

The Boss-Secretary Relationship in Contemporary Businesses

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ABSTRACT

In 1992, Reskin and Padavic reported that 46% of the U.S. workforce were women (25), ranking the administrative assistant, a.k.a. secretary, as the number one female occupation (53). This paper focuses on the boss-secretary relationship and updates a 1977 research study by Rosabeth Moss-Kanter investigating the influence of organizational structures on corporate relationships and employees. Findings suggest that this female dominated occupation has made limited progress toward greater gender equality in the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

In 1977, Rosabeth Moss Kanter conducted a research project based on the hypothesis that "organizational structure forms people's sense of themselves and their possibilities" (3). She argued that the rules, regulations, policies and procedures within organizations define the degree of success a person can attain within the corporate environment. Her research focused on the headquarters' administrative staff of a large manufacturing firm. In her report, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, Kanter refers to this company by a pseudonym, Industrial Supply Corporation (Indsco).

Kanter's study divided administrative employees into two categories:

1. managers, professionals and technical personnel
2. clerical and service staff, the corporate paper shufflers, data manipulators and record keepers (5)

Kanter argued that each position, depending upon its placement within the corporate hierarchy, offered varying degrees of potential advancement, empowerment and recognition within the organization. Positions held by managers, professionals and technical personnel were jobs of power and authority with long career ladders reaching into upper management ranks. Conversely, the jobs of the clerical and service employees had little or no opportunity for advancement and were virtually powerless within the corporation.

According to Kanter, an employee's response to the structural limitations they encounter is influenced by the individual's perception of his/her potential advancement and growth opportunities within a particular job or organization. Thus, people in jobs with short career ladders must gain recognition and power via avenues other than through the traditional promotion track. For example, a secretary's job at Indsco

was "so unskilled and replaceable that their only way to get recognition and perhaps advancement was to develop a relationship of personal service" with her boss (11).

The boss-secretary relationship observed by Kanter was characterized by stereotypical gender roles. The boss, usually a white male, held the dominant position of authority and power while the white female secretary occupied a subordinate position. Secretarial jobs at Indsco had vague responsibilities, defined by the boss' daily demands, rather than being based on corporate job descriptions. The end result of such a loosely-defined position was that the secretary divided her time between business and personal tasks as assigned throughout the work day. Thus, the secretary became more of a personal attendant to one person than a corporate employee. The boss defined her company role, and the status she achieved was a reflection of his standing within the company, not based on her personal achievement and skills (69-103).

This study is designed to evaluate changes in the boss-secretary working relationship since Kanter's research in 1977. The general question addressed by this study is whether the secretarial job, a female dominated occupation, reflects advancement toward greater equality in the contemporary workplace when compared to the research findings of twenty years ago. More specifically, through interviews with women currently in the secretarial field, the following issues were investigated:

- Characteristics of the contemporary boss-secretary relationship
- The impact of standardized human resources policies and procedures on the boss-secretary working relationship and in the clarification of the secretarial role
- Professional aspirations and limitations of women currently working in the secretarial field

Female gendered professions, according to Reskin and Padavic, have traditionally placed women in positions subordinate to white males, yielding lower wages and minimal avenues for advancement (Reskin 51-57). As this investigation focuses on a female dominated occupation, it is hoped that this project will add to the understanding of how organizational structures support gender inequality in the contemporary business environment.

DATA AND METHODS

Four white females were interviewed, all currently employed in the clerical field. The women ranged from forty to fifty-seven years of age and all have high school educations; two are married, one is divorced and one is a widow. Three had begun their secretarial careers immediately following high school graduation. All four report to white males in upper management positions of local business. These businesses include a manufacturing firm, a medical facility, a law firm and a not-for-profit organization. Two have held their current position for more than ten years; one has been employed at the same firm for eleven years in various positions and the fourth was hired by her current employer two years ago. In order to ensure confidentiality, all names used in this report are fictitious.

The interviews ranged from one hour and forty minutes to three hours in length. Three were conducted in interviewees' places of employment and one took place in my home.

INTERVIEWEE BACKGROUNDS

Interview One – "Ann"

Ann is a forty-three year old white female. She is divorced and has a son and a daughter. Her daughter is in high school and still lives at home. She began her career as a secretary approximately twenty-three years ago.

For the past two years, she has been employed at a local manufacturing company as an executive assistant. Although she reports to the director of finance, she works for the president of the company and several engineers in the sales department, as well. She also supervises the receptionist. Ann feels that she is at the top of the secretarial job ladder in the company. Advancement would require a change of employer and additional education. She says she likes what she's doing and has no plans for a career change in the future.

The company maintains a rather traditional business environment. Some, but not all positions, have job descriptions. Human resource policies and procedures re-

main vague and undefined for much of the staff. Hiring practices are unstructured and information regarding job openings to the employee population is minimal. Ann expresses frustration at this lack of communication and feels the company fails to take advantage of their best internal resource, the current employee pool. Because positions are not posted as they become available, current personnel do not have the opportunity to submit themselves for consideration. Thus, the company is "blind" to the talents already in-house.

Interview Two – "Bess"

Bess is a forty year old white married female with one child. Her husband works as a cabinet maker. She is employed at a local medical outpatient care facility. She began her clerical career eleven years ago in an entry level transcriptionist position with her current employer. She has advanced three levels to her present position of executive assistant to the chief executive officer. Her job responsibilities range from office management to assisting her boss, as well as the physicians, directors and other staff in the facility. Bess feels she has reached the top of the secretarial job ladder and would probably require additional education to advance to a director's position. At this time, Bess is very satisfied with her current situation and has no plans to pursue a change.

The current chief executive officer was hired by the medical management team approximately five years ago to oversee office and business administration. He has been instrumental in introducing more progressive human resource policies and hiring procedures. All employees have up-to-date job descriptions, annual evaluations are structured, and hiring procedures are standardized and publicized within house so that current staff is aware of opportunities as they become available. It is Bess' opinion that over the past five years the facility has become a much better place to work. She feels that she plays an active role in the everyday operations of the company.

Interview Three – "Kate"

Kate is a fifty-seven year old white/Native American widow. She has two grown sons, both college graduates, living outside the local area. She began her secretarial career twenty-nine years ago as a clerk at the South Bend Studebaker plant.

For the past eleven years, Kate has been the secretary to a managing partner of a local law firm. She remains in the position for which she was hired. There is nowhere for her to advance within the company unless she changes occupations. She has no interest in pursuing a career as a paralegal, which she says is her

only avenue upward from her current job. She retains her job at the law firm because she feels her opportunities to go elsewhere are restricted due to recent health problems.

Of all the women interviewed, Kate's employer represents the most traditional business practice. Formal and informal practices within the firm segregate staff and management. The Human Resources Department enforces different rules for each group. Guidelines are much more rigid for staff personnel than for those in management positions. Staff personnel are intentionally uninformed regarding corporate operations, as well as policies and procedures pertaining to job evaluations, annual increases and hiring. To Kate's knowledge, no one has a job description and the staff is expressly prohibited from discussing salaries and benefits amongst themselves. These prohibitions and lack of corporate communication have made Kate feel excluded and undervalued. She maintains a loyalty to her boss and places the blame for the differentiation upon the Human Resources Department.

Interview Four - "Nell"

Nell is a forty-three year old white married female. She is married to a Tool and Die Machinist and has one daughter in junior high school. She began working in the secretarial field twenty-seven years ago. She has been active in the local clerical association, "The International Association of Administrative Professionals," for seven years.

Nell is a senior staff member at a local not-for-profit organization. Twenty-three years ago she hired into an hourly position as the assistant to the president and chief executive officer. She currently retains those duties and her responsibilities have expanded to include those of office manager, supervisor and project coordinator. She is at the top of the secretarial career ladder, and while she says there are advancement opportunities available to her, she has no interest in any other job in the company. She enjoys what she is doing and plans to retire in that position.

The president and chief executive officer's business philosophy is a mixture of traditional and progressive ideas which are reflected in Nell's duties as well as in the organization's overall operation. The organization has adopted hiring practices that encourage advancement within the current employee pool but employee salaries, increases and benefits remain unstructured. Similarly, the president encourages Nell to expand her responsibilities, promotes independent action and decision making on her part and recommends pursuit of higher education. At the same time, he retains a traditional boss-secretary relationship in his preference for using her shorthand skills, having all visitors and telephone calls screened and requiring all employees,

including Nell, to call him by his surname. Regardless of his "quirks," Nell feels "empowered" in her position. She feels she is an important contributor to the organization's overall operations and is pleased with the way her job has evolved over the years.

THE BOSS-SECRETARY RELATIONSHIP

Kanter found that many bosses placed a higher value on the personal services provided by the secretary, such as emotional support, than on professional skills. Secretaries were often used as "sounding-boards" to the boss' daily business and personal woes (Kanter 88). The secretary's response to the job's emotional demands varied by the extent to which she was willing to adopt a nurturing role.

To a certain extent, the types of boss-secretary relationships discussed by Kanter are still active in today's office environment. The working relationship described by each woman interviewed is different. It is interesting to note, how closely these roles reflect the overall business philosophy of the company. For instance, Kate and her boss, a managing partner, have one of the most traditional working relationships. When asked if he encourages her to expand her role within the company, she replied:

Of course, I can only expand them as far as what he gives me the opportunity to. So I can't go any further than what he tells me ... I'm not sure it could be expanded much because of the volume [... of clerical responsibilities required per case].

- Kate

In her relationship with her boss, Kate is acutely aware of the restrictions of the company environment and the limitations of her own position. However, she is proud of her association with her boss (87-88), whom she refers to as "one of the good guys." She describes her relationship with him as:

formal ... That's the kind of person he is. He's very professional ... I know he sort of has an air about him ... I guess I've gotten used to it, but that's the way he is. He's a very private person ... For lack of a better word, he kind of has a pompous air about himself.

- Kate

Ann has adopted a more nurturing attitude toward the men with whom she works. Rather than taking her lunch at noon, she has made it a regular practice to delay her break until 1:30-2:00 PM to accommodate all those last-minute requests that seem to occur.

In fact, I often find myself going to lunch at 2:00 because initially, the president ... spent so much time at our building, I felt

like he ... required my services a lot during the lunch hour because he was here ... before I knew it, I was going to lunch at 1:30, you know, and now it's just kind of fine ... There are a lot of people who need me ... Maybe that's kind of old-fashioned but I do feel that way. I mean, I feel that's kinda what I'm here for and I would like to do my job well.

– Ann

Bess has the most businesslike relationship with her boss. The medical facility is the most progressive of the employers and the man to whom Bess reports is the person responsible for the standardization in the business and personnel policies. Although they seem to relate to one another on friendly terms, their working relationship lacks the personal interdependence that is evident in the others. He sounds as though he is quite capable of efficiently handling daily business routine without her but appreciates her assistance when she is in the office.

I'm not even sure there's a daily basis type of thing as far as depending on me ... But if anything would come up, like I said, he'd just have to do it himself or go to someone else. He's already come in here and pulled up letters that we've typed.

– Bess

Even in the more traditional relationships, there are changes occurring within the roles. With the exception of Nell, all the bosses did some of their own correspondence, managed their own phone calls and functioned independently when their secretaries were unavailable. It is likely that changes in how the boss views his role and redefines the activities of others is due to the increasing use of computer technology over the past twenty years. Computers are now common place in most executive offices. E-mail has made business correspondence much more efficient than total reliance on dictated and mailed letters. In today's business community, computer literacy is commonly viewed as an indication of a person's level of professional competency.

Gatekeeper Role

According to Kanter, an important aspect of a secretary's job twenty years ago was to act as a buffer between her boss and the rest of the world. As a personal "gatekeeper," she would limit access to her boss by screening telephone calls and visitors. Contact with the manager was made by only the "chosen few" (80). Of the women interviewed, Nell is a good example of a "gatekeeper." Her office physically restricts access to her boss' office, making Nell the only avenue through which other employees can contact him. Not only does

she literally block the entrance to his office, she schedules appointments when other employees request to see him, screens and places his phone calls and coordinates all his outside contact per his instructions. None of the other three interviewees were as actively involved in arranging their bosses' daily schedule.

Loyalty

In talking about the bosses' expectations of loyalty, each of the secretaries at Indsco was expected to place her boss' needs and career development above her own ambitions, to act as an emotional support for him and to value the interpersonal aspects of the job. Kanter refers to the boss' tendency to regard his secretary as part of his estate or personal property, thinking of her as someone who worked for him personally, rather than as a corporate employee. This perspective is illustrated in a statement made by one Indsco manager: "My secretary wouldn't want another job" (85).

Each of the women interviewed expressed loyalty to her boss in one form or another, but Nell exhibits best the loyalty expected by the aforementioned manager. After working for the same executive for twenty-three years, she expressed little interest in pursuing advancement opportunities for clerical staff within her organization.

Nell: "You mean here? Oh, most definitely! We encourage hiring within."

Interviewer: "Okay, so there is some flexibility available in advancement for clerical?"

Nell: "Yes, there would be flexibility. Right at this point in time, the way I look at it, it wouldn't be ... for me, there's nothing else I'd be interested in doing here. But for someone else ..."

Kate also expressed loyalty toward the managing partner to whom she reports:

Interviewer: "If he was to go out on his own, would you stay with the company or go with him?"

Kate: "I'd go with him ... Because ... I like working for him. I admire the work that he does. I think he is very fair. He is very organized and he's very good at what he does."

The Marriage Metaphor

Kanter used the "Marriage Metaphor" to describe boss-secretary relationships at Indsco, a "fusion" of

the secretary and boss as a couple in the eyes of co-workers. These "office marriages" were unique working arrangements established between a particular secretary and her boss. Over time, in fact, an emotional bond would often develop between the two (89).

Among my interviewees, the marriage metaphor was fully exemplified in Nell's relationship with the company's president and CEO. Nell is viewed by other co-workers as his "office wife" and often receives teasing to that effect.

Most generally if I'm requesting information, I am more apt to get it quicker because they know I'm obtaining it for him ... Other staff have teased and said something about, well, you know, if Nell asks for it, you better get it right now! But on the other hand, they've also teased by asking, "Who's running the company?" In order to see him, they have to go through me, that's just the procedure. So they tease me about that too.

— Nell

Principle of Arbitrariness

Kanter described secretarial jobs as lacking uniformity due to the absence of a corporate-wide job description. The position's formal responsibilities were vague and daily activities often focused on unscheduled, immediate tasks as assigned by the boss. Thus, a major defining factor of secretarial duties was her availability for the unpredictable (78-79).

From this study's limited data, it appears that the "principle of arbitrariness" remains in effect in contemporary offices, as well. The difference now is that these spontaneous duties are included in job descriptions. Secretarial jobs continue to include a constant flow of last minute and immediate requests.

It's funny, my favorite [aspect of the job] is the variety and then I'd have to say ... that sometimes my least favorite [aspect] is the interruptions. That it seems like, if I could just finish this and then they could (she laughs) come up and ask me. You know what I mean? You have to change hats so quickly ... that everything seems to be open-ended all the time. And I like to "put something to bed" and then ... but I always have all these projects going on all the time.

— Ann

Role of Personal Attendant

Kanter hypothesized that the lack of definitive corporate duties and responsibilities allowed the secretary's

boss to require "personal services" of her. A secretary was expected to do housework tasks, such as straightening up the boss' office, perform hostess duties by providing coffee service and "homemade coffee cake" for meetings, and run domestic errands (79). Personal service requests were only restricted by the corporation's informal parameters of what was considered "customary," the boss' view of what was "appropriate," and the degree of compliance from the secretary. Most secretaries were reluctant to refuse non-business related chores as they felt to do so would put their job in jeopardy (80).

From the limited data gathered in this project, it would seem the more overt personal services to one's boss, such as taking his clothes to the dry cleaners, buying his wife gifts, washing the family dog, etc., has reduced considerably since Kanter's study. However, each interviewee said they had been called upon from time to time to do non-business related chores for their bosses. These types of requests included typing family member's college papers and ordering flowers for a wife. The good news is that it does not exist in the extreme, at least for these women, as it did for secretaries twenty years ago.

REWARDS OF THE JOB

Recruitment

Kanter referred to a secretary's lack of upward mobility as being in direct contrast to a manager's highly dynamic career. She said that Indsco's managers advanced every three to five years, whereas secretaries could remain in the same position for twenty years. It was her contention that this system depended upon recruiting individuals into secretarial positions who would not feel resentment about their lack of advancement. Therefore, the company actively recruited young women from parochial high schools who would be the least likely to view themselves as bosses and most likely to accept differential status (83).

In this study, three of four interviewees began their secretarial careers immediately after graduating from high school. Three women remain in the same jobs for which they were hired. All have reached the top ladder for advancement in their profession within the company. Bess, having advanced through the company's internal hierarchy from an entry level position, expressed pride in her accomplishment. Kate, the interviewee that most closely matched Kanter's recruitment criteria, has come to view her lack of upward mobility as a normal consequence of her job.

Parochialism

Kanter observed that parochialism was one method secretaries used in response to structured limitations of recognition and control. The secretary would narrow her expertise to her boss' interests and his department (82). This included subordinating her personal interests to those of her boss, using fewer basic skills and increasing concentration on the idiosyncrasies and special requirements of her particular boss. Her limited perspective and knowledge regarding how her job and department fit into Indsco's overall operations restricted her personal advancement opportunities within the company (91-92).

In this study, the two companies in which parochialism is most obvious are the least progressive in establishing standardized human resource policies and procedures, such as job descriptions, evaluations and hiring practices. Both Kate and Ann expressed frustration and feelings of alienation because of their companies' exclusionary communication practices. However, three of the women interviewed have successfully redefined their secretarial roles by crossing departmental boundaries, thus expanding into areas which demand decision making abilities, project management, organization skills, and supervisory responsibilities.

Non-Utilitarian Rewards

Kanter argued that secretaries at Indsco were rewarded for the quality of their relationship with their boss rather than professional capabilities. The skills that secretaries developed while serving one manager were highly personalized, and thus they were not easily transferred elsewhere within the company. Kanter referred to these "skills" as "non-utilitarian" as they had no corporate-wide value. Examples of non-utilitarian rewards would include flattery and an overabundance of "thank-you's" (84-87).

Indsco managers evaluated their secretary's performance on two central traits: "initiative and enthusiasm" and "personal service orientation." As they were being evaluated on "non-utilitarian skills," the benefits of a secretarial position were often "non-utilitarian" rewards rather than monetary compensation. Thus, even though wages were low, some secretaries felt the nonmaterial benefits made up for the pay deficiencies.

Findings seem to indicate that this non-utilitarian reward system continues in today's business environments. When asked about the rewards of her job, Ann's reply exemplifies what Kanter refers to as "praise-addiction," a need for verbal recognition of her efforts:

Ann: "I am very lucky. I have a good group of people that I work with."

Interviewer: "What defines them as good?"

Ann: "Well, they, for the most part, have good natures, good personalities and they're usually very thankful and appreciative. Taking the time to say thank you and, I don't know how you feel about this, but for me, that goes a long way ..."

When asked about the additional perks of her job, Ann listed, "It's a lovely building ... the environment is nice ... it's clean."

The informal perks of the job received by executive secretaries twenty years ago have been minimized under the guise of contemporary egalitarian employee policies. Thus, corporate management has further reduced formal and informal rewards of the secretarial position by using human resource policies to restrict any advantage that association with someone in upper management may have once provided. This has now been labeled "favoritism" and bosses are loath to grant what might appear to be "special treatment" to one employee.

Three of the four women felt their wages were acceptable but none volunteered to share specific wage information. Corporations now use written policies and procedures as a way to justify the differential benefits, wage increases, and regulations applied to personnel.

PROFESSIONAL ASPIRATIONS

People are capable of more than their organizational positions ever give them the tools or the time or the opportunity to demonstrate.

—Kanter

While Kanter's quote may be used in reference to almost any job, it is particularly appropriate for the secretary. The structural influences that Kanter talked about twenty years ago still remain in the contemporary workplace. The structures that restrict employees in secretarial positions have become more subtle in nature; they have gone underground. Considering that three of the four women interviewed have current, up-to-date job descriptions, it appears as though companies are making a public effort to give greater clarification to the secretarial role. A job description may give the secretarial position greater legitimacy, but it fails to change the informal chameleon-like character of a secretarial job.

Kanter's premise is that established organizational structures are the primary forces that ultimately determine employee success or failure within the corporation. Kanter, however, fails to acknowledge an employee's personal agency, the individual's ability to effect change in spite of obstacles encountered in organizational structures. The women interviewed in this study developed very different job responsibilities,

though the positions have similar titles. Consider the different attitudes of Kate and Nell. Kate views her current employment with a resigned attitude of someone who has accepted her limited career options and low wages, while Nell feels empowered in her current position and well compensated in wages and prestige.

Company career ladders remain short for secretarial support staff, much as they were in Kanter's study. All four women interviewed said that they had reached the top rung of their career ladders within the companies they worked. However, three out of four stated that advancement opportunities were available for someone willing to change occupations and continue their formal education. An interesting common factor among these women was that none expressed the desire to advance beyond their current position either within or outside their current place of employment. When asked about potential opportunities, all cited that in order to move up, they would need additional education; not one expressed interest in pursuing this course, with the exception of "maybe sometime in the future."

I'm pretty happy with what I'm doing. The only thought that I had to the future is that I might be interested in ... the H/R field. I think I would enjoy that ... I don't know if they'd give me serious consideration because I don't have ... the right education.

— Ann

It's [advancement] a possibility. But, personally, I don't think I'm qualified ... I think I need more education.

— Bess

He'd like to see me go back and get my Associates and even my Bachelors. He's been encouraging me to do that over the years and I said, "I will in time ... that time is just not right for me."

— Nell

Thus, established corporate structures limit these particular women's advancement opportunities. However, it also seems that their educational limitations and lack of ambition impacts their current career situation.

CONCLUSION

Key elements in the contemporary boss-secretary relationship which are similar to the relationship observed by Kanter twenty years ago are:

- The contemporary boss-secretary relationship maintains many of the characteristics described in Kanter's 1977 study. This working relationship retains the highly personalized aspects resulting from a negotiation of roles between the boss and the secretary, but with less emphasis on personal services and greater focus on corporate job responsibilities.
- The effect of standardized human resource policies and procedures on the boss-secretary working relationship appears to be determined by the company business philosophy. In traditional environments, human resource policies have had little impact on the informal stratification of status and benefits. In more progressive companies, standardized policies and procedures have promoted a more egalitarian workplace for all employees, regardless of rank. It is this mixture of philosophical approaches by employers toward the treatment of personnel and related issues that gives the secretarial field such diversity. Each company broadly defines the secretarial role to accommodate the established structural guidelines adopted by that company. But it is the secretary's boss who ultimately defines the job.
- The professional aspirations of three women interviewed had been satisfied by their current jobs. While fully aware of the limitations of the secretarial occupation, these three expressed no desire to move beyond their current position either within or outside their current places of employment. All four interviewees acknowledged that their high school education limited their career options but all lacked interest in pursuing a college degree.

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Lin earned an associate degree in 1985. She has held a number of secretarial positions and for the past seven years, and has been involved in the human resources field. Lin currently works part time as the support staff person in the IUSB Radiography Program while attending classes full time.

This research paper was originally written for S410, *Gender, Work and Race* in the Fall Semester, 1998. Lin chose this topic because of her experience in both secretarial and human resources positions and her interest in equitable employment practices. This study was an opportunity to take a closer look at the growth and development of the secretarial job in the business environment and how individual positions and working relationships are influenced by corporate environments. Lin presented her research in March at the Midwest Student Sociology Conference at Dayton University. This paper won the research category in the annual IUSB Women's Studies Writing Contest for 1999.