



**“OUR UNSUNG HEROES”  
KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY THE DEPUTY PUBLIC PROTECTOR, ADV K  
MALUNGA, ON THE OCCASION OF THE CELEBRATION OF  
SECRETARIES DAY IN THE PUBLIC PROTECTOR SOUTH AFRICA AT  
THE KREAM RESTAURANT – BROOKLYN, PRETORIA, 30  
SEPTEMBER 2013**

**1. Introduction – our unsung heroes**

I am wondering how many of us here today would recognise the names “John Nicolay” and “John Hay”?

They were the supporting force behind one Abraham Lincoln, 16th President of the United States. **John Nicolay** was President Lincoln's Private Secretary; **John Hay** was his Assistant Private Secretary, who went on to become a great statesman himself, ending up as Minister for England, and Secretary of State at the turn of the previous century that had to deal with “*modern day*” problems of the time.

Almost every business has ‘high flyers’ in its ranks –exceptional employees who keep company competitive or make the institution stand out. But for every high flyer, most successful institutions also have a host of unsung heroes who keep the momentum going. Many of these unsung heroes are personal assistants or secretaries, who together play a crucial role in providing the support needed for the high flyers to do their thing.

As I begin I am also reminded of one of my favourite books by Mark Sanborn –*You Don't Need a Title to Be A Leader*-He makes the poignant observation that leadership isn't about having a title.He observes that often the strongest leaders in an organisation and in life, are those who don't have official titles.Most people have a title-I presume he is referring to big titles.He observes that when he stays at a hotel he rarely meets the General Manager but he always meets the bell caps,door men,front desk personnel, house keepers and restaurant staff. It is their service leadership that makes him decide to come back-or not.

**2. A little bit of history**

The term “*secretary*” is derived from the Latin word *secernere*, "to distinguish" or "to set apart,"

with the eventual connotation of something private or confidential, as with the English word *secret*.

A *secretarius* was a person, therefore, overseeing business confidentially, usually for a powerful individual (a king, pope, etc.). As the duties of a modern secretary often still include the handling of confidential information, the literal meaning of their title still holds true. Since the Renaissance until the late 19th century, men (those days it was unfortunately only men) involved in the daily correspondence and the activities of the mighty had assumed the title of secretary.

In 1870 Sir Isaac Pitman founded a school where students could qualify as shorthand writers to "*professional and commercial men*." Originally, this school was only for male students.

In the 1880s, with the invention of the typewriter, more **women** began to enter the field, and since World War I, the role of secretary has been primarily associated with women. By the 1930s, fewer men were entering the field of secretaries.

With time, like many titles, the term was applied to more and varied functions, leading to compound titles to specify various secretarial work, like general secretary or financial secretary. Just "secretary" remained in use either for positions such as administrative assistant of the officer(s) in charge, either individually or as member of a secretariat

In an effort to promote professionalism among United States secretaries, the National Secretaries Association was created in 1942. Today, this organization is known as the International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP). The organization developed the first standardized test for office workers called the Certified Professional Secretaries Examination (CPS). It was first administered in 1951

In 1952, Mary Barrett, President of the National Secretaries Association, C. King Woodbridge, President of Dictaphone Corporation, and American businessman **Harry F. Klemfuss created a special Secretary's Day holiday, to recognize the hard work of the staff in the office.**

This annual event was originally organized in 1952 as "National Secretaries Week" by the National Secretaries Association (now known as the International Association of Administrative Professionals: IAAP) in conjunction with public relations executive Harry Klemfuss and a consortium of office product manufacturers. It was established as an effort to recognize secretaries for their contributions in the workplace, and to attract people to secretarial/administrative careers. In the year 2000, IAAP announced a name change for Professional Secretaries Week and Professional Secretaries Day.

### **3. The role of the secretary – from assistant to "Administrative PROFESSIONAL"**

If we look at the modern work environment, the role of the secretary has evolved dramatically from the tea making typists of yesteryear. Today, secretarial roles extend to a wide range of duties. These can include bookkeeping, marketing, advertising, in-house copywriting, record keeping, licensing and more. In the current economic climate, the trend is towards streamlining

roles and giving more responsibilities to fewer people. **As a result, secretaries have become more important than ever in keeping business activities running smoothly and efficiently.**

Research shows that many workers around the world still hold the “**secretary**” job title; however, many alternative titles have become more popular, such as administrative assistant, office coordinator, administrative specialist, executive assistant, and office manager.

The name change to Administrative Professionals Week and Administrative Professionals Day expands the event to include other administrative job titles that also richly deserve recognition. In its association by laws, IAAP defines administrative professionals as “**individuals who are responsible for administrative tasks and coordination of information in support of an office-related environment and who are dedicated to furthering their personal and professional growth in their chosen profession.**”.

With that in mind let us pause and think of spending just one week without the administrative staff at Public Protector South Africa

#### **4. National Secretaries Day**

Also known as Administrative Professional Day, Secretaries Day was created with the specific idea of encouraging more people to consider secretarial and administrative positions. This salutation to the hardworking staff who keep the wheels of business and industry turning has grown to become perhaps one of the largest workplace rites.

As noted above in 2000, IAAP changed *Professional Secretaries Week* and *Professional Secretaries Day* to **Administrative Professionals Week (APW)** and **Administrative Professionals Day (APD)** to keep pace with secretaries changing job titles and expanding responsibilities of today’s administrative workforce..

Over the years, Administrative Professionals Week has become one of the largest workplace observances. The event is celebrated worldwide, bringing together millions of people for community events, educational seminars, and individual corporate activities recognizing support staff with gifts of appreciation.

National Secretaries Day **in South Africa** is celebrated annually on the FIRST Wednesday of September. This date was established by the Executive Secretaries Club of South Africa (ECSA) and Kelly Girl 25 years ago .The head of ECSA and of Kelly Girl was Neville Mackay. (Always celebrated on the first Wednesday of September in South Africa, the day is celebrated with parties, time off and the all-important gifting. Customary gifts range from flowers, chocolates and trinkets to restaurant lunches and spa treatments.)

#### **5. Facts/Trivia**

In the United States there are more than 4.1 million Administrative Assistants, and additionally, 475,000 in Canada. [2]

The first Certified Professional Secretary examination was administered in August 1951. There were 281 candidates at 15 examination centers. Today there are more than 250 exam centers worldwide to become a certified administrative professional.[3]

Today, there are more than 4.1 million secretaries and administrative assistants working in the United States, according to U.S. Department of Labor statistics, and 8.9 million people working in various administrative support roles. More than 475,000 administrative professionals are employed in Canada. Millions more administrative professionals work in offices all over the world

## **6. Conclusion**

John W. Gardner must have had secretaries or administrative professionals in mind when he stated that “*excellence is doing ordinary things extraordinarily well.*” But that is also an understatement because the job description of a secretary or personal or administrative assistant is not “*ordinary*”. They have to serve as secretary, butler, aide-de-camp, spokesperson, travelling companion, and confidante and if you are one of the 23 assistants working for Michelle Obama you may even be called a “*Shopper-in-Chief*”

On a more serious note I want to express our gratitude as an office and as managers, for the sterling work that the administrative professionals do in this office to keep us afloat .Again to quote from Mark Sanborn,the fact is everyone matters,everyone makes a difference.That is a critical message lost on employers and employees today.Leadership is about making a positive difference at home,work or in one’s community. That ladies and gentlemen is what we call Ubuntu.