'Look, that is not the way it's done, or that's not the way it works'...I did have one who tried to say 'Who is the solicitor here?' and I said 'Yes, you're the solicitor, but only because you went to college and you sat the exams', I said 'Now I'll put a question to you – who's had the most experience?'. 'Mmm'. I said 'Yes, and in this job experience counts for an awful lot'... And they also, some of them, need teaching on how to be with other people." R20

Her statement also shows some conflict in terms of knowledge, as she does not consider the authority her "professional" line manager might have in relation to her position of a secretary. On the contrary, she disregards the line managers' status of a trained worker and suggests she sometimes might know more than him/her.

While the medical secretaries find management and the way they are managed one of the main sources of problems and pressures at work, the legal secretaries find that their problems and pressures are more related to their workload than relationships or management control on them.

## **7.6 Prospects of change of occupation**

At the end of the interviews, respondents were asked if they had a chance to choose their occupation again, would they choose secretarial work again. Answers varied and in some cases they conflicted with a previous perception presented by respondents, as in the case of a medical secretary who said she would not choose another job but she also thinks that she did not choose to be a secretary, she was

forced to be a secretary. R2 says that she enjoys being a secretary, especially where she works now, and demonstrates that it is a life job for her:

“I particularly like this line of work and I do find it quite rewarding, I’ve done a few jobs now in the NHS but I think ...within this sector not only is it satisfying, it’s very interesting, ...and I had no idea of the depth and level of mental illness within society in general...it’s very enlightening ...but no I enjoy it and I suppose because I’m getting near the end of my life, my working life, that ...it’s been a good place to be and no I wouldn’t change it. It’s suited how my life turned out.” R2

For R3 it is a satisfying job: “Well as I say I’ve done a lot of different types of work and personally I think this is probably the most satisfying work that I’ve been in.”

Other medical secretaries demonstrate a different view. They say they would certainly choose another occupation and would have studied harder in order to pursue another career. R6 says that she wishes she had a chance to know about other career options and that nobody gave her proper guidance in choosing what she was best at. R6 says “I feel like I’m just here by default” and not as a choice.

“That’s a difficult question. I think um...if I was younger now I would want to go to university because I didn’t I just went to college um...and then obviously I probably wouldn’t be a secretary. I would probably have gone for something a bit higher up than a secretary probably. Um...but as I didn’t go to university...”  
R4

When asked if they had a chance to go back and choose their occupation, again they would they choose the same work, the answers varied among all respondents.

A higher number of respondents said that they would change their occupation and they would not make the same choice of occupation again. One respondent said that she would have certainly chosen another occupation as she did not choose to be a secretary. This issue has been discussed in this chapter when respondents talked about their choice of occupation. “Because I never really wanted to be a secretary. It just kind of fell that way because I did typing at school and the first job I got was a typist and then secretary and just moved on with that...” R23



However, respondents said they would have chosen another occupation but some of them agreed that now it is too late for a change and this shows their prospects of staying in the occupation for a long time is out of choice, but due to circumstances.

“Because I’d want to try something different! And see if I, I don’t know... I’m quite happy but I wouldn’t say I was completely fulfilled. I think you always want to know more and try something different. I think it would be good if you had the opportunity to do that. But I think with the way things are, you just kind of, it’s a way to live, you know, so you do what you know, what you’re good at. And you’ve not got the time to change.”R22

A smaller number of the sample said that they would not change occupations and that they think they are in the right work for them. As R17 says:

“I think that this is exactly up my street. It’s having little things to do, little tasks, and it’s having control over those things. Sorry remind me again? Yes. Just thinking about... Yes, I think office life is definitely for me. Because you think that you know everything by now, after seven years, but in 2013 for instance, I will look back and think ‘I didn’t actually know that much’. So you keep growing. There will always be different things coming your way. And I quite like knowing lots of things. People will come to you to ask for things and then if you don’t know it then it’s something new that you will learn. And I quite like working with a computer, so I think this is exactly for me. I like the English language as well, I think it’s a lot easier than the Dutch language. Yes!” R17

In the case of some of the older secretaries interviewed, there was a sense of a willingness to do something different, but given the context in which they lived years ago when they left school, the option was not available.

“I don’t know. I’ve often thought I would have liked to have worked with animals. Because I love animals. But as you get older, you begin to realise that it’s not just working with nice fluffy, furry animals, you have to work with a lot of others, like snake and spiders and, you know, things like that, which can turn the stomach. And other times I think what would it have been like if I’d just gone into shop work. But I think in the end, choosing secretarial work was right for me.” R20

## 7.7 Chapter summary

Data have shown that from the career history of the secretaries interviewed that did not choose to be a secretary, most respondents entered the secretarial occupation due to the context in which they lived and the lack of options they had at that time.

Another common factor among the secretaries interviewed is that ten respondents reported that their mother (of eight respondents) or a close relative (of two respondents) were or are secretaries. This family factor was found to have influenced the secretary to choose her occupation.

The issue of being a secretary or a PA is still to be more developed. Sometimes it was not possible to determine whether the interviewee was a PA or a secretary, as in many cases they introduced themselves to the researcher with both titles. Most of the legal secretaries interviewed demonstrated that being a PA gives them more status than being a legal secretary. Considering that the idea of a PA is of a person who works for one line manager, that is not always the case with some of the interviewees who are PAs. Paradoxically, it seems that the PA issue implies a continuation of the idea of a personal service to private individuals, giving more emphasis to the relationship between the line manager and the secretary rather than the work content. In big organisations, such as legal firms, the goals and the needs of the whole organisation may conflict with this idea.

Another paradoxical issue in relation to the services of a PA is that, in essence, the work of a private secretary refers to the amount of control she is able to exert on her line manager's communication, such as mail, email, telephone calls, visitors and other information. However, in the context of today's organisations, when big legal companies are more and more using large open plan offices, that close relationship and the control factor is not possible. In her analysis, Vinnicombe (1980) argued that "the basis of the private secretary's influence lies in the nature of her gatekeeper position: sitting at the junction of all the line manager's communications – visitors, telephone calls, and mail, and having control over them. The physical location of the private's secretary's office *vis-à-vis* her boss serves to emphasise her gatekeeper

position (...)” (1980:74). With the majority of the secretaries interviewed, their office and desk location were among other people, secretaries and even the line manager.

The secretaries interviewed indicated that there are few prospects of change or promotion in their occupation. This is one of the reasons why the secretaries interviewed were not very optimistic about promotion prospects, as Truss (1993) also found in her studies. They indicated that the organisations should have a clear job description in relation to the position of PA and secretary, as well as the requirements for each position. At present these differences are not clear. As a result in some cases management chooses a PA by no pre-established criteria and this causes strain among the workers. R21 exemplifies the secretary’s view on the position of PA and the status attached to it when she says: “Yes, well I think being called a ‘Personal Assistant’ is much better than being called a ‘secretary’ and a ‘secretary’ is much better than being called a ‘typist’. Yes, there’s definitely that stigma, if you like”.

Data also showed that the perception of being a PA may also be linked to the status of the line manager as for some (eg, R21) PA’s can service a high profile person whereas a secretary could service a junior partner.

This perception about the position of PA presents a low sense of identification with the occupation as the secretaries try to avoid saying they are secretaries and are very proud of being called PA

What is being described in many of the secretaries’ accounts, either by the medical or the legal secretaries, is a relatively complex life story. Some of the secretaries share and interpret their experiences, from school to today’s work, in a way that it is possible to differentiate who *became* a secretary and who wanted *to be* a secretary. This condition in the cases studied may relate closely to the issue of identity. If occupational identity is something that takes time for the worker to feel part of a group (Strangleman, 2012), the stories narrated do not show any close attachment to their occupation. On the contrary, some of the secretaries highlighted that, although they became a secretary by chance, they do not feel part of a secretarial group and would change occupation if possible.

Both legal and medical secretaries reported similarities in their lived experience, from when they left school to their present job. Some of the events they have lived

which are common to many of the secretaries interviewed are also related to the fact that they are women. In most cases when the secretaries reported having to stop work to move, this was in relation to moving due to their husband's work relocation or because they had kids and needed to stop working. The fact of being a feminised occupation makes secretarial work still susceptible to such events through their working life. It is not easy to separate gender issues to the analysis and understanding of such gender segregated occupations.

Given the data presented, this study also argues that secretarial work for the majority of respondents was not a choice. This was an occupation they ended up pursuing due to contextual factors and family influences they had when leaving school.

The picture of secretarial work today given by all respondents represents an occupation with a varied range of tasks, a wide range of skills and a complexity of work related to feeling and life experiences. However, the final answers given by respondents demonstrate that they would change their occupation if they could, or they would have chosen another occupation if they had been given the chance to choose. Some secretaries demonstrated that they became more interested in their job as time went by, whereas for others, their work as secretaries was just a matter of lack of options and now they do not see a chance of another occupation. For most of the secretaries interviewed their career as a secretary is for life.

This question brought up an issue in this study. The question asked by the interviewer was whether the secretary would change her occupation if she had another opportunity to choose again. However, given that it was found that most of them did not choose to be a secretary, the word "choose" used at the beginning of this study was then substituted with "enter".

The medical secretaries, for all their labour struggles, either in relation to the public management they are involved in the problems and pressures associated with it, are the group of secretaries that reported most satisfaction with their occupation. With the legal secretaries the picture is different. The legal secretaries, on the other hand, appeared to be more inclined to change occupation if possible.

The themes emerging from this chapter build upon understanding occupations by looking at their work content (chapter five) and their work context (chapter six). All

three elements are important to understand a particular occupation. The next chapter will present the conclusions about this study, presenting the contribution of this research, by assessing the merits of the conceptual approach proposed as well as the outcomes of the empirical material and suggest directions for future research.

## CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

### 8.1 Introduction

This thesis so far has revisited the studies of occupations. It firstly presented the significance of occupations for society, organisations, and individuals, and the wealth of contemporary studies of specific occupations and occupational groupings, as explored in chapter 2, where it also presented LPA as a useful theoretical framework for the analysis of occupations, as LPA has made a significant and distinctive contribution to the understanding of occupations. Secondly, in chapter 3, it presented the body of research on secretarial work, which is the empirical focus of this study. A holistic approach was presented as a way of understanding occupations by analysing the content, the context in which work is undertaken and the workers' lived experience. Chapter 4 exposed the methodology adopted for the investigation. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 presented the findings of the analysis of medical and legal secretarial work. The work of medical and legal secretaries was presented and explored by an integrative analysis of their work content, context and lived experience as posed by the research questions in this thesis.

This chapter firstly revisits the research objectives of this study. Secondly, informed by the analysis provided in chapters 5, 6, and 7, it assesses the research contribution in relation to the empirical data as presented. Thirdly, it assesses the contribution and usefulness of the conceptual framework as well as the limitations of the study. Finally, this chapter ends by proposing areas for future research. A summary of the themes and sub-themes considered is provided in Box 8.1:

### **Revisiting the research objectives**

#### **Research contribution**

- **The empirical data**
  - Contemporary medical and secretarial work
  - Implications of findings
  - The impact of changes
  - Standard classifications
  - Identity
- **The conceptual framework**
  - A conceptual framework for analysing occupations
  - Labour Process Analysis as a theoretical engine
  - The holistic approach
  - Occupations as “real social things”
  - Usefulness of framework
  - Challenge

#### **Study limitations**

#### **Future research**

Box 8.1: Conclusion– summary of themes and sub-themes

## **8.2 Revisiting the research objectives**

The objectives of this thesis were presented in chapter 1 and followed from the conceptual focus of this work – the study of occupations and the need to further understand them.

The first objective of this thesis was to propose a new approach to analysing occupations in terms of three dimensions: the content, the context in which the tasks are undertaken, and the meaning ascribed to the occupation by the individual, the lived experience. This thesis provided a conceptual framework for analysing occupations that gives importance to a range of factors surrounding the work of people and how people understand their occupations in relation to their lived experience. The applied holistic approach established that, for people, the differences in the way they experience and identify with their occupation may mean the way they understand their occupation and the way they think other people understand them. Considering the three elements as studied – the content, the context and the

lived experience of the worker – it is possible to have a clearer picture of an occupation and the members involved in it. Studying occupations through the lenses of Labour Process Analysis was valuable as LPA provides a rich mechanism of looking at people's work which, allied with the subjectivity of people's life, can provide a good way of understanding the nature of people's work as well as specific factors of each member of a social group.

The second objective was to apply the approach developed, its relevance and usefulness in relation to the analysis of the contemporary experience of the secretarial occupation. Having proposed a better way of understanding occupations, this study provided an analysis of secretarial work based on the holistic approach proposed and studied the content, the context and the lived experience of medical and legal secretaries in Scotland. The approach taken was relevant to the study of secretaries as many of the existing studies so far have presented a more topical analysis of secretarial work, analysing more frequently issues on gender, technology or other specific aspects of secretarial work as argued in chapter 3. This approach was useful, because it provided a wider picture of the work of secretaries considering not only details and experiences about what they do, but also details and experiences about the context in which they work as well as their lived experience in relation to their occupation. Each element was interconnected and they sometimes overlapped proving the importance of looking at each of them without disconnecting them from each other.

The third objective was to contribute to the study of occupations and to the study of secretarial work with new empirical data. The study explored and assessed the work of legal and medical secretaries with the holistic approach and provided a new insight into how to better understand an occupation. The findings provided a contemporary picture of secretarial work, for both medical and legal secretaries. In both cases it was possible to provide a rich description of the content of the work of the secretaries, their tasks, skills, knowledge base and other content-related issues. The second element of the framework proposed, the context, was also analysed in relation to where the work content is exercised, and finally, the lived experiences of the secretaries were explored in order to understand the occupation from the view of the occupation holder.



The next section will present how this thesis reached its objectives and presents the contribution of the thesis in relation to the empirical data and the conceptual framework.

### **8.3 Research contribution**

This thesis makes a unique conceptual contribution to knowledge and to the study of occupations. It presents qualitative insights into the work of one occupation by analysing it through different dimensions and showing how those dimensions are connected and when analysed together how they aid a better understanding of occupations or one specific occupation. The holistic approach presented here, aided by LPA, combines objective and subjective accounts of occupational work.

In addition, this thesis makes a significant empirical contribution by presenting insights into the work of the secretarial occupation. Where previous studies on secretarial work focused on separate aspects of their work, this study focuses on what they actually do by giving voice to them, the secretaries themselves. This study is therefore unique in considering secretarial work as an occupation far from what is formally described. It presents the richness involved in secretarial work as well as its contested nature.

The contributions of this ethnographic informed work are important and unique. It has provided deep insights into the world of occupations, in this case of secretarial work. Moreover, it has anchored frameworks and theories that have had impact on both researchers of the sociology of work and occupations, secretarial work and on secretaries alike. The experiences of ethnographic interview are particularly important in legitimating what is said in relation to one's occupation and one's identification to the occupational role. Ethnography can also be invaluable in sharpening understandings, shaping research questions, and developing current theories and frameworks.

It is hoped that this study may contribute to a better understanding by employers and by the workers themselves of the importance of allowing research to be undertaken in organisations. Such research can help organisations to understand workers and to

better manage them, once they are able, from the results of such study, to understand the worker and the way the worker relates to their occupation and to the work they do. Workers themselves, especially secretaries, should be able to understand that allowing and contributing to research about their field of work will not only enhance their work conditions and people's understandings of their work, but could also put an end to the perceived lack of value usually expressed by some organisations.

This section is organised as follows. Part 8.3.1 assesses the empirical contribution. It concentrates on a discussion of the key findings in relation to the secretaries' work considering the main contrasts between medical and the legal secretaries. In particular, this section explores aspects of LPA related to contemporary secretarial work. It is here that the importance in analysing occupations considering the three connected elements – the content, the context and the lived experience - as proposed becomes apparent.

Part 8.3.2 seeks to assess the conceptual framework and its significance for understanding occupations.

### **8.3.1 The empirical data**

The study's main aim was to contribute to the study of occupational work through a holistic analysis of an occupation and to provide empirical insight into the occupational structure and experience of secretarial work through the analysis of the work of medical and legal secretaries. It is important at this point to revisit the research questions raised as presented in chapter 4:

- 1 What is the content of secretarial work? What do they actually do?
- 2 What are the contextual factors surrounding their work?
- 3 What is the experience lived by the workers?

These questions were answered in detail in relation to the empirical findings as presented in chapters 5, 6 and 7 while also addressing the three elements of the conceptual framework proposed.

Previous research in secretarial work, as shown in chapter 3, have analysed different aspects of secretarial work. Studies are mainly focused on either gender issues or the skill base for secretarial work. However, research in this field shows a lack of attention to what secretaries actually do now. A strength of this research lies in the ability to contrast and to compare medical and secretarial work from the perspective of the workers who, in both cases, firstly, have experienced changes in relation to their work, and secondly, support knowledge workers. The implications of the findings will be discussed as follows.

#### ***Contemporary medical and legal secretarial work***

- Tasks and skills

The data demonstrate that medical secretaries perform some of the traditional secretaries' task and much more than what is contained in their job description and more than what they are actually able to describe. As for the legal secretaries, the majority of the content of their work involves typing, particularly true of the legal secretaries who do not have the title of PA. The legal secretaries indicated that, although they develop other tasks depending on the department they work for, most

of their time and priority is given to typing and this activity accounts for a great number of hours in their working day, according to their description of their daily routine.

The medical secretaries perform a wide range of tasks that require them to use a wide range of skills as well. Their skills and range of tasks are not usually understood and rewarded by those near them and they feel they have no recognition for their work.

The findings on medical and legal secretaries contradict Thurloway's (2004) research. This is because her research presents a skill rank order of 22 of the most important skills to possess considered by the sample in her study. The top two ranked skills were organisation and communication, which in this study were not considered as the main ones required for the job. Both organisation and communication skills are not secretarial-specific skills and are skills required for other types of occupations as well.

- Role of technology

The role of technology was firstly assessed in relation to the content of secretarial work to the extent that it affects their tasks and how management control their work. Findings showed that the medical secretaries utilise organisational software (OASIS) for most of their tasks, however, they have no input in relation to the system itself and how it works. They merely manage the data in the system and management controls their work by interfering and dictating what they do.

The role of technology presents a somewhat different scenario with the legal secretaries. Although they spend a lot of time typing letters and although they utilise a digitalised system to do this work, it looks like the secretaries are not applying their abilities to the full. This is particularly true due to time constraints and the pressure on having the letters done for their line manager. This shows that they might be being under-utilised by management as they spend a lot of time typing, which could be something done by typists and no higher skills are required for such a job. On the other hand, a number of secretaries referred to the typing element of their job as a pleasurable activity.

Secondly, the role of technology was assessed in relation to the secretaries' context and lived experience. In those areas, again overlapping with the content area,

technology is about changing roles. Technology brought destabilisation to the secretarial identity as both groups of secretaries reported that in some cases, their line manager now performs work and does things on the computer that was in the past given to secretaries only. This picture shows how secretaries today are not “extensions” (Pringle, 1989) of their bosses any more.

- Training

Over the years working as legal secretaries, some of the respondents reported that they gather a good amount of experience and their organisation does not encourage them to develop other work activities or even go out for further occupational specific training. The provision of training seems to be neglected in the organisations, as data shows.

In general, most legal secretaries said they are kept busy in their jobs and when they are free, they tend to offer help to other secretaries who need it. Both medical and legal secretaries showed to have a good sense of teamwork as they tend to help one another in order to control the workload.

- Changes

The findings showed that secretaries are part of an occupational group that easily adapts to change. In the context of medical secretaries, they are used to working with the consequences of frequent changes in the NHS and they have to adapt to the changes. This adaptability was found to be very apparent in the context of public service.

With the legal secretaries, it was possible to assess how changes play an important part in their work and how context-related issues are closely related to the content of their work. Within the findings, it was found that organisational and economic changes have affected their work in different ways: firstly, changes in the economic area have affected the workload and the intensity of the work of some of the legal secretaries. This was happening because at the time the research was carried out the legal firms in the UK were suffering from the credit crisis that started in 2008, which

led many organisations in the UK to adopt contingency measures. According to the secretaries, they noticed how the crisis was being felt in the company as sometimes they have no job to do and they could perceive a decrease in the number of clients, leaving them not fully occupied all the time.

Secondly, changes in the organisational area also affected their work. In some of the legal firms in this study, there had been merged in the last few years and a lot of employees, especially secretaries, had been made redundant. This caused some apprehensiveness from secretaries as they were feeling pressured by possible redundancies in their organisations.

Some of the legal secretaries interviewed were over-qualified for the job they were doing, which in most of the cases required secretaries to spend a lot of their working time on typing with no need to employ high level skills.

- Invisibility

Both legal and medical secretaries had a sense of invisibility in relation to their work recognition. This feeling accounted for their perception that their work was not recognised nor understood by people. It is important to note that the secretaries reported this sense of invisibility by exemplifying skills and tasks they perform which are not recognised. Those are tacit skills and tasks considered intrinsic to female workers and they are the ones usually expected but not described or defined, as seen in their job description.

### ***Implications of findings***

The implications of the findings can be explored in relation to secretarial work and the study of occupations in general. The secretaries' descriptions and perceptions of their occupation presented in chapters 5, 6 and 7 have been gathered from the perspective of the individual occupation holder and are framed very differently from discussions within the literature. Findings illustrate more nuanced understandings of the work undertaken by the secretaries based upon personal experiences and

reflections. Findings also offer new insights and understandings, indicating potential areas for further research and consideration.

This research presents a picture of contemporary work of secretaries in two different sectors. This contribution differs from previous studies that focused on technical and/or contextual aspects of their work, without considering the subjectivities of the occupational worker's life.

Whilst the analysis of the empirical findings revealed that the work of secretaries today still maintains some traditional secretarial tasks, together with longstanding gender issues and similarities in their career history, it also showed how the work of secretaries is undermined and disregarded by people. Organisations, superiors and work colleagues are in most cases unaware of what is involved in the work of a secretary. The data showed that much secretarial work today remains invisible and this invisibility, perceived by the secretaries in relation to the amount of work and extra work they do, is also apparent with the lack of promotional opportunities as well as the apparent continuity of a gendered occupation. Many aspects of the work content and context of secretarial work refers to the remaining notion of a gender segregated occupation and their lived experience, from when they left school and had to choose an occupation to start a career to the experiences they live now at work. This is also one example of how content analysed together with the context may yield more understanding of an occupation.

The rich data gathered presented a picture of two groups of secretaries with similarities and differences. The secretaries interviewed presented similarities in work content, however, not as a general rule. While both groups have very similar histories of how they entered the occupation, some of them presented differences in relation to how they perceive the occupation and the work they do. The medical secretaries presented a nurturing sense, which gives their identification with the occupation a social dimension. This issue would not have been captured in a study that did not listen to the occupation holder. It is also one aspect of their lived experience that may affect the way they perform at work and their levels of satisfaction.

### ***The impact of changes***

Data also show how much both groups of secretaries experienced (and still experience) organisational and other types of change. Change, as discussed in previous chapters as well as in the previous section in this chapter, is one subject that has implications for their work.

Firstly, the findings suggest that the work of secretaries is shaped by changes in different areas, such political, organisation, economic, social and technical.

Secondly, the way they face changes is instrumental to their experience in the occupation. That is, the way secretaries react to changes in some areas will also shape their experience. For example, the medical secretaries are facing the forthcoming digitalisation of their dictation and typing system. Reactions to this change show resistance from some of the medical secretaries while others see the changes in a more challenging way. These changes already affect their work as their present experience at work has a level of apprehensiveness together with resistance due to the threat of deskilling.

Thirdly, while much of the existing literature on secretarial work focuses on changes in relation to technology and its effects on the work of secretaries, from its findings this study argues that the role of technology imposes even more changes over the nature of secretarial work. The type of IT the secretaries have available may provide them with powerful ways of managing the information they have, not only with the input of information on the different systems they work with, but also widening the possibilities of managing and analysing the data they have with the ever increasing workload that they report. The secretaries themselves do not seem to realise this aspect of the role of technology in their work and most of the changes they report from the technological aspect are more of a negative or pessimistic perception, although being at the centre of the information flow they may not be aware of the extension of their skills in dealing with information in the organisation. Contrary to their sense of invisibility, as they report, this may be about an invisible self-recognition, that is, they cannot recognise or evaluate the extent of their own work.



Finally, the changes secretaries face brought changes to the nature of their work to the extent that they now perform an extensive list of tasks and skills.

### ***Standard classifications***

The empirical findings raise some questions in relation to the value of the SOC in aiding an understanding of an occupation or simply a description of some kind of work. The findings draw attention to the limitation of the SOC in relation to the three elements explored in this study. The findings suggest that formal classification systems do not present a real picture of the work secretaries do and disregard aspects of work that shape their occupation. Firstly, it is seen in the SOC that under the category of secretary, many types of secretaries are involved with many different types of work content, context and have different lived experiences. This is not the case for secretarial work only. Within other occupations, any variation found in their title in the description in the SOC still fail in presenting objective and subjective aspects of their work that shape their occupation. Secondly, the SOC presents a lack of information on skills changes (Anderson, 2009) and content, as well as information on skills they perform that are not even named and recognised. As data on legal and medical secretaries show, their lived experience revealed different pictures of the contemporary work they do, at times being recognised by their superiors, at times being neglected by them. The findings show that if it is considered that secretarial work is an occupation that involves certain skills deployed in their various types of jobs and that their work is crucial for the organisation, they are an occupational group that has to be considered and respected more than just a category under a set and concise list of tasks. In assessing secretaries' place in a categorisation system, it is fair to say that the conceptual framework proposed and applied contributed to a further understanding of this occupation. Therefore, this study argues that the SOC and other classifications may fail to capture the richness of occupations. Consequently, what is known about occupations is limited, outdated and lacks a comprehensive picture of the occupations.

## ***Identity***

On the relationship between the occupation and identity, the holistic approach demonstrated that secretarial work is a very distinct and complex occupational group. That is because this relationship comes from the experience of work as well as the occupational culture (Leidner, 2006), and in the case of the secretaries there is a formal, although ever changing, set of tasks and knowledge although there seems to be a lack of collective identification. The secretaries interviewed demonstrated their struggle with work interaction and this picture affects their personal and occupational identity.

On the other hand, findings about this occupation reveal a somewhat peculiar relationship between the secretary and the line manager. This relationship is complex, as it presents different aspects that overlap the three dimensions as analysed. Firstly, although today there is a change of roles due to the effects of technology and the secretaries see their line managers performing some of the jobs they usually regard as secretaries' jobs, like typing a letter for example, the secretaries and the line managers still maintain an interdependency between them as the line management is still dependent on secretarial work and knowledge. Secondly, this interdependency may account for the fact that the secretaries studied work for knowledge workers, who are highly impacted by changes (McKinlay, 2005) and who keep a degree of reciprocal interdependency of work with tasks among other people in the organisation (Benson & Brown, 2007).

### **8.3.2 The conceptual framework**

After considering major issues and literature in relation to the study of occupations, chapter 2 concluded by proposing a holistic approach to studying occupations, an approach that, while it affirms the centrality of job content to understanding occupations, acknowledges that one can only make sense of job content by analysing it in its organisational and individual context, thus combining objective and subjective factors as a means of understanding occupations.

### ***A conceptual framework for analysing occupations***

Several sources were used to derive the elements that comprise the proposed conceptual framework for analysing occupations. The conceptual framework was, firstly, based on the recognition of the significance of occupations to society (Krause, 1971), individuals and organisations and as representing “... a meaningful focus in the lives of many people” (Lee et al., 2000:799). Secondly, it was also recognised in this study that there is a voluminous and long-standing academic literature on occupations that span economics, psychology, sociology and organisation studies and there is also a wealth of contemporary studies of specific occupations and occupational groupings such as professional workers (for example, Watson, 2002; Muzio, 2010) care workers (for example, England, 2005; Findlay et al., 2009); technical workers (for example, Barley and Kunda, 2001; Barley, 2005) and retail workers (for example, Grugulis and Bozkurt, 2011). While generating much insight, many of these studies are driven by an interest in specific occupations rather than in occupational work *per se*.

### ***Labour Process Analysis as a theoretical engine***

LPA was a useful theoretical engine to look at occupations holistically, as the elements of this theory were those that mapped the analysis of the occupation and provided insights into the interconnection of the elements of the conceptual framework. LPA also facilitated an understanding of how those elements are related and how, if put together, they aid an understanding of the labour process of an occupation, thus providing and allowing the occupation to be understood according to its organisational context and workers’ struggles.

Using LPA as a theoretical engine to look at occupations holistically allowed a significant and distinctive contribution to our understanding of occupations to be made here. LPA gave grounds for a particular look into work in relation to the nature and content of occupational work itself, the skills and knowledge required to engage in a particular occupation, the degree of control and autonomy afforded to – or won by – occupational workers, and the forces influencing occupational work and

workers. LPA was a useful framework to map this study as it responds to “new empirical conditions and for incremental conceptual innovation” (Thompson, 2009:106). The empirical data presented in this study, derived from the proposed conceptual framework, contributed to LPA in understanding an occupation holistically, especially with regard to the individual experiences of work as reported by respondents.

### ***The holistic approach***

The holistic view of an occupation (as argued in chapter 2 holistic here means a consideration of an occupation as more than a collection of tasks and not separable from the individual who occupies it) and the context in which the role is undertaken allowed an exploration of an occupation without prior selection and limitations to the dimensions to be analysed.

The holistic approach also allowed the study, in an LPA informed perspective, to gain a deeper insight into the work of secretaries, prioritizing the voice of the occupation holder. The results of the holistic approach allowed an understanding of an occupation not only focused on its content, but the content of work as it is embedded in the organisational context in the experience lived by the worker.

### ***Occupations as “real social things”***

The conceptual framework was an approach that considered occupations more than just a set of categories and was built on Abbott’s framework of occupations as “real social things”, however, it extended Abbott’s framework to the analysis of non-professional occupations. This research proposes a framework that extends Abbott’s “full social entities” concept; it looked at and beyond the usual themes of analysis and categorizations of occupations and added to the understanding of the secretarial occupation as well as to the understanding of occupations. The findings showed that the three dimensions, the content, the context and the lived experience are interconnected and together they can present a way forward to understand an occupation and its

complexities and this understanding can also be extended to occupations without the title of 'professional'. It can be used and applied to any occupation when a deeper and richer understanding of the occupations is to be gained.

### ***Usefulness of the framework***

The use of the conceptual approach proposed in this study was considered appropriate for this study, firstly, because it has established important elements for analysis that have produced a good picture of the work of the occupation under analysis; secondly, applied with the ethnographic informed methods, that is, the preliminary observation and the interviews combined with the job descriptions, it yielded rich data which have contributed to the integrative analysis of the holistic approach; thirdly, it contributed with insights into the work of secretaries.

### ***Challenges***

Challenges came in the application of the conceptual framework to analyse secretaries, firstly, as they comprise a non-unified group of workers. It was perceived that applying the framework to study a group of workers which are not unified, not closely connected and with a low degree of occupational interaction may pose some challenges to a researcher. Secondly, as the holistic approach had various elements for analysis, some secretaries demonstrated concern not to reveal any secrets and in many cases, especially in the case of the legal secretaries, they clearly want to protect themselves and their line manager or show him/her in the best possible light. They were sometimes reluctant to take the researcher into their confidence and were always concerned to keep their anonymity. In some cases these issues did not enable the secretaries to speak about what they do with more freedom and exploring the different facets of their work and their work experience. As with any research, some of the secretaries could have viewed the research as a threat. Authenticity proved to be an important issue to consider in analysing this group, because for secretaries secrecy is a major part of their work as well as loyalty they have for their line

managers and the organisation. However, this was not a general rule. Some of the secretaries were very confident in participating in the interview. It was possible to note that these were secretaries who had a high degree of autonomy and control over the work they do, especially in the public arena, and they demonstrated enough recognition and confidence to be able to speak up for themselves and talk about their work. Those secretaries were the ones with longer career tenure and proved to have negotiated and acquired their space at work. In these cases, the attitude to the researcher was different, not as a threat but as someone who could bring help to their occupation. These secretaries had a different approach, they had something to contribute and something to say that could help to change the picture of their work and consequently of their occupation.

#### **8.4 Study limitations**

The aim of this study was to present a holistic view of occupational work. It analysed the actual work of secretaries, covering their work content, context and lived experience. In conducting such analysis, this study embraced the challenging process of conducting an ethnographic informed study to comply with the aims and objectives raised. Although participant observation was sought to be part of the methods used, the researcher did not have access to observe the participants as desired. It is believed that this study would have benefited from a period of observation in order to add more information on the participants' work as they do it.

In the interviews, respondents presented a degree of difficulty in describing their daily routine. These issues should be overcome in future research, as suggested by Gobo (2008), by phenomenological interviewing techniques, such as using questions like "What time did you get up in the morning?, What was the first thing you did? Has anything unexpected happened today? Have you eaten anything?" (2008:192) applied to the context of the research being undertaken. This issue can also be better explored in future research by using observation as an ancillary method to aid the ethnographer to better understand the data or to gain further understanding. This is simply because, as verified in this research, in "observing a worker, it is easier for a researcher to capture what and how a worker does the work, as most work practices

are so contextualised that people are not able to articulate how they do what they do, if they are not in the real state of doing what they do” (Barley & Kunda, 2001:205).

Comparing to other work, such as Barley and Kunda’s (1996, 2001), this study presents limitations in relation to the time spent in conducting the research. Due to the timeframe of this study, it was not possible to conduct an ethnographic study in the same scale as the one done by Barley (1996) and capture finer detail about the work of secretaries. In addition, this study was conducted by a lone researcher within the constraints of a doctoral programme. It would have benefitted from the participation of a larger research team, such as that present in Barley’s (1996) study. However, when compared with other studies on secretarial work exposed in chapter 3, this research presents an approach that differs in various aspects. Firstly, it explores and extends the previous studies of issues related to secretarial work, such as skills (Thurloway, 2004) and technology. Secondly, it looks at secretarial work with attention to secretaries’ subjective experience of work as a way of better understanding the occupation and how the occupation holder makes sense of it. Thirdly, it portrays the work of contemporary secretaries, its content, context and the secretaries’ lived experience, when most recent literature focuses on gender and technology issues.

## **8.5 Future research**

Studies on occupations have contributed to the understanding of the work of many people in many different places. However, with the same pace that the society changes, occupations change. More importantly, people change and so does their experience at work. There is a need for more exploration with a holistic approach of other occupations. Expanding the knowledge of how work is changing due to political, economic and social factors is valuable in its own right, but together with the subjectivities of people’s life experiences it will be invaluable to understand the experience of work in general.

This thesis highlighted the work of secretaries in two sectors. Whilst, for example, the work and experience of the legal and medical secretaries were examined in

relation to their experience, an examination of secretarial work in other sectors will add to the understanding of this occupation. This study opens doors to the analysis of secretarial work in places where the context of work may differ from the legal and medical secretaries, especially considering that the secretaries interviewed work for knowledge workers. Other secretaries in other places may experience their work differently depending on their work context or as a result of the changes they experience.

It would also be useful to study occupations and to explore secretarial work, following the same methodological choices of this study, in different countries. A cross-national comparative study of occupations may reveal different applications on the conceptual framework proposed here.

Finally, the empirical data collected in this study was gathered during two atypical moments: firstly the economic downturn, which proved to have affected some legal secretaries interviewed in relation to their work and future aspirations and fears; secondly, changes in the NHS in relation to systems of work, as the medical secretaries will soon experience a digital dictation system that might affect they work in different ways. Data indicated a degree of anxiety among the medical secretaries and the fear of being deskilled. A follow-up study accounting for these issues would therefore be useful to assess the work of secretaries in this area and would provide further contemporary insights into Wood's (1983) thesis on the deskilling of the content or work as opposed to the deskilling of a particular individual.



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# APENDICES

## Appendix A – Interview Schedule



### Interview Schedule

- Greetings
- Information Statement
- Consent Form

#### Section 1 – Education/Career History

- **Could you tell me how you got from school to here?**

This chronological approach of the secretarial work should cover:

- Training/Education
- Career paths
- Length of time working as “Job Title” (JT)
- Length of time working for the company
- Entry paths
- Reason for choice of career

#### Section 2 – Current job

- **What is your job title (JT)?**
- **What are your tasks as a JT?**
- **What is your job description?**  
*\* ask for access to the company job description*
- **What things do you have to know to be able to do your job?**
- **What kind of skills are required for this job – that is, what do you have to be able to do?**
- **What sorts of personal characteristics are needed to do your job?**
- **Can you describe a normal day in your job and give some indication as to the time you spend on each activity?**

- **Does your job involve more than is contained in your formal job description?**

### **Section 3 - Changes**

- **How do you think your work has changed over the last few years?**

- Technological changes

**How do you feel when facing those changes?** - More or less: skills, responsibility, status, work effort, etc

What do they mean for your job?

What do they mean to you?

- **How do you learn new things?**

- formal training

- informal training

- occupation specific

- other?

- Does the company provide training?

### **Section 4 – Social Organisation of Work**

- **In doing your job, what other people do you interact with (ie other occupations)?**

- Which of these groups do you most/least interact with?

- **How is your work organised?**

- Do you have a team? Do you work from home? Is your work flexible?

- How does it affect you? Does your work require you to travel?

- **Does your job require you to work with other secretaries/JT?**

- is yes, what kind of interaction do you have to each other? (excluding social interaction)

- if no, why?



### **Do you supervise other people?**

- **Do you feel you have autonomy (control) over the work you do?**
  - Would you be allowed to change the way things are done in the office?
  - Do you have flexibility? In which ways?
- **Who do you report to?**
  - How would you characterise your working relationship with this person?

### **Section 5 – Collective Organisation**

- **As a (JT) are you a member of a union or staff association or any other group (collective grouping)?**
- **There are different titles for the work you do. How is the occupation divided?**
  - is it divided by the type of tasks, or skills or qualification?
  - experience?
  - qualification required in a job advert? How do feel about it?
- **How do you think people understand the kind of work you do?**
  - in the organisation/society/status
- **How do you feel about your work recognition?**
  - In the company/boss?
  - By the society?
- **Are most of the people who do your job women? Why? Does this have any impact on the status of your work?**

*There are some stereotypes related to the work you do:*

- **How do you react to them? Have you had any experience in relation to that?**
- **How does that perception affect you?**
- **Do you feel part of a secretarial group?**

## **Section 6 – Other General Questions**

- **Has secretarial work become more complex/challenging?**
  - what kind of skills?
- **Do you think that your skills requirements change depending on:**
  - the specifics of the company?
  - the role and position of your immediate superior?
  - anything else?
- **Is the work you do based on experience and judgment or on scientific knowledge/academic training?**
- **What are the jobs that are not in your level?**
- **What other occupations do you think your occupation is comparable with, in terms of the knowledge and skills it requires?**
- **Is your kind of work becoming more or less important in your current organisation?**
  - considering the changes we talked about
  - are you still required to be multi-function (tasks/skills)? (won't this have been outlined earlier?)
- **Do you think you are a professional? What does this term mean for you?**
- **What are the main problems/pressures you find in exercising your work?**
- **What are the main rewards or satisfactions of your work?**
- **Looking back over your working career, if you had the chance to choose again, would you make the same choice of occupation? Why/why not?**

## Section 7 – Demographics

Date: File:

Name:

Age:

Marital status:

Dependent children – now or previously:

Salary range:

Less than 10,000

10,000 – 14,900

15,000 – 19,900

20,000 – 24,900

25,000 – 29,900

30,000 – 34,900

35,000 – 39,900

Over 40,000

Company:

Industry sector:

Duration:

Comments:

## Appendix B – Information Statement



### *Information Statement*

My name is Debora Zuin and I am a post-graduate researcher at the University of Edinburgh. I am inviting you to take part in a research study conducted as part of my training requirements to qualify for a PhD degree.

Before you decide whether or not to consent to taking part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take your time to read the following information carefully. Please let me know anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

#### ***What is the title of this project?***

*Revisiting the study of occupations: A holistic view of the present state of secretarial work*

#### ***What is the research study about?***

It is about people who work as secretaries, PA and administrative assistants. I want to find out more about the views and experiences of people like you. I particularly want to get a better understanding of the kind of work you do, the context in which you work and your personal experience of work. There are many studies of different occupations and jobs, but very few recent studies of the kind of work that you do, or the types of changes that you have experienced in your work in recent years. I believe this study will be useful in tracking contemporary occupations and the factors that influence them.

#### ***Who is supervising this study?***

I am supervised by Dr. Patricia Findlay who works for the University of Strathclyde and Dr. Wendy Loretto from the University of Edinburgh Business School.

#### ***What does participation in this study involve?***

Your participation will consist of an interview with you. The interview will cover different aspects of your background, education, career history, current job and future plans. The interview will be recorded with your permission and it may last for about two hours. The recording will be destroyed once the study is finished.

#### ***Do I have to take part?***

You do not have to participate in this study. Participation is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

#### ***What will happen to all of the information?***

All of the information collected from you for the research study will be kept ***strictly confidential***.

***What if I don't want to take part in this study?***

The research is voluntary and it is entirely up to you whether or not to take part. If you decide to, but change your mind after reading this, you are also free to do so. You are under ***no obligation*** to take part; participation in this study is ***completely voluntary***. You ***do not*** have to give a reason for not wanting to take part in this study.

***I would like to reassure you that any information collected about you will be strictly confidential, and no one will be able to identify you or your company from the data collected.***

**Thank you for your time and consideration.**

Debora Zuin  
The University of Edinburgh  
BusinessSchool  
**dzuin@ufv.br**

## Appendix C – Consent Form



### *Consent Form*

**Study Title:** *Revisiting the study of occupations: A holistic view of the present state of secretarial work*

**Researcher:** Mrs Debora Zuin

**PhD supervisor:** Dr. Patricia Findlay

**Please read the statements below and circle your responses:**

I understand the general aims of the study	YES	NO
I understand what is involved in taking part in the study	YES	NO
I understand that it is my decision to take part in the study	YES	NO
I understand that if I take part, I can stop at any time	YES	NO
I understand that if I do not want to take part, I do not have to give a reason	YES	NO
I understand that my name, address or the company's name will not be used in any reports of the study	YES	NO
I understand the interview will be recorded	YES	NO
I confirm that I have read the Information Statement	YES	NO

I agree to take part in the study by signing below:

Full name of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone number: \_\_\_\_\_

email: \_\_\_\_\_

***For further information, please contact:***

*Mrs Debora Zuin*

*PhD Researcher*

*Tel: 07964 922 407 – [zuindata@gmail.com](mailto:zuindata@gmail.com)*

## Appendix D – Example of Coding



### NVivo coding

#### Tree nodes: *Education/Career History*

- Career paths
- Entry paths
- Reason for choice of career
- Job experience before leaving school
- Training (**Case**)
- Further training
- Length of time working for the company (**Case**)
- Family career history/influence

#### Tree nodes: **Current job**

- Job title (**Case**)
- Tasks as a JT
- Job description
- What things do you have to know to be able to do your job?
- Team details/description
- Knowledge required
- Skills required
- Personal characteristics required/soft skills
- Daily routine
- Office interactions
- Tasks
- Contextual factors
- Salary (**Case**)

#### Tree nodes: **Changes**

- Changes in the occupation
- Reactions to changes
- Provision of training (in-company)
- Secretarial specific training

#### Tree nodes: **Social Organisation of Work**

- Interactions (personal basis)
- Online interactions
- Home/remote work

- Travelling for work
- Team details
- Interactions with other secretaries
- Supervision
- Work autonomy or control
- Report to
- Relationship with boss (and/or line manager)
- Boss capacity

### **Tree nodes: Collective Organisation**

- Union membership
- Secretarial group/association
- Comparisons PA x SEC
- People's understanding of sec work
- Work recognition
- Gender segregation
- Effects/reactions to stereotypical imagine
- Appraisal
- Feeling part of a secretarial group

### **Tree nodes: Other General Questions**

- Implications of occupational changes
- Basis for sec work
- What are the jobs that are not in your level?
- Comparable occupations
- Importance of job at current organisation
- Professional
- Problems/pressures
- Rewards
- Satisfactions
- Would change occupation?
- Future plans
- Further comments



## Appendix E – Analytic Framework

### *Analytic Framework*

- Informed by literature review, participant observations with secretarial group, pilot study, interviews and researcher’s assumptions.
- Headings and sub-headings cross other groups.

### **Coding framework**

**Coding phase 1** – Codes/themes derived from interview schedule, researcher assumptions, interviews still being carried out during coding and initial analysis when new issues and potential themes emerged.

**Coding phase 2** –Codes for analysis

<b>Group</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Headings Coding phase 1</b>	<b>Headings Coding phase 2 (final)</b>
<b>Content</b>	Tasks	Task as a “Job Title” (JT) Added task - supervision of others - Does more than what is contained in JD?	- Tasks as a JT - Does more than what is contained in JD?
	Skills	- Skills required for the job of “JT” - Job description (JD) - soft skills	- Skills required for JT - Soft skills
	Knowledge Base	- knowledge required	- knowledge required
	Education	- Educational background - family career history	- Educational background - family career history
	Training	- provision of training - secretarial specific training - further training	- provision of training - secretarial specific training

<b>Context</b>	Career history	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Career paths</li> <li>- Present JT</li> <li>- job description</li> <li>- Length of time working as JT</li> <li>- Length of time working for the company</li> <li>- Entry paths</li> <li>- Reason for choice of career</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Career paths</li> <li>- Present JT</li> <li>- Reason for choice of career</li> </ul> <p><b>*Codes here cross the “Content” categories</b></p>
	Social organisation of work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- people involved in office interactions</li> <li>- teams details</li> <li>- flexibility</li> <li>- supervision</li> <li>- work autonomy/control</li> <li>- report to superiors</li> <li>- appraisal</li> <li>- boss capacity</li> <li>- organisation specifics</li> <li>- contextual factors</li> <li>- daily routine</li> <li>- provision of training</li> <li>- relationship with boss</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- office interactions</li> <li>- teams details</li> <li>- flexibility</li> <li>- work autonomy/control</li> <li>- organisation specifics</li> <li>- contextual factors</li> <li>- daily routine</li> <li>- provision of training</li> <li>- relationship with boss</li> </ul>
	Changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- changes in work as “JT”</li> <li>- reaction/feelings</li> <li>- changes in the occupation</li> <li>- implication of changes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- changes in work as “JT”</li> <li>- reaction/feelings</li> <li>- changes in the occupation</li> <li>- implication of changes</li> </ul>
	Collective organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- union/staff membership</li> <li>- perceptions of how people understand their work</li> <li>- work recognition</li> <li>- gender issues</li> <li>- comparison between PA and Sec</li> <li>- online interactions</li> <li>- secretarial group membership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- perceptions of how people understand their work</li> <li>- work recognition</li> <li>- comparison between PA and Sec</li> </ul>
	Conditions of work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spatial and social</li> <li>- flexibility</li> <li>- importance of job at current organisation</li> <li>- office layout</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- flexibility</li> <li>- importance of job at current organisation</li> <li>- office layout</li> <li>- problems and</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- problems and pressures</li> <li>- remote work</li> <li>- salary</li> <li>- travelling</li> </ul>	pressures
<b>Lived experience (“Emic”)</b>	Occupational meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- perception on changes and complexities of job</li> <li>- basis for secretarial work</li> <li>- importance of job</li> <li>- understanding of “professionalism”</li> <li>- secretarial interactions</li> <li>- satisfactions and rewards</li> <li>- work recognition</li> </ul>	<p><b>*Codes here cross the other groups</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- perception on changes and complexities of job</li> <li>- basis for secretarial work</li> <li>- importance of job</li> <li>- understanding of “professionalism”</li> </ul>
	Occupational identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- feeling part of a secretarial group</li> <li>- problems and pressures</li> <li>- rewards and satisfactions</li> <li>- reason for chosen occupation</li> <li>- future plans</li> <li>- comparable occupations</li> <li>- titles variation</li> <li>- gender segregation</li> <li>- jobs in the same level</li> <li>- likes and dislikes</li> <li>- people’s understanding of secretarial work</li> <li>- would change occupation?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- secretarial interactions</li> <li>- satisfactions and rewards</li> <li>- work recognition</li> <li>- feeling part of a secretarial group</li> <li>- problems and pressures</li> <li>- rewards and satisfactions</li> <li>- reason for chosen occupation</li> <li>- people’s understanding of secretarial work</li> <li>- would change occupation?</li> </ul>
<b>“Etic” issues</b>	Will be addressed throughout analysis and especially on Chapter 7, “Integrative analysis” of case studied.		

## **Appendix F – NHS Job Description for Medical Secretary**

### **Medical secretary/personal assistant**

On this page you will find a description of the roles of the medical secretary/personal assistant including information on entry requirements

#### **The role**

Medical secretaries deal with consultants' correspondence, making appointments, handling patients queries, and liaising with other healthcare staff. Sometimes they may work under a title of personal assistant.

In a GP practice they handle letters and phone calls about a huge range of different conditions, but working for a hospital consultant they are based in a specific department, for example paediatrics (child health) or cardiology (heart care).

This is a responsible job, as medical secretaries are expected to use their own initiative, make decisions and deal with patients and their relatives who are worried or upset about their illness. There is significant contact with patients, GPs and other healthcare staff.

Personal assistants may work for a specific director or the chief executive, managing their diary, sending out agendas for meetings, taking minutes, dealing with correspondence and organising travel arrangements. They may also be responsible for maintaining details of certain budgets, ordering stocks of stationery. They will be responsible for booking resources such as rooms, audio-visual equipment and refreshments for meetings and other events.

They may be responsible for managing the workload of a team of secretaries ensuring that they have all of the materials (e.g. file documents, letter headed paper etc) and access to equipment (such as photocopiers, audio playback machines etc) that they need to do their work.

#### **Entry requirements**

Medical secretaries will need to have or be prepared to work towards a diploma in medical secretary studies awarded by the Association of Medical Secretaries, Practice Managers, Administrators and Receptionists (AMSPAR). Good secretarial skills are obviously essential as is a good knowledge of medical terminology.

Personal secretaries need good secretarial and administrative skills, holding RSA or similar qualifications at an appropriate level. They will usually have administrative or secretarial experience and have a professional approach to their work.

Medical secretaries and personal assistants are required to use their initiative and a high level of independence in their work.

#### **Job vacancies**

Advertisements appear on the NHS Jobs website, [www.jobs.nhs.uk](http://www.jobs.nhs.uk), in local press or job centres. You can also contact the personnel office/human resources department of local hospitals/trusts.

<http://www.nhscareers.nhs.uk/details/Default.aspx?Id=1931>

## Job description: Medical Secretary

Medical secretaries are specialist secretaries, with some understanding of medical 'speak'. If you go into this field it's your role to help doctors, hospital consultants and other senior medical staff manage important administrative and secretarial tasks so they can spend more face to face time with their patients.

As a medical secretary you'll be seen as an important part of the team no matter where you choose to work - in a healthcare centre, GP surgery, medical school, for a private practice, in complementary medicine or for a medical charity or pharmaceutical company.

A typical day in the life of a medical secretary varies according to where you work. If you work in a GP's surgery you'll probably find yourself dealing with a lot of patients. If you work in a private or complementary medicine clinic then you might have to take payments and provide receipts.

General tasks you will be responsible for include:

- Dealing with incoming and outgoing mail
- Answering phone calls
- Using a computer to write letters or record medical notes
- Making sure medical samples are properly labelled
- Keeping on top of filing and making appointments.

Depending on your medic's schedule and needs, as you prove yourself you might also be able to take on some more PA-type responsibilities which could involve:

- Scheduling meetings
- Keeping track of a doctor's busy diary
- Organising travel
- Dealing with patients and visitors.

### Hours and environment

You can expect to work a standard 35 to 37 hour week. This usually means you'll be onsite Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm ish. Sometimes medical secretaries need to be on hand round their doctor's shift which could include starting early or working the odd evening or Saturday.

It is a flexible job and often part-time work and job share are available.

Most of your day will be spent sitting in front of a computer and using the phone. You might also be expected to take a turn at reception or to run important files to the right department.

### Skills and interests

You'll need to be more than just an efficient general secretary to make it as a medical secretary. You'll need some specialist training in medical terms and jargon, so it definitely helps if you have an interest in medicine.

Skills that are a must for the job are:

- Well organised
- Good attention to detail to manage complex work
- Good communication skills to deal with patients and relatives in a sympathetic way and be able to cope with the emotional strain
- Good keyboard skills and be confident using technology
- Able to work as part of a team and on your own initiative
- Able to prioritise a number of different tasks
- Good concentration - you'll get lots of interruptions in the course of the day
- Discretion (all medical information is confidential)

## Entry

Although there are no minimum entry requirements, you'll probably find that employers will ask for four GCSEs (A -C grades, including English). You will also be expected to be confident with technology and good at typing.

Taking a general secretarial course such as the City & Guilds, OCR and London Chamber of Commerce and Industry will help you get noticed. These courses are available (full, part-time and distance learning) at many colleges and private colleges across the UK.

## Training

Once you've bagged the job, your employer might ask you to work towards the Advanced Diploma for Medical Secretaries from the Association of Medical Secretaries, Practice Managers, Administrators and Receptionists (AMSPAR). The course covers:

- Admin and legal issues relating to the NHS
- Rules for medical documentation and practice
- Spelling of medical words
- Correct use of medical terms and abbreviations (so you can read notes and prescriptions etc)
- Learning the meaning of medical terms
- Learning the correct use of titles, professional bodies and qualifications

The course takes between 12 and 24 months to complete and involves a combination of written exams, a research project and work experience. You'll need at least four GCSEs/S grades (A-C/1-3) or equivalent to be accepted on the AMSPAR course, but if you have A levels/H grades you may be able to take a shorter course. Full and part-time options are available and a list of colleges offering the course is available from AMSPAR.

You'll get on the job training to help you get to grips with the computer system and procedures used in your office.

If you work for the NHS you should be encouraged to go on some of the courses offered by the service.

## Opportunities

There are more than 30,000 medical secretaries in the UK. Once you've got your feet under the table there are plenty of opportunities to progress.

Many stay within the field and are promoted to the role of senior secretary. Others move organisations to gain more seniority and responsibility, for example moving from a GP's surgery to a private practice.

You could also use your skills and go on to become a PA either in the medical world or in other industries. If you have AMSPAR qualifications you could even go on to become an office or practice manager.

## Annual income

Where you work will have an impact on your salary but you can expect to start on around £11,500 to £12,500.

Looking ahead in your career, as a senior medical secretary you can take home between £15,000 to £25,000 depending on your level of experience.

Things are a bit different in the NHS where there are set pay bands ranging from £13,694 for a new entrant to £19,248 for a senior medical secretary. These rates are higher in London.

<http://www.totaljobs.com/Content/Job-descriptions/Admin/Medical-secretary.html>