



# EUROPEAN MANAGEMENT ASSISTANTS

– Work, challenges and the future





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# Sales of the publication

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# Contents

Acknowledgements .....	6
<b>1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1.1 Purpose of study .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1.2 Research strategy, the limitations and structure of study .....</b>	<b>9</b>
1.2.1 Research strategy.....	9
1.2.2 Limitations of study .....	9
1.2.3 Structure of study.....	10
<b>2 Management assistants: work, education and future .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>2.1 Title, status and work .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>2.2 Job description .....</b>	<b>14</b>
2.2.1 Definition.....	14
2.2.2 Finnish studies of assistants' tasks .....	14
2.2.3 International studies .....	16
2.2.4 ISCO classification.....	18
<b>2.3 Assistant education at HAAGA-HELIA .....</b>	<b>20</b>
2.3.1 Core competence areas.....	20
2.3.2 Work placement and exchange studies .....	21
2.3.3 Objectives of the programme.....	21
<b>2.4 Future prospects .....</b>	<b>22</b>
2.4.1 Future employee.....	23
2.4.2 Cultural diversity at the workplace.....	26
2.4.3 Summary of competence requirements by 2020 .....	27
<b>3 Data collection on assistants' work in Europe .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>3.1 Leonardo Mobility Project and study at hand .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>3.2 Interviews.....</b>	<b>29</b>
3.2.1 Interview questions.....	29
3.2.2 Interviewers and interviewees .....	30
3.2.3 Total number of interviews .....	34
<b>3.3 Analysis of data.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>3.4 Discussion on the quality of data.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>4 Assistants' work in Belgium .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>4.1 Assistant's background .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>4.2 Job description .....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>4.3 Cultural knowledge at work.....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>4.4 Changes, challenges and the future.....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>4.5 Summary of the interviews in Belgium.....</b>	<b>49</b>

<b>5 Assistants' work in Finland</b> .....	51
5.1 Assistants' background .....	51
5.2 Job description .....	52
5.3 Cultural knowledge at work .....	56
5.4 Changes, challenges and the future .....	56
5.5 Summary of the interviews in Finland .....	58
<b>6 Assistants' work in France</b> .....	61
6.1 Assistants' background .....	61
6.2 Job description .....	63
6.3 Cultural knowledge at work .....	69
6.4 Changes, challenges and the future .....	71
6.5 Summary of assistants' work in France .....	74
<b>7 Assistants' work in Germany</b> .....	76
7.1 Assistants' background .....	76
7.1.1 Analysis of EUMA representative's and the trainers' interviews .....	76
7.1.2 Background of interviewed assistants .....	77
7.2 Job description .....	78
7.2.1 Analysis of EUMA representative's and trainers' interviews .....	79
7.2.2 Job descriptions of management-assistant -pairs .....	79
7.2.3 One manager and three team assistants .....	84
7.3 Cultural knowledge at work .....	87
7.4 Changes, challenges and the future .....	88
7.4.1 Assistants' views .....	88
7.4.2 Managers' views .....	90
7.4.3 EUMA representative's and trainers' views .....	92
7.5 Summary of the interviews in Germany .....	93
<b>8 Assistants' work in the Netherlands</b> .....	95
8.1 Assistants' background .....	95
8.2 Job description .....	96
8.3 Cultural knowledge at work .....	97
8.4 Changes, challenges and the future .....	97
8.5 Summary of the interviews in the Netherlands .....	98
<b>9 Assistants' work in Poland</b> .....	99
9.1 Assistants' background .....	99
9.2 Job description .....	100
9.3 Cultural knowledge at work .....	103
9.4 Changes, challenges and the future .....	104
9.5 Summary of the interviews in Poland .....	106

<b>10 Assistants' work in Spain</b> .....	107
10.1 Assistants' background .....	107
10.2 Job description .....	109
10.3 Cultural knowledge at work .....	113
10.4 Changes, challenges and the future .....	113
10.5 Summary of the interviews in Spain .....	114
<b>11 Assistants' work in Sweden</b> .....	116
11.1 Assistants' background .....	116
11.2 Job descriptions .....	117
11.3 Cultural knowledge at work .....	119
11.4 Changes, challenges and the future .....	119
11.5 Summary of the interviews in Sweden .....	120
<b>12 Assistants' work in Europe</b> .....	122
12.1 Big picture .....	122
12.1.1 Assistants' background .....	122
12.1.2 Assistants' job descriptions .....	124
12.1.3 Cultural knowledge at work .....	126
12.1.4 Changes, challenges and the future .....	127
12.2 Implications of results to assistant education at HAAGA-HELIA .....	128
<b>13 Summary of study and discussion</b> .....	130
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	134
<b>Appendices</b> .....	136

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## 1.1 Purpose of study

This is a study of management assistants' work in Europe. Management assistants serve a supporting role in business and other organisations releasing managers to their core functions. This study was conducted to describe assistants' work and management/assistant interaction in chosen European countries, as well as to better educate future assistants in Finland.

HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences is the only higher education provider in Finland with degree programmes for management assistants. The degree programme is available both in Finnish and English. Each year approximately 160 degrees are granted. The roots of this programme are in Helsinki Secretarial College (Helsingin Sihteeriopisto=HSO) which functioned from 1967 to 1997. Year 2007 was thus a jubilee year in secretarial and assistant education in Finland – this education has been available for forty years! Other significant years have been 1993 when education at polytecnic-level (higher professional education) began and 1997 when the English programme was started (Itkonen 1997, 41–42). About 5000 HSO-secretaries graduated from the college and from the university programme about 1850 assistants have graduated so far.

The Management Assistant curriculum at HAAGA-HELIA is being developed continuously. Developing is based on the reports drawn on the impressions of Finnish managers and their assistants of the prospects in the field (Itkonen, Blomberg & Törnqvist 1991; Pirhonen 1994; Juvonen 2001; Taimio & Salmi 2005). At HAAGA-HELIA Finnish management assistant students learn at least four languages and cultures respectively. Foreign students learn three languages. Thus international cultural knowledge is central in development work because business practices vary in Europe across different countries and organisations. The Finnish society is strongly becoming multicultural in every way, as well. The tasks in any organisation today have an increasingly international twist. At work this means that we are increasingly in contact with different cultures and especially management assistants have to be able to act in accordance with

each culture to support her/his organisation efficiently and productively. This imposes growing demands on their education.

For the time being the only descriptions of assistants' work in Europe (and other parts of the world) of comparative nature have been done in Sweden based on data collected by journalists in the 80's (Bäcklund 1990). Furthermore, the content and the organisation of work has changed considerably from those days, which means that there is an urgent need for up-to-date research based knowledge to support education in the field.

The aim of this study is to produce a description of management assistants' work and roles in different firms and other organisations across Europe. The aim is to find out and understand how assistants in different countries support management, how the work of management assistants has changed in recent years and what visions there are for their field of work.

The research questions are the following:

1. What does support to management and to work place community involve now and in ten years' time in different European countries namely Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden? Are there differences between the views of managers and their assistants?
2. What changes have there been in an assistant's work, role and influence in recent years and what kind of challenges are there now and in the future? Has there been a proliferation in the centrality of the assistants?
3. How are management and expert communication tasks performed in various cultural environments now and in the near future (letters, e-mail, phones)? What kind of cultural knowledge and which languages are needed in assistants' work? Are there cultural differences that make customary behaviours at home dysfunctional elsewhere?
4. How well do the roles and duties of management assistants found in this study match with the targeted core competences of the HAAGA-HELIA Degree Programme in Modern Languages and Business Studies for Management Assistants and Degree Programme for Multilingual Management Assistants curriculum of 2005 (presented in chapter 2.3)?

The report is a description of management assistants' work practices in different countries. This study is the first of its kind in the world and thus it is internationally important. The report is intended to be used

both in teaching and developing work. The information is useful for both teachers and assistants in the target countries.

## **1.2 Research strategy, the limitations and structure of study**

### **1.2.1 Research strategy**

The data for this study from seven European countries (mentioned above, Finland excluded) was collected by interviews as part of a Leonardo Mobility project. Altogether 52 assistants, managers and EUMA (European Management Assistants) representatives were interviewed between September 2006 and April 2007. Interviews were conducted by ten HAAGA-HELIA teachers of the management assistant programmes. Each teacher or teacher pair also prepared a travel report on their trip. These are also used as valuable sources of information.

To complement the study with Finnish data similar interviews were conducted by two teachers in four Finnish companies in October 2007. Thus the total number of interviews rose to 57.

### **1.2.2 Limitations of study**

The occupation studied is called either assistant or secretary or as Kolehmainen-Lindén (1997) puts it “secretaries are, in general, defined as assistants of persons in leading positions”. Earlier the title secretary was more common and also the one used in literature but nowadays assistant is winning ground. Even though an assistant’s work involves more demanding tasks than that of a secretary (ILO 2007a) no demarcation line can be drawn between them based solely on the title of a person performing secretarial duties and therefore they are both used here to avoid unnecessary repetition as well as changing the original texts of reference. However this study deals with the education that gives qualifications and competence to the occupation and the occupation itself that falls in the ISCO category 3431, “administrative secretaries and related associate professionals” (ILO 2007b). The people interviewed in the role of an assistant are all called assistants regardless of their actual title.

The educational level of the interviewed assistants has not been a central theme in this study.

The assistants' education was asked and recorded as such. The data gathered does not allow comparisons to be made about the skills levels between different countries or even between individual respondents. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, the educational systems vary between countries due to their own traditions. This shows in the contents, the length and the defining names given to educational achievements. Secondly, in general, the educational systems have changed and developed during the last decades and due to this development, the skill levels of younger generations are higher than those of the older ones. The respondents' ages were not asked and, therefore, there is no meaningful way of comparing the skill levels of the interviewed assistants.

When discussing assistants education, we restrict ourselves to the current education given to future assistants at HAAGA-HELIA. Neither are other curricula discussed, nor historic accounts of assistant education in Finland offered, because the past is already aptly presented elsewhere (see i.e. Kolehmainen-Lindén 1997, 152–160; Kärki 1997).

This study pursues more practical than theoretical ends and addresses the future instead of the past and, therefore, past changes, i.e. in work are discussed only when considered necessary to understand the current situation. Therefore, regardless of our interest in the differences in assistants' work in different countries, cultural differences between countries (à la Hofstede 2005) are not discussed. Furthermore, concerning the issue at hand, assistants' work in different countries, the only study with findings of comparative nature is the already mentioned one by Bäcklund (1990).

The tape containing interviews done in the Netherlands was unfortunately misplaced and therefore the results concerning the Netherlands are mainly based on the researcher's travel report. Some answers were received in writing.

During their Leonardo visits, the researchers gathered a considerable amount of data concerning education, methods, IT equipment, libraries etc. of the partner schools. This data will be used elsewhere and not analysed and discussed here.

### 1.2.3 Structure of study

In chapter 2 firstly, the title of the occupation and earlier studies of assistants' work and job description are discussed. Secondly, assistants' education at HAAGA-HELIA is presented and finally the future trends in working life, education and job descriptions are discussed.

In chapter 3, data collection is discussed and in chapters 4–11 the results from each country are presented. In chapter 12, the results from each country are combined to form a theoretical model of assistants' work. The changes compared to earlier studies are discussed and the implications for a future curriculum are considered. The last chapter, chapter 13 is devoted to the summary and a discussion on the results.

## 2

# Management assistants: work, education and future

### 2.1 Title, status and work

■ To define a management assistant is to define his or her duties. But before a definition can be offered a short discussion of the name of the occupation is necessary. The word “secretary”, a title still used of many management assistants, originates from a Medieval Latin word “secretarius” which meant a highly respected person acting on behalf of his “master” (Huusko 1987, 23). A secretary – a writer, most often a man, had a highly responsible position. Even though a secretary or an assistant today most often is a woman (Bäcklund 1990, 7) according to Kolehmainen-Lindén (1997, 167) the word still means more or less the same as she states that “the most important task of secretaries is to ensure that their superiors can work in peace as well as to release the superior from the kind of tasks which can be delegated to the secretaries.” Secretaries work with one or more superiors and generally they do not have subordinates (Aaltio 1985, 5).

As stated earlier we use both the titles secretary and assistant to nominate the job at hand but there are other options as well. In Europe EUMA, the only pan-European management assistants’ association has defined itself as “a network of management support professionals.” In the U.S.A. the members of the International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP, formed in 1942 as NSA, the National Secretaries Association; name changed to PSI, Professional Secretaries International, in 1982 and to IAAP in 1998) are called “administrative professionals” who “go by various titles in the workplace, from administrative assistant, executive assistant, secretary and executive secretary, information and administrative coordinator to office administrator, plus many other titles” (IAAP 2007a). IAAP (2007b) 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 pro-

profession.” As can be seen from the above, instead of secretary or assistant, these two associations have adopted as the collective title “management support” or “administrative” professional.

Juvonen (2000, appendix 4) also found that there is a really vast spectrum of occupational titles. Aaltio (1985, 6–8, 20) stated that depending on the job, the occupational title “secretary” or “assistant” can have as a definition of ones duties a prefix like office, department, marketing, sales, export or project. Along with the general tasks, the work of a HR-assistant, for instance, may include tasks concerning retirement, health and safety benefits and insurances, personnel registers and other assisting work concerning human resources management.

Bäcklund (1990, 120) found that a secretary is a professional with a good education, especially in languages, often has a long further education, good work experience and a central and important position as a civil servant or in private business the world over. However she (1990, 31–42) stated that in the 80’ in certain European countries such as Germany and France, class distinction had a steady social foothold that affected both professional status, business communication and the nature of the superior/secretary relationship. In Germany, for example, secretaries were expected to address their superiors formally, using titles and surnames.

The International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) is one of the main international classifications for which the International Labour Organization (ILO) is responsible. ISCO is a tool for organising jobs into a clearly defined set of groups according to the tasks and duties undertaken in the job. In ISCO-88 there are two categories dealing with secretarial work with the titles respectively 4115 secretaries (ILO 2007c) and 3431 administrative secretaries and related associate professionals. (ILO 2007b) In spite of the fact that the titles differ rather little, the levels of expertise differ considerably. The first is classified under the heading “Office clerks” and requires skills at the second ISCO skill level where as the second one is classified under “Administrative associate professionals” and requires skills at the third ISCO skill level (see appendix 1). The latter ones are in the heart of this study.

## 2.2 Job description

### 2.2.1 Definition

Job description is one of the basic concepts of human resources management (HRM). Therefore a definition for job description can be found in any volume on HRM. The following is adopted from a book by Bolton (1997, 38–39). Bolton states that a job description is a written “portrait” of a job at a point in time. It is a statement of the significant facts regarding the duties pertaining to a job and responsibilities and their organisational and operational interrelationships. A job description should contain:

- a. the job title
- b. the department and/or section in which the job is located
- c. a job code number
- d. the title of the person to whom the job holder is responsible
- e. the date of at which the job description was prepared (or updated) and by whom
- f. the grade of the job
- g. a brief description of the job’s purpose
- h. a statement of the key responsibilities in the job
- i. a more complete list of the main duties in the job arranged so as to be consistent with the key responsibilities
- j. the date the job description should be reviewed.

The above definition with all the details is a valuable model that can be used when preparing a job description for a particular job in an organisation. In the following chapters we operate in a general level and when describing an assistant’s job description we can only describe the responsibilities and duties in the job.

### 2.2.2 Finnish studies of assistants’ tasks

The tasks of assistants are varied and diversified. Some tasks are universal and some are country, firm, level and post or position specific. Important decisive factors regarding work contents are the task and position of the assistant’s superior and the size and industry of the workplace. Competence demands have also developed with time as assistants are moving to a less subordinate position and are given more independent tasks. (e.g. Itkonen & al. 1991, 5; Pirhonen 1994, 41)

In the course of the years several lists have been drawn up presenting the various tasks that assistants perform. The list drawn up by The Association of Executive Secretaries in Finland (Aaltio 1985, 10–15) includes as the most common tasks

- opening, sorting and presenting the incoming mail as well as answering routine letters
- receiving phone calls as well as taking calls on behalf of a superior
- writing and typing as well as proofreading texts both in Finnish and other languages
- attending to indexes, files and registers
- arranging meetings, negotiations and conferences as well as social receptions
- making arrangements for trips and journeys
- following professional journals and daily news
- dealing with banks, associations, authorities, etc.
- making and acquiring statistics as well as acquiring all kinds of information from diverse sources
- taking care of the private affairs of a superior. (See also Kolehmainen-Lindén 1997, 167; Aalto, Peltomäki & Westermark 2001, 19.)

Pirhonen (1994, 40) found in her study which was carried out among the firms that offered work placement for HSO students that the most important competence areas for secretaries were IT, languages, organising, communication, familiarity with own organisation, time allocation and word processing.

The most recent study of Finnish assistants' work was conducted by Juvonen (2000, 2001). He studied during the years 1999 and 2000 the changes that had taken place in an assistant's work and what qualifications are needed to perform the job well. A questionnaire was sent to 800 members of Finnish assistant associations with the response rate of 20.4 %. In addition to the questionnaire, 8 managers in all were interviewed at those work places that substantially use secretarial services. The results did not differ a great deal from the previous study made by Pirhonen (1994). The results of Juvonen's study showed that the most important languages besides Finnish are English, Swedish and German. In the future French, Russian and Spanish will also be important. IT-skills were found central as well as understanding business in general, the field of business of one's employer and having a general view of the firm's activities. As always it was found that it is important for an assistant to manage and organize the superior's tasks and time, to ensure the smooth running of

things, to be able to organise meetings and to have cultural knowledge. The HAAGA-HELIA curriculum that is presented below in chapter 2.3 was developed based on the result of Juvonen's study and all the other knowledge gathered on assistant work and competence demands.

### 2.2.3 International studies

There are several international textbooks (e.g. Harding 1998; Spencer & Pruss 2000) with guidelines for secretarial duties. The tasks and duties of assistants and secretaries listed in these books are similar to those found in Finnish studies and therefore it seems pointless to present these lists.

More interesting are the results of the only earlier study with international comparable material on secretarial work. A Swedish journalist, Bäcklund (1990), made a portrait of the world's secretaries. The interviews in her study were conducted during ten years so that the first one took place in Thailand in January 1980 and the last in August 1990 in the Soviet Union. The list of countries that are included is really impressive with all parts of the world represented. Also all the countries that are part of this study, except her own home country Sweden, are represented in Bäcklund's study. However, in some countries only one secretary was interviewed and her occupational portrait presented. Even though Bäcklund's work (illustrated with photographs) can be regarded as seminal in the lack of other international volumes, it can by no means be considered very comprehensive with its 120 pages in total.

The secretaries have not been asked exactly the same questions (Bäcklund 1990, 3), and in many of the portraits more notice has been given to the overall social situation of the interviewee rather than her tasks. Bäcklund has herself interviewed four secretaries, the rest have been interviewed by a large group of journalists. During the interviews, such themes as secretaries' workdays, their thoughts, hopes and a critical look at their labour market situation were discussed. Below are Bäcklund's central country specific results that have relevance in this study. (A list of interview details can be found in appendix 1).

In **Belgium**, the interviewed secretary had a three years secretarial education; she was fluent in Flemish (mother tongue), French, German and English. Her work included the usual secretarial duties. (Bäcklund 1990, 30–31.)

In **Finland**, Bäcklund stated (1990, 24) having interviewed the secretary to the chairman of the board of Wärtsilä dry-docks that it is a great merit to be able to have a command of Swedish because all documents

are prepared in both Finnish and Swedish. Also English, German and some French are needed.

One of the secretaries interviewed in Finland had graduated from the Helsinki Secretarial College. She sat in a small room with an electronic typewriter with a limited memory capacity her duties including:

- opening the mail and preparing it before passing it on to the superior
- all correspondence
- arranging lunches, dinners and receptions hosted by her superior
- standing in for the superior while he is away
- travel arrangements.

Another secretary interviewed told about her job: "The work is highly variable, no day is like another, I meet different people all the time, I manage my job very independently, I work with different teams, work groups and the management group." Her duties included also

- calendar
- personnel magazine.

The assistant in **France** (Bäcklund 1990, 38) had a long career behind her and she had noticed that she does not like paperwork or a lot of routine work. The best things in the job are freedom and her special personal area. She also said that to be able to make a career as a secretary in France means that one has to have a suitable personality, be tactful, submissive, to have the ability to organize, good language skills and a respectful appearance. The secretary's job is to unload the superior as much as possible so that he can concentrate on the most important things.

**Germany** was still a divided country when the interviews were conducted. In West Germany, the secretary told that they use the formal address at the workplace but one can wear slacks. She worked part-time and because of that some days were highly stressful. Her duties included

- many letters and telex messages
- sales reports and statistical tables
- travel arrangements and invoices.

The Eastern counterpart had as her duties

- mail
- correspondence
- minutes of meetings
- taking care of a bonus system (Bäcklund 1990, 31–34).

In **The Netherlands**, the interviewed secretary's work was very independent. She told that she

- organised meetings and conferences
- talked a lot on the phone all over the world
- was the superior's right hand and standing in for him while he is a way.

She had one year's secretarial education after school. (Bäcklund 1990, 28–30.)

In **Spain**, (Bäcklund 1990, 39–40) the secretaries had the following duties

- normal paperwork, office work, translations
- foreign correspondence.

Language skills mentioned were Spanish as mother tongue, English, French and Basque.

In **Poland**, (Bäcklund 1990, 46–47) the following tasks were mentioned:

- answering the phone
- receiving guests
- handling mail.

Of her own country Sweden, Bäcklund (1990, 13) states that some of the special areas that secretaries handle without proper education are economics, administration, communication and personnel issues.

#### 2.2.4 ISCO classification

As stated in the introduction, this study deals with the occupation that falls in The Classification of Occupations, ISCO-88, category 3431. The categories can also be seen as job descriptions.

According to ISCO-88, the persons who are classified into the occupation of 3431, administrative secretaries and related associate professionals “implement and support the communication, documentation and internal managerial co-ordination activities of an organisational unit to assist the head of unit and other members of staff, and make verbatim reports of proceedings. The tasks include:

- a. drafting administrative correspondence and minutes;
- b. obtaining, proposing and monitoring deadlines and follow-up dates;

- c. screening requests for meetings, scheduling and organising meetings, scheduling and organising meetings and travel arrangements for the head of unit and other members of staff;
- d. assisting in the preparation of budgets, monitoring of expenditures, drafting of contracts and purchasing or acquisition orders;
- e. assisting the head of unit and other staff with inquiries of an administrative or organisational nature;
- f. assisting the head of unit in organising and hosting hospitality functions for outside visitors or members of staff;
- g. making verbatim reports of proceedings in legislative assemblies, courts of law or other places in shorthand or by other means;
- h. writing and answering business or technical letters and other similar correspondence;
- i. performing related tasks;
- j. supervising other workers.”

Examples of the occupations classified into this category:

- Administrative secretary
- Assistant, correspondence
- Verbatim reporter. (ILO 2007b)

It should be noted, however, that ISCO-88 is currently in the process of being updated to take into account the developments in the economies of countries all over the world. The updating will not affect the basic principles and structure of ISCO-88 but will take the form of new occupational groups in some areas and improved descriptions in others. The updated version will be ready in 2008. (ILO 2007a) Member States of the European Union have not yet decided whether the updated ISCO will be introduced as such or as a more detailed version updated for the Member States.

The Classification of Occupations used by Statistics Finland (2001) is based on the classification of occupations by EU ISCO-88(COM), which is partly more detailed than ISCO-88. The Finnish version of the classification will also be updated based on either the ISCO-88 or the ISCO-88(COM) if an update of it is made. Duration: 2004–2009 (Statistics Finland 2007a.)

## 2.3 Assistant education at HAAGA-HELIA

The title of assistant or secretary is a common occupational title. The title is not necessarily tied to any specific educational qualification. Most often a commercial education is required. (Kolehmainen-Lindén 1997, 115.) In general, the most important requirements for the occupation of a secretary are the knowledge of languages, word processing skills and handiness with office equipment and knowledge of the industry of the workplace (Aaltio 1985, 20). Based on her research results Bäcklund (1990, 12) stated that secretaries in general have a very good educational background, often even better than that of their superiors.

As stated in the introduction, HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences is the only university in Finland with degree programmes for management assistants. Students graduate from these 210 credit-point degree programmes for management assistants in 3.5 years. The language of instruction is either Finnish or English. The Finnish title is Tradenomi, the English one is Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA). Management assistant education at HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences is well known and highly valued in the Finnish labour market. Graduates from the degree programme are qualified to work in high-level positions as management assistants, executive secretaries and administrative or marketing assistants, as well as in the areas of communications and PR. (HAAGA-HELIA 2007.)

### 2.3.1 Core competence areas

The studies focus on the core competence areas required of management assistants, i.e. multicultural communications expertise, information expertise, and business expertise. Multicultural communication includes studies in organisational communication, languages and cultures. Finnish graduates are fluent in Finnish and English and two additional languages. Foreign graduates are also fluent in Finnish and English and one additional language. The additional language choices are French, German, Russian, Spanish, Swedish and from the beginning of autumn term 2008 Chinese. Courses in Italian are also offered. Information expertise includes studies in the gathering, processing and generating of information. Business and public administration includes studies in organisation and management, marketing, law and accounting. Studies in information technology are integrated into all competence areas. (HAAGA-HELIA 2007.)

### **2.3.2 Work placement and exchange studies**

The work placement of 100 full working days normally takes place after two years of studies and is uninterrupted. The second and third year are also recommended for possible exchange studies. HAAGA-HELIA has a wide network of international partner institutions offering a good opportunity for students to take part of their studies abroad. In addition, it is possible to do work placement abroad. (HAAGA-HELIA 2007.)

### **2.3.3 Objectives of the programme**

The degree programmes for management assistants educate professional management assistants to support a multilingual management and multicultural workplace community. Graduates are able to interact in professional situations in at least three foreign languages, the foreign students also in Finnish. Upon graduation they have acquired expertise in networking, project organisation and workplace management. They have multicultural communication skills and are experts in gathering, processing and generating information. Together with this, they are able to use their extensive knowledge of business and public administration to produce high-quality business and administration documents. Graduates also have the professional skills to make use of information technology in the office. (HAAGA-HELIA 2007.)

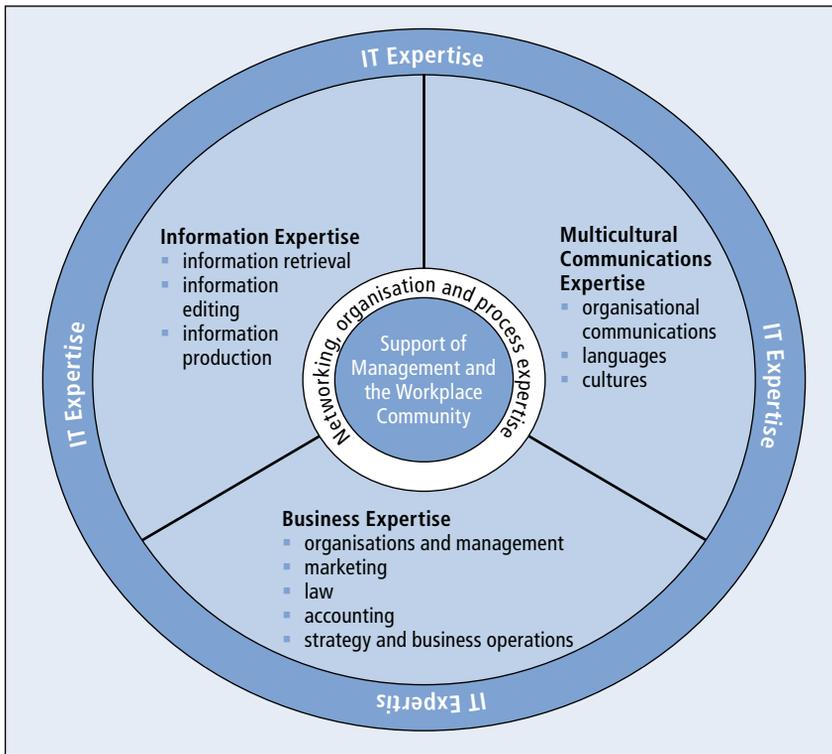


Figure 1. Core competence areas of the degree programmes for management assistants (HAAGA-HELIA 2007).

## 2.4 Future prospects

To know what competences and qualifications are needed in the future labour market we need to look ahead and try to anticipate changes. Such looking ahead has been done by the Confederation of Finnish Industries EK with two intent projects being finalised recently. The final report of Education Intelligence (EK 2007a) seeks to provide a vision of the future business environment, products and services, labour market and the competences required by companies operating in six industrial and construction sectors in the year 2015.

Services 2020 (EK 2007b) is a long-term intent project with the objective of anticipating the changes that will take place in the private service industry and the operational environment of the individual sectors, and to examine how these changes will be reflected in the competence requirements in the sectors being evaluated. The project focused on seven

sectors: IT services, commerce, real estate services, accommodation and catering, financing and insurance, social services and health care.

The shared objective of both projects is to influence education policies and planning to make a contribution towards ensuring that the Finnish enterprises will, in the future, have access to competent and qualified labour in sufficient quantities. Because of their focus on education needs of the future the project reports are very valuable sources from the point of view of this study because assistants work in every field of business as well as in the public sector.

The reports state that we are living on the threshold of the era of connectivity. We have moved on to an age where the main focus lies on man and interpersonal relations. Instead of the information society, Education Intelligence (EK 2007a, 3) uses the concept of **a conscious network society**. Knowledge acquires a new meaning when it benefits mankind. There will be a trend away from specific solutions towards the perception of the big picture and continual development of processes and systems. The successful cluster of the future will engender social innovations that will alter the ways that society works and transform its structures. The cluster produces system innovations where the “product” consists of a new way of life and life-enhancing experiences, such as health-promoting products and services, smooth production processes, minimization of risk, communications, learning, and a pleasant and safe environment.

### 2.4.1 Future employee

In the future, straightforward life paths, such as long careers in the service of the same employer, will be rare. The workplace environment and duties will become more international for everybody. The qualities we are required to acquire is respect for others, knowledge of other cultures and versatile interpersonal skills to promote a genuine dialogue and argumentation. (EK 2007a, 2.)

The employee of 2015 is a change-maker who values her/himself and others and is committed to developing and sharing skills and competence (EK 2007a, 26). The competences required by companies consist of

1. knowledge and skills
2. values and attitudes and
3. networks.

Knowledge and skills refer to the theoretical and practical capabilities acquired through training or experience necessary for coping with work.

Values mean the compatibility of the individual and corporate values while attitudes refer to the approach to work and the workplace community. Membership in various networks will be of growing importance in recruitment because new knowledge and skills are increasingly produced and exchanged in networks. Naturally, a high standard of competence will remain important. (EK 2007a, 28.)

In 2015, according to EK (2007a, 23) companies will be undergoing perpetual change. In order to maintain competitiveness, firms need to develop their processes, products and services. In a digital operating environment, information and products are transmitted online with wireless mobile communication devices. The employee will be part of a competence network that makes it possible to harness the competence of individuals around the world. There will be a wide range of employment relationships, and various corporate arrangements will be routine. For any employee, the ability to change is a basic skill comparable to literacy.

Companies need to strike a happy balance between specialists and “amalgamators” who combine individual strains of competence. Even specialists will be required to have the ability to evaluate issues from a variety of angles. Amalgamators are people who fuse specific competences creatively. (EK 2007a, 3.)

Increasingly, new things are generated at the various interfaces within multidisciplinary networks. Trust between the individual parties is a necessary prerequisite for fruitful cooperation. The challenge is to find a common “language” and ways of working that can be shared by the individual experts who all perceive the world differently. (EK 2007a, 3.)

In a global operating environment, the employee is required to understand different cultures and be able to work with people with different cultural backgrounds. A sound sense of self and positive curiosity about new people and views help succeed in international cooperation.

The nationality of the employee will have lost all meaning: the key positions will be open for candidates from all over the world. Foreign experts move into Finland while Finnish experts leave for other countries. (EK 2007a, 26; 2007b, 10.)

In EK’s reports (2007a; 2007b), the traditional occupational division to blue or white collar workers and management has been replaced by a division to implementers, appliers and seers. That is to say that in the future companies will employ **experts** whose duties will focus on

- doing (implementers), being responsible for assembly, installation, servicing, sales, etc.
- applying the expertise in response to customer needs (appliers), or
- developing and creating something new (seers). (EK 2007a, 25.)

Considering the task at hand, we need to ask to which category will assistants belong? Havén (2007) when discussing the employment of the graduates from various universities of applied sciences has used the 2001 Classification of Occupations by Statistics Finland. For the purposes of his study, he has formed two groups out of the original ten occupational groups (see appendix 1). These two groups are expert level occupations and worker level occupations. Havén has placed, as can be expected, assistants in the category of experts. The other two occupational groups within this category are special experts and managers/top civil servants. From this and the above definitions we can conclude that assistants can be seen to be in the group “appliers” or perhaps even in “seers” in the future.

Regardless to which occupational category one belongs there are some mutual competence needs:

- creativity and innovation
- technological competence
- business competence
- network competence
- service competence
- design competence
- management of multiculturalism
- responsible business (EK 2007a, 27).

EK’s report (2007a, 3, and 28) also claims that an improvement in the general standard of competence will make it possible to expand the range of duties, which will gradually lead to the blurring of the boundaries between individual occupational categories, and clearly defined job descriptions will disappear. For example, the boundaries between appliers and seers will be getting harder to define. The creation of new things will be based on the sharing, joint development and perfection of own competence.

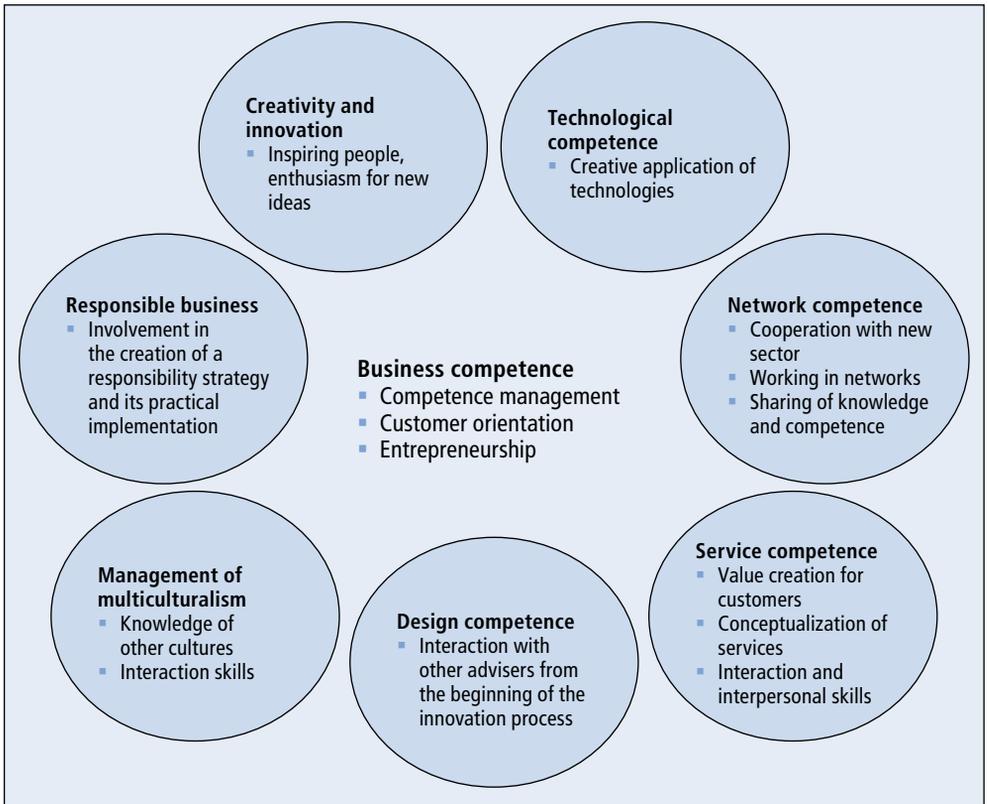


Figure 2. What is expected of applicants? (EK 2007a, 30).

## 2.4.2 Cultural diversity at the workplace

By 2020 Finland and Finns will have become truly international. Immigration and recruitment of experts from other countries will transform workplaces into multicultural communities. (EK 2007b.)

The representatives of all occupational categories – seers, applicants and implementers alike – will in the future have more and more face-to-face contacts with people of different nationalities. At the same time, open-mindedness will turn into a major competitive tool: an easy-going atmosphere will attract people who think differently or have a different work history, including people with different cultural backgrounds (Himanen 2004). Internationalization requires cultural awareness, inter-personal skills and team-working capabilities. An understanding of the partner's culture is important; familiarity with the values, customs, religion, gender roles and social norms promotes open-mindedness and efficient cooperation. Special challenges facing the applicants and seers are interpersonal skills in

a demanding international environment, the ability to engage in a dialogue, as well as argumentation and debating skills.

As far as language skills requirements are concerned, perhaps surprisingly EK (2007b, 10), claims that the same languages will be important in 2020 as today. Aside from Finnish, in the service sector the knowledge of Swedish, English, and Russian will be a significant asset. Knowledge of Chinese will become increasingly important in IT services.

English is by far the most common language used in international communications and many organisations will use English as the official working language. In spite of its dominant role, knowledge of other languages will also be vital in 2015. Few jobs, however, will require complete mastery of a foreign language. Oral language skills must be sufficient for active interaction and cooperation: what is required is the ability to express ideas clearly and convincingly, arouse interest and create an atmosphere of trust. At the same time, good writing skills will become more important as Finnish will increasingly be replaced by some other language in reporting. (EK 2007a; 2007b, 6.)

### **2.4.3 Summary of competence requirements by 2020**

From the above discussion of the future life at work place based on two reports by EK we can draw the following conclusions what is expected of assistants in the future.

Finns and Finland as well as work will be truly multicultural. Therefore respect for others and knowledge and understanding of other cultures, their values and attitudes, will be essential. One must be able to work with people with different cultural backgrounds. For assistants this means for example that they need a good knowledge of languages. The same languages will be important in 2020 as today. English will be the most important language in international communication. Even though it will be important to be able to express ones ideas clearly and convincingly orally good writing skills will become more important.

The future companies will employ experts, with high standard of theoretical and practical knowledge acquired through training and/or experience. Technological, business, network, service and design competence are among the competences that create competitive advance.

By 2020, membership in various networks will be of growing importance in a digital operating environment and the ability to change is a basic skill comparable to literacy.

# 3

## Data collection on assistants' work in Europe

### 3.1 Leonardo Mobility Project and study at hand

■ The data for this research project was collected by teachers, 12 in all, from the degree Programmes for management assistants (both the Finnish and English sections) of HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences. Two teachers collected data in Finland but the majority of the teachers, 10, participated in the Leonardo Mobility Project 2006–2007 (also known as The Exchange of Expertise between Management Assistant Work and Education in Europe, TEEMAWEE). That's why it is shortly presented here (see also appendix 3).

HAAGA-HELIA participated in the Leonardo project with institutions of higher education in eight other European countries: Belgium, France, Germany, Holland, Ireland, Poland, Spain and Sweden. Each country contributed one Partner University, a national EUMA organisation when possible (see appendix 4) and three companies if possible. In France and Spain, the partner university provided the company connections (three different companies). In Belgium, Holland and Poland, the local EUMA organized the corporate contacts. In Germany, the researcher Sirpa Solonen organised the company interviews herself. In Sweden EUMA Finland organised these connections. In Finland, Tradenomi HSO Sihteerit r.y. helped to find the interviewees. In Ireland, no company interviews were arranged.

The objective of the Leonardo project was to deepen professional know-how and international knowledge regarding the education of management assistants, their actual work assignments and any professional challenges of the future in the various participating European countries. Furthermore, the project helped to make the international networking of experts among the various organizations possible. The project supports the pedagogical strategy regarding management assistant education as well as strengthens internationalisation and know-how at HAAGA-HELIA.

The project ran from 1 September 2006 till 31 December 2007. In 2006 six teachers of language and professional courses went to Spain, Holland, Ireland and Sweden. In 2007 the same was done in the countries of Belgium, Poland, France and Germany. English Degree Programme Manager for Multilingual Management Assistants, Ms Paula Ronkainen was the project manager of this Leonardo mobility project.

## 3.2 Interviews

### 3.2.1 Interview questions

The interview questions were drawn up by Minna Söderqvist, PhD. Originally there were five sets of questions for:

- assistants in companies; background questions and interview questions
- superiors in companies; interview questions
- EUMA representatives; interview questions
- university representatives; background questions
- university teachers (colleagues); interview questions (see appendices 6 to 9).

There were two coaching sessions for Leonardo mobility project teachers; one six-hour session for all interviewers on 11 September 2006, the second one was for those teachers who left in spring 2007. The two-hour session was held on 19 January 2007. The two teachers who did the interviews in Finland were inducted by Paula Ronkainen just before they went. The teachers were familiarized with the materials and instructed how to do the interviews (see appendix 10).

The questions were forwarded to each partner school well in advance before the Leonardo visits by the HAAGA-HELIA teachers with a cover letter where it was asked that the background questions would be answered in writing before the interviews (see appendix 5).

Of these background questions and interview questions the questions posed to assistants, their superiors and EUMA representatives (in Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland) are analysed below. The questions presented to university teachers concerning language instruction have been analysed by M.A. Marketta Keisu and the results are presented in appendix 11. The rest of the data gathered of the partner institutions is not analysed here. It will be used in developing networks further between HAAGA-HELIA and these partners.

## 3.2.2 Interviewers and interviewees

Only the interviews analysed in chapters below are discussed here.

Most of the interviews took place face to face, some were conducted by phone. The interviews were conducted in the interviewee's own language when possible and taped. They were then transcribed and thereafter translated into English. Part of the transcribing and translating was done by students as part of their studies. The results were checked by their teachers. Part of the transcribing and translating was done by the teachers themselves (i.e. France). Interview material from Sweden and Finland was not translated into English.

### 3.2.2.1 Visits in autumn 2006: The Netherlands, Spain and Sweden

#### ▪ **The Netherlands**

Swedish lecturer Marketta Keisu visited the Netherlands 5–11 November 2006. She interviewed three assistants, one manager and the Netherlands EUMA representative.

The interviewees represented three organisations: a professional education institute, a hospital and an air traffic organisation. The manager was “HR manager” by title and the assistants had the titles “Executive Secretary”, “Office Manager” and “Secretaris Medische staf”.

The interviews took from 10 to 33 minutes. The interviews took place in either the interviewees' own office (three interviews) or during lunch (1). The atmosphere was open and relaxed. The questions were presented in English in their original form. Constrained by the language barrier, the manager's interview was somewhat superficial.

#### ▪ **Spain**

Spanish lecturers Pekka Savinainen and Pedro Beltrán Herrera visited Spain 14–21 October 2006. They interviewed four managers and four assistants in four companies. The interviews took from 15 to 62 minutes. There is no EUMA in Spain.

The organisations were an automotive factory, a cultural and congress company, conserve factory and a non-profit research institute. The managers had the following titles: “Director”, “General Director”, “Managing Director” and “Plant Manager”. The assistants were “Administrative Assistant”, “Management Assistant”, “Production Assistant” and “Secretary of Direction”.

All interviews were conducted in Spanish except for one which was done in English. The questions were translated from English to Span-

ish by Beltrán Herrera as they went along. The interviews took place in either the assistant's or the manager's own office with no disturbances. (Savinainen, P. 27.9.2007.) In some situations there were more people present than just the interviewers and the interviewee.

- **Sweden**

Swedish lecturer Marjaana Halsas visited Sweden 23–30 September 2006. She interviewed three assistants and two managers in Swedish. She translated the questions there and then but the interviewees had received the questions in English beforehand and they had them on the table in front of them during the interviews. The interviewer stated that she considered the answers reliable. EUMA Sweden did not take part in this study. The interviews took from 21 to 55 minutes. (Halsas, M. 28.9.2007.)

The interviewees represented two large international companies. The manager's titles were "Business controller/Deputy President SBU Director" and "President and CEO". The assistants were "Assistant to President and CEO", "Executive Assistant" and "Market Assistant".

### 3.2.2.2 Visits in spring 2007: Belgium, France, Germany and Poland

- **Belgium**

IT lecturer Anneli Virtamo visited Belgium 22–28 April 2007. She interviewed three people and made five interviews. The first person was a manager and interviewed in that capacity. The second person was interviewed in the role of an assistant and as a EUMA representative. The third one had been an assistant and was now a manager. She was interviewed about both roles. The interviews lasted from 10 to 22 minutes.

The interviewees were from three companies, two of them were large multinationals representing automotive and computer industries, the third company is part of a multinational company that produces medicine and health products. The managers had the following titles "Brand Manager" and "Staff ("People") Manager", the assistants were "Assistant" and "Management Assistant".

- **France**

French lecturers Catherine Métivier and Kristiina Åberg visited France 19–24 March 2007. They interviewed nine assistants. Each interview lasted approx. 60 minutes. EUMA France did not participate.

The questions were presented in French. Métivier translated them as they went along. There were no disturbances during the interviews

that would give rise to doubt the reliability of the answers. (Åberg, K. 28.9.2007.)

The nine assistants came from seven organisations. The organisations where the assistants worked were: a chamber of commerce, an educational institute, a real estate agency, a branch of an American toy and games company, a subsidiary of a German electronics company, a chocolate factory and a French affiliate of a multinational company that employs 240 people and produces e.g. machine tools.

The assistants' titles were "Executive Assistant to the HR functions", "General Management Assistant", "Qualified Secretary" (2), "Management Assistant" (4) and "Training and Competences Manager".

#### ▪ **Germany**

German lecturer Sirpa Solonen visited Germany 11–19 March 2007. She interviewed six assistants and five managers and one employee. The interviews were conducted in English and translated into German if needed. The interviews took place in either the interviewee's office or a meeting room. Only in one occasion there was another person present during the interview. Two managers were interviewed by phone. The interviews lasted from six to 75 minutes. There was no meeting with EUMA Germany. The answers from EUMA were received in writing by email. (Solonen, S. 15.10.2007.)

The interviewees represented four large international companies representing the fields of telecommunications, home appliances and business software solutions. The managers' titles ran as follows: "Automotive Aftermarket Vice President Purchasing", "Director International Delegations", "Head of Service Assurance", "Senior Vice President HR Technology" and "Training Manager".

The assistants' titles were "Assistant to the Senior Vice President HR Technology", "Delegation Consultant", "International Management Assistant", "Project Assistant" and "Team Assistant" (2).

#### ▪ **Poland**

Russian lecturer Pirjo Salenius and English teacher Karl Robbins visited Poland 11–17 March 2007. They interviewed three managers and three assistants. In Poland, the EUMA representative was also interviewed.

The interviews were conducted in English except for one that was conducted in Russian. Salenius translated the questions while interviewing. The interviews lasted from 30–90 minutes. During the interviews there were two to six people present. It seems likely that the presence of

the superior created some kind of tension in the situation. (Salenius, P. 27.9.2007.)

The assistants interviewed worked in three different companies. The companies were a corporate travel bureau employing 30 people and specializing in servicing business trips, a sales and marketing company of stamps and office products which is a daughter of an Austrian company employing 50 people and a training company for adult training.

The managers were “Manager”, “Managing director” and “President”. The assistants were “Assistant” (2) and “Purchasing and Administration Specialist”.

### 3.2.2.3 Interviews in autumn 2007: Finland

IT lecturer Heli Lankinen and Management lecturer Eija Kärnä interviewed two assistants each in Finland in October 2007. Furthermore one manager sent her answers by email. The interviews were conducted in peaceful surroundings without interruptions and they lasted from approximately 60 to 90 minutes. (Lankinen, H. 11.12.2007; Kärnä, E. 11.12.2007.)

All assistants worked for different companies. Three of the companies belong to some of the largest companies in Finland. The number of personnel ranges from 5500 to 15000 employees. The fourth assistant works for an institute that organizationally is under the Ministry of Transport and Communications. The manager’s title was “Vice President,

Human Resources”. The assistants’ titles were “Assistant to President and CEO”, “Executive Assistant”, “Executive Assistant to the Director General” and “Personal Assistant to the President”.

### 3.2.3 Total number of interviews

COUNTRY	ASSISTANTS	MANAGERS	EUMA	ALL
Belgium	2	2	1	5
Finland	4	1	0	5
France	9	0	0	9
Germany	6	5 +1 empl.	1	13
The Netherlands	3	1	1	5
Poland	3	3	1	7
Spain	4	4	0	8
Sweden	3	2	0	5
All	34	18 +1	4	57

Table 1. The total number of interviews.

Altogether 56 assistants, managers and EUMA representatives and one employee (Germany) were interviewed for this study. In some cases EUMA representative was also interviewed about her own job as an assistant and therefore the number of people interviewed is smaller than the number of interviews.

## 3.3 Analysis of data

The data for this study was collected by using three sets of questions (appendices 3 and 4) to interview the target groups. The researchers' travel reports were also used as sources of information.

The data was analysed by forming four themes of the original questions and under each theme the answers by assistants, managers and EUMA representatives reported. The analysis of interviews was supplemented by the information in the travel reports.

There were 18 questions for assistants, half of them background questions. The questions posed to assistants were not numbered, originally. Numbering was done during the analysis for clarity (appendix 3). For superiors there were six questions and for EUMA representatives there were seven (appendix 4). Some questions deal with more than one theme and therefore are mentioned in the below chart twice or more. It seems worth mentioning that originally the intention was that all the taped data be analyzed by using discourse analysis. This strategy was abandoned after the researcher assigned to the task changed jobs. Instead it was decided to use a more traditional approach. This explains why theme interviews were not used in the first place but the themes formed only afterwards.

The themes and the questions correspondingly:

Theme: **Assistant background**

QUESTIONS FOR	NO.	
Assistants	A1	What title do you use on your business card?
	A2	How many years have you worked as an assistant?
	A3	What is your educational level?
	A4	What further courses have you taken since receiving your degree?
	A5	Who are your superiors? In what positions have they worked?
	A6	Do you have a special area in this organization which you personally take care of? If so, describe your duties relating to it.
	A7	What IT programmes do you know how to use? Which ones do you use on a daily basis?
	A8	What languages can you speak and write? How would you describe your spoken and written language skills in these languages?
	A9	Do you have a mobile phone?
EUMA representatives	E2	How many assistants (multilingual management assistants) are there in your country? What is the female-to-male ratio? What is their general educational background? Where have they studied?
	E3	What is the general salary level of a multilingual management assistant?
	E4	What IT programmes do they use? What languages do they speak? Do they have mobile phones and email? How would you describe the work of an assistant in your country today? What are the biggest challenges in their everyday work?

Table 2. Assistant background questions.

## Theme: **Job description**

QUESTIONS FOR	NO.	
Assistants	A10	What you do, what kind of a weekly programme you have, if you have a job description (if so, what it is), what your role in the organization is, the biggest change in your work during the last five years?
	A11	Whom you meet, who the key persons/key partners in your job are?
	A12	What you like/don't like about your work?
	A14	What is easy for you and why, what your most demanding tasks are and why?
	A16	What you do in order to prepare meetings, what your role is during them, what you do after them, for example for follow-up?
	A17	What type of spoken business communication situations you have in your everyday work, what you need to be able to do in your mother tongue, what you need to be able to do in foreign languages (which languages), how and when you use a mobile phone and email?
Superiors	S1	What are your responsibilities; what do you do?
	S2	What does your assistant do for you? What are the most important tasks s/he does? Does s/he also work for someone else? If so, for whom?
	S3	What type of work division do you have with your assistant?
EUMA representatives	E1	What do management assistants do for you in your country? With whom and for whom do they work?
	E4	What IT programmes do they use? What languages do they speak? Do they have mobile phones and email? How would you describe the work of an assistant in your country today? What are the biggest challenges in their everyday work?

Table 3. Questions concerning job descriptions.

## Theme: **Cultural knowledge at work**

QUESTIONS FOR	NO.	
Assistants	A17	What type of spoken business communication situations you have in your everyday work, what you need to be able to do in your mother tongue, what you need to be able to do in foreign languages (which languages), how and when you use a mobile phone and email?
	A18	What type of cultural knowledge you need to use everyday on the national, organizational and professional levels?

Table 4. Questions about cultural knowledge at work.

Theme: **Changes, challenges and the future**

QUESTIONS FOR	NO.	
Assistants	A10	What you do, what kind of a weekly programme you have, if you have a job description (if so, what it is), what your role in the organization is, the biggest change in your work during the last five years?
	A13	What the biggest changes in your work have been?
	A15	What the challenges of today and tomorrow are and why, what the challenges in general for assistants will be in the future, what professional objectives for the coming ten years you have for yourself, for your job and for your organization?
Superiors	S4	What types of challenges do you see regarding your cooperation?
	S5	What type of job description do you think your assistant will have in ten years? With whom and for whom will s/he work?
	S6	What is your vision regarding an assistant's role in your organization ten years from now?
EUMA representatives	E4	What IT programmes do they use? What languages do they speak? Do they have mobile phones and email? How would you describe the work of an assistant in your country today? What are the biggest challenges in their everyday work?
	E5	What have been the biggest changes during the past five years in an assistant's work?
	E6	What do you think assistants will be doing ten years from now? What will be their position in the organization?
	E7	What are the future challenges facing a managerial assistant?

Table 5. Questions concerning changes, challenges and the future in assistants' work.

After assessing the quality of the data, the results are reported below first country by country in alphabetical order and then by summarizing these results a general model of assistants' work in Europe is presented. The questions are not repeated as such in the text but their numbers have been put in place when ever appropriate.

### 3.4 Discussion on the quality of data

In this study both the data and the analysis of it is qualitative by nature. The data was collected by interviews. The sets of open questions posed to the interviewees in eight different counties by twelve interviewers were the same. The questions were originally in English, but in most cases they were translated by the interviewers to the interviewees' language (in France to French, in Germany to German, in Sweden to Swedish etc.).

In data collection, there were almost more irregularities than regularities. Within each country there were fewer irregularities than between the countries. There are quite a few sources of measurement errors in the research material, e.g. different interviewers in each country, the translations back and forth, the wording and order of asking questions. Some interviewers also had their own agendas and professional interests as teachers of a certain subject. They had the chance to ask questions and they took it. Unfortunately, the analysis was made difficult by the fact they had not kept to the original questions but asked also other questions, changed the original questions and presented them in a random order. Many questions had several questions within them and it was quite usual that only some parts were asked. It must be pointed out, though, that some respondents did not answer all the questions and some also answered them in a random order.

As inconsistent as it may seem, from the methodological point of view the irregularities only prove the nature of the study to be qualitative. King (2006, 11) states that “a key feature of the qualitative research interview method is the nature of the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. The interviewee is seen as a “participant” in the research, actively shaping the course of the interview rather than passively responding to the interviewer’s pre-set questions.”

Regardless of the measures that are employed it is important that they be both reliable and valid (McIntyre 2005, 66). It is obvious that with such a great number of people involved in different phases of this research project there are many possible sources of imperfections that may lessen especially the reliability of the data. To begin with, due to a number of coincidences, the analysis was done by a person who did not conduct any interviews and, furthermore, was not responsible for the questions. The data was collected when the writer of this report stepped in to a moving train the destination of which was already determined.

A reliable measure is one that gives consistent results (McIntyre 2005, 67). Reliability has to do with the following questions: how simple and understandable they are, whether they can be understood the way they were meant and whether the results would be the same regardless of who the interviewer was. The questions were simple, open questions and even though there were so many interviewers and the questions were posed to people working in different European countries, there is no reason to believe that the results had been more reliable if the interviewers were changed to another twelve people. The consistency of the answers across Europe speaks for this conclusion.

However there would be less concern for the reliability of the material had the person who designed the interview questions alone conducted the interviews. Such a data collection would have been ideal from the point of view of reliability but, on the other hand, it would have taken a lot of time and it can be asked if the language skills of any one person would have been enough to perform such a task. Even though some reservations concerning reliability are in order with so many different interviewers, languages and translations with the possible effect that the questions have not been understood in exactly the same way or in the way they were meant and because some interviews were done hastily in a few minutes or over lunch it must also be stated that this data is unique in many ways and valuable even with flaws.

Still some of the questions could have been more precise to allow comparisons to be made. Especially in the case of the educational level the respondents should have been presented a universal measure like ISCO skills levels or ISED-1997 with explanations to choose from. Also the knowledge of their age range would have been needed.

The interviewees were selected in three different ways. In most cases the interviewed assistants were selected by the partner schools among their own previous top students. In those countries with EUMA participation, it also helped to arrange contacts with companies, but in Germany the interviewer organised the interviews. In Sweden and Finland, EUMA Finland organised the contacts. There were an uneven number of interviewees per country because in some it was easier to arrange access to organisations than in others.

The interviewees were good representatives of the target profession of this study but by no means represent all and every assistant or secretary in Europe. From the point of view of the study in Poland, two of the assistants were not ideal targets because they were still students and had hardly any experience of the field. Moreover the assistants were interviewed in the presence of their managers, which gives reason to doubt some of their answers.

A measure is valid if it actually measures what you think you are measuring (McIntyre 2005, 66). The validity deals with the contents of the questions, whether the questions give answers to the research questions. The questions were based on earlier study results on assistants' work and dealt with a profession the interviewers and interviewees alike knew very well. The validity of the questions in this study is quite high.

Finally, there is the question of reflexivity (King 2006, 20). According to King, the term reflexivity refers to the recognition that the involvement of the researcher as an active participant in the research process shapes

the nature of the process and the knowledge produced through it. The interviewers were inclined to be very positive about their subject and the subjects of the research because of their own professional status. That is to say that they might have received slightly more positive results concerning the influence and importance of the assistants and their work than totally neutral researchers. The same applies to the knowledge produced by the analysis.

# 4

## Assistants' work in Belgium

### 4.1 Assistant's background

■ The EUMA representative who was interviewed told that in Belgium the female to male ratio among management assistants is 90 % female (E2). It is still rare to find a male management assistant. Most assistants have management assistant education and have also studied languages. Their level of studies is A1 which is just below university level. The course takes about three years; during their last year of studies they have traineeships. There are also firms that offer complementary training.

Three pay levels can be distinguished and the level depends on experience: just graduated, a few years of experience and top level professionals (Virtamo, travel report). Salary (E3) also depends on where you work: the location, the size and the field of the company all have an impact. The EUMA representative said that “Brussels is better paid than Antwerp. If it's a small company or a large multinational, there you also have big differences, and also the sector: so the pharmaceutical compared to tourism for example, there is a big difference as well.”

The IT programmes that management assistants use (E4) and that are very important are Word, Excel and PowerPoint. Some use Access and some company-specific programs that are different everywhere. “And then of course email, Outlook or Lotus Notes, depending what their company uses.”

Assistants speak Dutch, French and English. Also German is often asked for. All additional languages are more than welcome: “Spanish; Italian, Russian...” In the multinational companies the working language is English. In smaller companies it depends where the companies are located; the working language can be Dutch or French. It is English if they have contacts with the members of the Board in the United Kingdom or in the United States.

Company mobile phones are rare; there is email, and depending on the company, one can have or not have a remote access.

According to the EUMA representative in Belgium, assistants' employment situation is very good. All vacancies cannot be filled because there are not enough high-level applicants. Assistants with good a command of languages and computer programs are needed. Also the representative from the university KH Mechelen had stated that they could educate as many as 400 assistants and they could easily be employed. (Virtamo, travel report.)

The EUMA representative commented that the students see an assistant as a person who assists others and cannot advance to a management position. The situation in the labour market is however the opposite and an assistant can advance quite quickly.

The two assistants interviewed were firstly asked about the titles on their business cards (A1). The first one said that it is "Sales and Marketing Executive" but in the company itself it's more known as "Sales and Marketing Assistant". The second one, who no longer works as an assistant because she was promoted to manager said that she used "market coordinator" as her title, because assistance was only a part of her job and it wasn't on her card either; she was the assistant to her manager, because he needed someone to take care of a lot of things for him.

The first one has worked as an assistant (A2) for nineteen years and the second one had worked as an assistant for two and a half years. The first assistant stated that her education (A3) is "higher education, the short type: A1...and languages". The second one said that her educational level "in European terms would be called the Bachelor's degree". The first one has not taken any further courses (A4), the second one many within the company. The first one's superior (A5) is the Sales and Marketing Director and the second one's was the central programming coordinator manager who had had a lot of different jobs before that; e.g. he had been a managing director in Czech Republic and a marketing director in Belgium.

The first assistant's special personal area (A6) is being the contents manager of the company portal – intranet – and also the content manager for the CRM system – making sure that all information is correct, in the right format, and there are no troubles in it. The second one stated that: "The areas I took care of when I was working for my previous boss were the travel arrangements and the holiday planning of our particular small part in the organization."

The IT programmes these assistants (A7) use are the general Microsoft Office programs Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook, Lotus Notes and specific company ones (e.g. Sales fors.com). On a daily basis they use Outlook, Excel and the specific ones for the company; PowerPoint and Word on a weekly basis. The languages they speak and write (A8)

are Dutch (mother tongue), French, English and German. They do not have company mobile phones (A9).

The researcher also took note of the assistants' working conditions: The assistants had own small room or a corner in an open plan office. (Virtamo, travel report)

## 4.2 Job description

In Belgium, two managers, two assistants and the EUMA representative were interviewed. In Belgium, no management–assistant -pairs were interviewed.

The first question posed to the EUMA representative dealt with the contents of work of management assistants (E1, E4). She replied: “In general, they are assistants to a manager, director, sales manager, marketing manager - all people with certain function that need more assistance. And they do the general secretarial work and also some additional preparations for meetings, finding suppliers for instance, booking, travel arrangements – all these kinds of things. There are also management assistants who do not work for only one manager but for a team of managers. It all depends on the company – if it's a big company or a small company – and how it is organized.”

The first manager interviewed was the personnel manager of about 27 secretaries within the company. The second manager had herself formerly been an assistant but now she is a brand manager for a car company. Her responsibilities include price setting, training of dealers and salesmen and some administrative work. (S1)

Neither of the two managers had personal assistants (S2). The personnel manager of secretaries shared her views on what assistants should do for the managers that they support. She said that their main task is calendar management – accepting earlier agreed meetings and making meeting arrangements: logistic support and finding the meeting rooms. Besides this, there are also the travel arrangements. They also handle the expense accounts of the managers. Some assume the job initiation of newcomers, some are more involved in organizing customer events, this varies from one secretary to another.

The second manager told the researcher that they have two people working for their department with 23 passenger car brand managers. These two people take care of distribution and transportation for the managers. They report to one of the managers directly and make sure transportation of all vehicles goes well; “if there is a launch, they distribute

the vehicles... if something goes wrong with the invoice or the vehicles are delivered wrong, they start the process of taking care of it and they follow up the entire process and they only come to us to see whether it is a valid request from the dealer or not. So they take care of a lot of the administrative...”

The first manager stated that the work division between assistants and their managers (S3) depended on the managers and departments. “You can imagine that the relationship between a country general manager (CGM) and his secretary is different from the one between a manager who is responsible for an administration department and his secretary. The CGM has to be able to rely 200% on the secretary, because, e.g. she has access to his mail. Some managers work very autonomously and others rely on their secretaries for everything. So you have managers who will, for example, if they need a projector for a meeting go to the service desk and collect it themselves. You have other managers who automatically ask their secretary to do this.”

The second manager said that the managers “handle the more general stuff, take responsibility for the price settings and for everything. Our assistants take care more of the execution business. They have their own responsibilities but in the end, if something goes wrong, it’s on our account.”

When the assistants were asked about their job description (A10) both assistants said that they do not have one. The first one told that her duties are: the complete planning, and agenda of the superior. Travel and meeting arrangements, making up presentations, finding back financial information out of the company system. She also organizes the meetings for the members of the office staff but not their presentations. “And there is the follow-up of our portal on a weekly basis. And our CRM system.”

The former assistant said that she did not have a job description because working as an assistant “was something I did on the side in addition to my normal day-to-day job. There was this monthly schedule with planning and with expense notes rather than a weekly routine.” She took care of everything he didn’t have time for or he didn’t know how to, her role was to be there when he needed her.

The key person/partner (A11) in the first assistant’s job is the Sales and Marketing Director, and, on the other hand, the sales managers and the marketing managers, as well. The key persons in the former assistant’s job were her manager, the HR department, the accounting department and outside the company the people that she contacted to make travel arrangements and hotel bookings.

The first assistant likes (A12) the variety in her job and the fact that she can use her language abilities. She does not have daily or weekly routines, every day is different. Overall she likes her job, she only thinks that “sometimes we have organized a complete set-up for a meeting: travel, hotel bookings and then last minute changes – this can be hectic; it’s just a pity of all the work that has been put in it beforehand.” She does not find her work particularly easy but has over the time adopted some well perceived habits that make the job easier. More demanding is the follow-up of the agenda of the manager, because things can change quite quickly. She also finds her special area as the content manager for the CRM system demanding because it is still fairly new to her. But she likes it because she learns new things and it keeps her alert.

The former assistant liked most the contacts with people outside the company. The assistant part gave an added value to her day-to-day job. What she did not like was “the pile of administration”. The superior wasn’t keen on it and therefore he used to give everything what he could to her. “Even his expense notes and everything...” The easiest for her were the routine jobs, e.g. holiday planning. The most demanding tasks come all of a sudden. “My manager would burst into the office all of the sudden, having forgotten that he needed to travel to... I don’t know where the next day! And you had to get everything arranged for him... It wasn’t difficult, but it’s a bit more stress, because obviously you stress out and you annoy other people when talking on the phone, saying you needed ticket by today.”

Question A16 dealt with meetings. Only the first assistant arranges meetings. Firstly, she has to find a day that suits everyone and then to find the most ideal location. Many people, the staff, come from different countries. Then she has to make all the necessary arrangements with a hotel, or a business centre where the meeting is organized. If hotel rooms are needed, she books them in advance. For the evening she suggests a few restaurants or makes a group dinner. If she arranges the meeting for her superior, most of the time she has some PowerPoint presentations to make up. Then of course the travel details – she always makes up a detailed travel plan for the superior that he knows where he is going, at what time things are starting, if taxis have been booked to hotels, if a rental car has been booked - all that kind of information. This way, the manager can leave one plan at home for his family and take one with him.

“During the meetings... That depends. If they are not held in the company premises then most of the time I’m not there.” If the meeting is inside the company she makes sure that the meeting place is OK; that the material is working; that they can start their meeting right on time.

After the meeting the participants make themselves their action plans and she is not involved.

The first assistant said that when spoken communication (A17) was conducted with internal colleagues it was in Dutch, with foreign colleagues they used either French or English depending on their nationality. In Belgium, she also makes reservations in her own language. She does not use mobile phone at work. She uses email on a daily basis – “almost all the time!”

In writing emails English is used as the common language most of the time, “unless it’s something to a direct colleague here: then I make them in Dutch. It all depends if you know in advance it will be forwarded then you make sure you write it in English.”

The former assistant spoke a lot with the HR Department and mostly business communications concerned reservations, cancellations, planning of trips for the different colleagues and managers, both spoken and written. “Mobile phone a little, email every day for formal, but also for very informal communication: for quick questions and so. Email is a daily routine and a very big part of what I do.”

### 4.3 Cultural knowledge at work

The first assistant said that the cultural knowledge (A18) on the national level was easy because she is Belgian, and one knows the national culture. “For your own country it’s always easy.... I think it’s also something you learn by doing.” With others it all depends who you are dealing with, should you be distant or can you become more personal. “In our company, it’s common that we all use the first names. But there’s still a difference when I’m talking to my direct boss or when I’m talking to the Vice President; then you automatically take a bit more distance and... Yeah. I think you have to feel this. Every company has its own way of life as well.”

The former assistant said that she needed a lot of cultural knowledge, because she worked with very different countries: Poland, the Czech Republic, Russia and South European countries. She felt that it was important to be perceptive of different cultures. She thought that the most important thing one needs is an open mindset.

## 4.4 Changes, challenges and the future

The biggest change (A13) in the first assistant's job has been that she has become contents manager for the portal and the CRM program – which was completely new for her. She said that it was quite a challenge to learn it all and be involved in this important tool. The former assistant had not experienced any changes during her two and a half years as an assistant.

As for the challenges (A15) the first assistant said that the challenge of today is being really proactive. The challenges in general will be that you also will do a lot of tasks that you did not learn at school. And you have to be open to new tasks, even if they are not directly related to the original position. The second assistant said that today's and tomorrow's challenges are about the same: the biggest challenge is to keep adapting yourself and to keep up to speed with everything, with all that is new – the new evolution is going on in the company and in society and you have to be there all the time; you have to keep up, because no one can manage with an out-of-date assistant.

The personnel manager saw that the challenges in assistant – superior co-operation stem from the change in the occupation from secretary to management assistant. This evolution in the tasks presents itself in the way that a manager asks his secretary to take up more and more operational tasks that he has no longer the time to do. And this can be quite confusing for the secretaries, because it can create an overload of work in some cases. On the other hand, the assistants appreciate that their manager delegates those tasks, because it gives them the variety in their job that they like. But it *may* be an obstacle or a generator of more stress.

The brand manager thought that the biggest challenge in assistant – superior co-operation is to be able to divide the work and the workload equally, and the responsibilities as well.

When asked about the future job description (S5), the personnel manager stated that the setting “one secretary for one manager” is changing. We are now asking secretaries to work for several managers. Assistants have to work more and more independently because the manager and the assistant don't see each other every day. An assistant has to be able to support the manager from a remote location. “The relationship between a manager and an assistant becomes very, very important because they have to rely on each other 200%. And this is a major change within our company.” Today, the company already offers to the *professionals* all the tools they need to work from a distance. “Till *now* this was something that within our company was not offered to management assistants. So, I can

imagine that these tools should be offered also to management assistants. But today all the managers' assistants already have flexible hours, a laptop and they can be connected from anywhere in the building. They work in open spaces. "In the future it might be that we ask some secretaries to work from another location, and this is the major change."

The brand manager thought that in ten years' time the two assistants that now work for 23 managers have both moved on a great deal. They could either be brand managers themselves, or at least junior brand managers, or they could be working in any other department, especially in sales and marketing or in some other company. "But I could see both of them – they are very good - on a mid-management level. Maybe in ten years time it would be low-management, but they would work up... Yes."

The brand manager also said that the same type of an assistant's role will be needed ten years from now (S6) as today. The traditional secretary is disappearing, and the all-around assistant, who takes a lot of responsibility, has a lot of initiative with a broader view of the job will step in. She will be an assistant to an entire department rather than one person.

As the biggest challenge, the EUMA representative saw (E4) the managing the agenda of the manager and see to it that it is not overbooked and that when he travels a lot, you find the best travel arrangements. And that the assistant becomes really his right hand on that part. She saw as the biggest changes during the past five years (E5) that in the past you really received letters and just had to type them out. Or you had to do it with a voice recorder. It was just copy paste, in fact. When now you can make up yourself the emails; you can work more independently; you can take action yourself and already respond to certain mails without asking your manager every time.

The EUMA representative was of the opinion that management assistants' jobs and their position will remain the same ten years from now (E6). She thought that they will be more involved in doing a proper follow-up of action points decided in meetings. It seems likely that they will draw up financial reports by themselves – all this in order to help their managers to have more information available – without having the managers to do them all. She thought that "there will still be the distinction between a manager and his stuff – and then his assistant." She thought that that will not change.

The future challenges facing a management assistant (E7) may include working from home. In many multinational companies bosses work a lot abroad. This may change the traditional way of working, you can work from home instead of being in the office where no manager is.

## 4.5 Summary of the interviews in Belgium

Neither of the two assistants had the word “assistant” in their title. Instead, their titles were “sales and marketing executive” and “market coordinator”. They did not have job descriptions even though they had worked as assistants for nineteen years and two and a half years respectively. Their education was of the A1 and bachelor level. The first one had not taken any further courses but the second one had taken many within the company. Both worked for top level managers. Only the first mentioned assistant had a special area working as the contents manager of the company portal and the CRM system.

The IT programmes Belgian assistants use are Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Access, Outlook, Lotus Notes and some company specific programmes. They speak and write Dutch (mother tongue), French, English and German. They do not have company mobile phones, email is very important in all communication.

The assistants’ tasks were:

- the planning and agenda of the superior
- travel and meeting arrangements
- taking care of guests
- making up presentations
- invoices
- finding (financial) information out of the company system
- a special area
  - the follow-up of the company portal and CRM system
  - holiday scheduling.

The division of work was traditional. An assistant usually works for one superior and handles support functions, timetables, meetings and travel arrangements.

Of cultural knowledge needed on the job, perceptivity and openness to different cultures was considered important. In multinationals the working language is English.

The interviewees considered that the traditional assistant’s work will remain but there can be changes in it. The assistants may be delegated more duties which means a larger spectre of tasks. An assistant has then to be open to new challenges and also show more initiative. She may also take part more than before in the implementation of plans and not just register them.

The challenges in management assistants’ work will be working for several superiors, which in turn may grow the work load. This offers the

much appreciated variety, on one hand, but may generate stress on the other. The future may change assistants' work into the direction of using laptops and distant working from home or from another building instead of working next door to the manager.

# 5

## Assistants' work in Finland

### 5.1 Assistants' background

■ Four assistants were interviewed about their background. The four assistants' titles (A1) were "Executive Assistant to the Director General", "Executive Assistant", "Assistant to President and CEO" and "Personal Assistant to the President". In the original Finnish versions of the titles, two were called secretaries. All interviewees had long careers behind them from nine to almost 30 years. (A2)

There was some variety in their educational background (A3). Two had the Finnish title *Tradenomi* (Bachelor of Business Administration), one had after the matriculation examination graduated from a commercial college and supplemented her education by studies in foreign trade, and the fourth one had studied languages and was a certified translator in French and German.

All have actively developed themselves by taking further courses and even degrees. (A4) The first one had taken a network course in creative writing, some IT, language and other courses developing her skills needed at work. The second assistant had attended lectures on Russian and Swedish, taken a three day course in business economics and a one day course on how to arrange a stockholders' meeting because she arranged them. The following assistant had taken a distant learning course in export practises, studied commercial Swedish and had participated in "Executive Assistant" and "Assistant as a Leader" -training courses. The fourth assistant had taken a BBA degree and is currently working on the final stages of an MBA degree.

Three of the assistants work for some of the largest companies in Finland. The number of personnel ranges from 5500 to 15000 employees. The fourth assistant works for an institute that organizationally is under the Ministry of Transport and Communications. All the assistants work for just one superior, three of them are company presidents and one is the director general. (A5) As her own special area that she personally takes care of (A6) the first assistant had the red-letter days of the management,

updating some registers and a particular area in Intra and acquiring of computers. The second one does teamwork in preparing the company quarterly and annual reports. She also arranges the board meeting once a month. The third one develops board meeting practices, takes care of the red-letter days of the personnel and organizes personnel events. Also company PR and travel organisation are among her duties. The last assistant did not have any special area to mention.

The IT programmes (A7) the assistants use on a daily basis are: Ms-Office: Word, PowerPoint and Excel, Outlook (for email). Some others are Adobe Acrobat, Matkamies (Traveller), Tilapsi (to arrange meetings), an electronic programme for the acceptance of bills, Aergo (for the reservation of trips and hotels), a program for updating network pages, Heli (personnel programme), SAP (for investments; travel invoices), Franger Advisor (for company profit statements).

Finnish is the mother tongue of all the assistants. They all know English and Swedish well. Three know German from some to well. One of the assistants has a good command of French, one knows it a little. Russian, Spanish and Norwegian were all mentioned once.(A8) All assistants have mobile phones (A9), one's mobile is a communicator where she receives all e-mail during business hours, one has both a mobile phone and a communicator.

## 5.2 Job description

In Finland four assistants and one manager were interviewed about job descriptions. The manager was not a superior of any of the interviewed assistants and the answers were received by email in English. She was a Vice President of Human Resources (S1). She was asked what her assistant did for her (S2). She answered that her duties included, as those of most of the assistants:

- “Time management, i.e. calendar planning, updates, meeting reservations, travel planning and reservations in a proactive way, not only by request
- correspondence and phone: Main interface and gate keeper to the contacts and answering some of the questions and meeting requests posed for the superior receives also the contact attempts for the superior
- helping the superior in the communications towards the organization
- prepares material and collects information for the superior

- big annual and/or external meeting arrangements
- key user to most of the business applications used at the department
- working in cooperation with the assistants at other departments.”

The most important task she does is keeping the whole “package” in shape in a timely manner. Occasionally, she also works “to the other team members, when the activity is the same with the superior”.

The manager was also asked about the work division she has with her assistant. (S3) Her reply ran as follows: “Exceptions and short term operational tasks are agreed and updated in the weekly meetings.”

The assistants were asked about their job description and weekly program. (A10) The first assistant said that the board of directors has weekly meetings that she prepares and forwards related subjects to the company board to which the assistant gives support. These meetings give rhythm to the weekly program.

The second assistant said that she did not have an official job description. She does not do much routine work but she receives the superior’s phone calls. There are also the superior’s mail, calendar, travel and meeting arrangements and invoices to take care of. Preparing quarterly reports takes a fortnight and during that she has time for nothing else. When people do not reach the manager they contact her because she knows where he is and how to reach him. The assistant also channels phone calls to appropriate receivers.

The third assistant said that in her job description the requirements, duties and areas of main responsibilities have been described as well as the language requirements. The job description is fairly broad because it is difficult at this level to define the duties in advance. Her job is to support the superior but there is no weekly program. Time management is the core. Her duty is also to make sure that when going on trips or attending meetings the superior has all the documents needed with him. On his return she files the documents so that they can be found later on. She takes care of the time-tables and the preparations for both internal and external board meetings and for the co-operational bodies’ meetings.

The last assistant said that she had no job description; she is involved in everything the superior does. Weekly she makes sure that the events taking place during that week go as planned. Daily and weekly she plans the events that will be held during the following weeks. Her responsibility is the superior’s time management, not just the calendar. She also prepares the documents to the coming events. The events are organized according

to the superior's wishes; the assistant outlines the programs, contacts the in-house personnel taking part or whose expertise is needed in the organization. The assistant sends the programs to those invited. She delegates the catering and booking of rooms to the secretary of the unit. When trips are organized she contacts the travel agent, asks for alternatives that are then checked with the superior. Next she contacts the assistant of the receiving person in charge to find out what kind of a presentation they want. The assistant makes a draft of a speech or a presentation and the superior edits it according to his wishes. Furthermore, her duties involve international connections with similar institutes abroad, correspondence and emails also in the name of the superior.

The key persons (A11) for three assistants are the superior and other managers. For the first assistant, the members of the board and their assistants are also important. She receives the superior's guests as does the second assistant. The second assistant also has daily many contacts by phone including reporters. The third assistant's partner at work is the unit's secretary who takes care of copying, filing, mailing etc. Outside connections worth mentioning include visitors and the assistants of the most important co-operators and reference groups.

The fourth assistant meets a lot of people and her network is highly comprehensive. Within the company at the level of the concern and in target countries she has most contact with both managers, members of the board and their assistants and publicists. In many cases the chauffeurs of the company are of irreplaceable help. Because the superior is a member in the boards of other companies the assistants in those other companies have become familiar. Also banks, insurance companies and other big companies are included in her daily contacts. Contacts with customers come through the events organized for the customers by the superior. She has weekly contacts with ministers of the Finnish cabinet and foreign embassies. Of her other contacts the EUMA network is an important one.

What the assistants like about their work are (A12) the contents, the atmosphere, the equipment and ergonomics. They like the fact that all days are different, there is never a dull moment as the phones are ringing, mails are received and they are conveniently busy. One assistant mentioned that she likes new tasks and coordinating larger entities. Another said that she appreciates in her work that she has a view over the Finnish business world. She has the possibility to follow ongoing projects both within the company and in the Finnish industry. Internationalism creates color and interest in the job.

What the first assistant does not like about her job is a relatively low pay. She also said that the division of work has remained the same for ten years, and she would like something new for a change. Also sometimes the days are too long, rush and uncontrollable situations are not pleasant. One of the assistants said that it would be ideal if the work could be dispersed equally during the year, in the summer it can be too quiet but at other times there may be work around the clock. Numbers are difficult for one and she also finds it difficult to reschedule appointments when the fact is that the superior may be available next in a month's time. Routine tasks are not her favorites, neither table and hotel reservations nor booking flight tickets.

When the assistants were asked what was easy for them and what tasks are most demanding, (A14) one assistant said that almost everything was easy. The others concentrated in answering only the latter part of the question. Learning a new IT solution was found demanding, as one should find time to take a course. Time management is also demanding. It is not easy to find time to finish the given tasks. An example of a demanding task is to shorten a memo especially if the subject is unfamiliar. Customer phone calls can also be demanding or buying business presents in lack of creativity. Dealing with numbers and economics can be demanding if these aspects are not part of an assistant's core competences. It can be demanding to try to find a nice way of asking someone to do an urgent job in a limited time frame. One assistant was highly positive about demanding jobs. She saw them as challenges that motivate. More difficult to bear are dull routines.

For the Finnish assistants meeting preparations (A16) require:

- finding a suitable date for all participants
- reserving a room and ordering catering
- taking part in preparing presentation materials
- drafting the agenda and invitations
- in case of larger meetings, hotel and transportation reservations, as well as writing menus.

After the meetings, the assistants have the following duties:

- to write a draft of the minutes
- to deliver messages concerning the decisions to appropriate persons.

Two assistants do not take part in the meetings at all, one said that she seldom took part and the last one said that she tried to attend because that helped to coordinate the information further.

When asked about the spoken business communication situations and the use of mobile phone and email (A17) it became clear that both phone and email were extremely important in these assistants' work. Certain letters are also still written. Mobile phones are used to phone but also to send messages e.g. to the superior who is in a meeting. The languages used are Finnish and English, other languages are less used.

### 5.3 Cultural knowledge at work

Two of the assistants use foreign languages regularly (A17). One said that the company language was English. She daily uses spoken foreign languages on the phone and in the office because people from different countries work there. The other one said that she spoke on the phone a lot and used the language of the country she was speaking to. Emails and meeting preparations are done in English. Every week there are visitors from different countries and the common language is English.

All assistants said that cultural knowledge was needed (A18). One mentioned that, lately, learning about Asian culture has been a challenge. Knowledge is needed of manners, catering, giving presents, decoration, even of an unveiling ceremony of a portrait. Two said that there was knowledge about cultural matters and help to be found in the company's international department. One pointed out that expatriates were very helpful when international events were organised in Finland.

### 5.4 Changes, challenges and the future

One manager and four assistants answered the questions concerning changes, challenges and the future of assistants' work.

The manager was first asked: "What types of challenges do you see regarding your cooperation?"(S4) She answered that she saw "no special challenges. It is always a challenge to keep work content meaningful and rewarding."

Secondly she answered the questions S5 and S6: "What type of job description do you think your assistant will have in ten years? With whom and for whom will s/he work?" (S5) "What is your vision regarding an assistant's role in your organization ten years from now?" ((S6) She replied that "in general an assistant's work will evolve and have more independent/ specialist type of contents in the job description. Mobile working

methods will be more part of the “business as usual working” than today.” “Ten years from now assistants will be more and more experts on their area with individual responsibility. They will be multi skilled persons with strong communications and language skills.”

The assistants were asked about the biggest changes in their work (A10, A13). The first assistant said that during the last five years the biggest changes had been the changes in the company structure, change of the company name and the fact that her superior changed a year ago. That the superior changed meant that she had to learn all new ways of working. The overall biggest changes have been related to technical development. Almost all work is done in networks, only little can be done without a computer. Work load has increased and the way management works has also changed.

For the second assistant, internationalization has been a big change. The company turnover has grown as well as the number of employees. The number of contacts and rush has increased accordingly. The superior is also asked more to give presentations abroad. Overall biggest changes have taken place in IT systems, e.g. electronic travel invoice system and electronic invoice acceptance system are fairly new. A long relationship between the superior and the assistant has increased the trust between them. She said that together they had been learning how to put her full capacity to use.

The third assistant said that the last five years had been a time of relative stability compared to the years before. Now the company is turning more towards Asia and India. She has found that virtual technology may develop in a too high speed causing people to forget humanity. How to combine the changes in IT and practical life are experienced as challenges.

The fourth assistant’s superior has changed two times within the last five years. The assistant’s duty is to induct the superior on practical level and bring him in the network. She has noticed the considerable growth in the use of email which has shortened reaction time. An assistant can draw up letters in place of the superior because no signature is needed as was the case five years ago. An assistant has to have a command of e.g. PowerPoint in presentations because the eldest superiors may not know how to use it. While the technique has developed there is more time to develop other things. She feels that her work became easier as the personnel moved to the same building compared to the situation were they were dispersed between five buildings.

As for the future (A15) two assistants said that the younger generation’s managers were more independent and this may mean that they do

not know how to use assistants' help or need their assistance in preparing (presentation) materials. One assistant said that the greatest challenge today and in the future was the continuous need to control change. Also the development of IT is a challenge. She was of the opinion that in a large company career planning is more difficult for an assistant than in a smaller one. She considered that to be able to maintain her well-being, she might be better later in life to do something completely different.

The second assistant was of the opinion that assistants were needed in the future but they would most likely work for a larger group or as a part of a larger entity. The command of IT is the core skill for assistants in the future, language wise English is enough. She felt sorry that there would be less need for other languages. Distant working could become more frequent also for assistants. She felt that as an assistant she is on the highest possible level. She does not feel a need to further education. Her superior will retire before her and she has to think what to do after that but there is still time before that happens.

The third assistant felt that the greatest challenge was the need to be available all the time. There are work calls even in the evenings and weekends. It seems that everything grows tighter all the time. The line between work and free time is fading away. Technique develops in an ever accelerating speed. Video conferencing that saves time and money are the latest news.

An assistant has to know the company thoroughly, as well as the personnel, and to read newspapers and to follow the news on the company. An assistant has to be proactive in developing her skills to prepare herself for the expectations towards her work in order not to lose tracks. An assistant has to show initiative in various developmental issues. The main point is to keep one's competence level up-to-date.

## 5.5 Summary of the interviews in Finland

One manager and four assistants answered the questions. Two of the assistants had the word assistant in their Finnish titles and two the word secretary. All had long careers behind them from nine to almost 30 years. One of them had secondary level education, two had first stage of tertiary education (bachelor level) and one had a university degree. They had taken various further courses especially in languages. They all worked for top level executives. Three of them had a special area that they personally take care of. The IT-programmes they use on a daily basis are the MS-Office

programs Word, PowerPoint and Excel. In addition, there are several individual solutions in use.

The assistants' mother tongue is Finnish and they know English and Swedish well. German is familiar to most and two knew French. All assistants had mobile phones.

The assistants' duties were:

- time management, calendar planning, updates, meeting reservations
- organization of events
- drafting speeches and minutes of meetings
- travel planning and reservations
- all correspondence and phone
- preparation of material, filing and collecting information for the superior
- forwarding the decisions taken in meetings to appropriate people for further action
- approvals of invoices
- financial statements
- red-letter days
- Intra up-dates
- receiving guests.

Two assistants mentioned that they did not have a job description.

The key people in their jobs are the superior and other top executives in the firm as well as their assistants. The assistants like the variety in the job and being conveniently busy. They do not like routine tasks, long days or rush. Most demanding is the lack of time and the intensification of work that has followed the technical development.

The preparations for meeting involve:

- setting the date
- reserving a room and catering
- preparing materials
- drawing up the agenda and sending the invitations.

The mobile phone and the email are the central means of communication, and it would be virtually impossible to work without a computer. The main languages used are Finnish and English.

When cultural knowledge is needed the assistants turn to their colleagues for assistance.

In the future, assistants are seen as having a more independent and specialized role. It may also be that distance work is more frequent than

at the moment. Changes are perceived as challenges. The types of changes expected are technical development, growing work load, internationalization and a new breed of managers. The younger generation of managers may prove to be a challenge for assistants. They may not need, want or know how to use their support. Assistants may in the future work for a team or a department. Assistants have to keep their competence on a high level and to maintain their well-being, they have to be able to separate work and free time.

# 6

## Assistants' work in France

■ In France nine assistants were interviewed. Neither EUMA France nor any managers took part in this study.

### 6.1 Assistants' background

■ The first question (A1) dealt with the title on their business card. Four assistants had the title “management assistant”, one had “general management assistant” and another one “assistant”, two were “qualified secretaries” and one had the title “executive assistant of the HR”. One person told the interviewers that the title “assistant” does not exist in their company any more and that she is responsible for “training and competences”. Only one of the interviewees stated that she did not have a business card and one of them works part-time.

The second question (A2) was about the years worked as an assistant. They had worked as assistants from seven to 40 years (7, 7, 9, 14, 15, 25, 27, 40). One person did not answer this question.

The third question (A3) dealt with the assistants' educational level. All interviewed assistants were qualified with either a BTS (=assistant de direction, BAC + two years of studies; BAC = matriculation exam), BTS in accounting and management (BAC+two), BTS in management and commerce (BAC + two); or similar education, which most had supplemented because of their own interest, needs in the field of work or to develop at work. One interviewee had a commercial education in excess to the basic education, one had studied English and one mathematics and one had supplemented basic studies by studying law (Métivier and Åberg, travel report).

The interviewees had attended all kinds of further courses (A4) although there were also those who had not taken any. The courses taken were mainly internal including subjects like “management of HR and payroll”, “time management”, courses in English and different types of IT courses.

These assistants had a variable number of superiors (A5) in different positions. The first two who were interviewed together had three superiors: the director of the school and two assistant managers. The third assistant had only one superior, whose title was not mentioned but she stated that “I am practically his shadow.” The fourth assistant works for two people, a manager and a research manager. The fifth one stated that the company structure is in constant evolution. “At the moment, we have here the manager of the agency and above him, a manager for the agencies for the plain. So I have two main superiors. We are two assistants and we share the work. I work more in the exterior (outside), where as my colleague stays more at the office to do the administrative work, receiving people etc.”

Two assistants had as their superiors the general director of the company. One of these two assistants also works for the CEO. She is considered his personal assistant by e.g. her foreign colleagues. She acts as a filter, the obligatory passage to reach the CEO.

The HR director is the superior of the person who defined her title as “responsible for training and competences”. The ninth assistant’s superior is the Administrative and Financial Director but she also assists the CEO e.g. in all that has to do with strategic meetings.

Three assistants out of the nine interviewed said that they do not have a special personal area (A6). The rest had various responsibilities: one is in charge of the payroll, another one said that she is a commercial assistant in charge of hiring property. In addition to secretarial duties, this assistant handles public relations issues and follows the budgets concerning the general management and, as already mentioned, an assistant’s special area is handling training and competences. A further one is involved in the economy of the company.

The one with the title “general management assistant” said that she was not in a management assistant’s work but in assisting service and that she only had one obligation: to get results. All the suppliers and partners of the company are advised by her. Her role is to know how to have things done. “If I should try to put this in a framework, I should say that I manage projects, I make this company turn, ultimately for the satisfaction of the clients.”

The IT-programmes (A7) the French assistants use are:

- Excel (used by all assistants interviewed)
- Word and Power Point (both mentioned five times)
- Publisher (mentioned three times)
- Outlook (mentioned two times),
- Lotus Notes and Access (both mentioned once).

The company specific programmes mentioned were:

- Charlemagne, to administer the data concerning students and the parents, includes a software for grades and bulletins
- ICS, a database but also contains accounting aid
- Lineal, a software for payments
- Sphinx, for statistics
- Business Object
- Mind Manager, for reflective work at the beginning of a project. A tool that permits one to plan structurally.
- a software programme designed specifically for HR purposes storing all the histories of the people, details concerning their training and their competencies.
- Cognos
- Tempro, for production dealing with all the data concerning the raw materials, machines, production rates, line conduct, etc.

The question of the language skills (A8) was not taken up in the interviews but the question of mobile phones was (A). Only two out of nine assistants had a company mobile phone. There were various explanations for the lack of mobile phones: the most common one was “I can be contacted on my wired telephone”.

The researchers also took note of the assistants’ working conditions. They stated that the working conditions depended on the work place. They had their own desk or room, telephone and email. In their companies the assistants’ also had up-to-date and multifaceted it-equipment. (Metiviér and Åberg, travel report)

## 6.2 Job description

The nine assistants were asked about their job description, weekly programme and their role in the organisation (A10). The first two assistants work for an educational institute and were interviewed together. They said that they do not have a weekly programme and that all the days are different. They have many small administrative duties like opening and distributing the mail. However once a week one of them works at the switchboard and takes calls.

They have different roles: first there are the dealings with the public bodies, such as the regional board of education, the town hall, the general councils and second all the things that are related to the teachers, the students, the registrations and social security issues related to the

administration. “There are the people that come from all over the place with all kinds of information and affairs from all possible directions, with all kinds of requests concerning the students, the teachers, the director.” They also have some regular annual tasks with strict due dates. “As concern the regional board of education, as concern the enrolment for the baccalaureate, the BTS and all that.”

The assistant who works as a real estate agent also said that there is no typical working day. The work changes all the time. At the office she meets a lot of people and takes a lot of calls. There are always interruptions in the work which makes it hard to concentrate. At the end of the month she has a lot of “site appraisals” and she is out of the office quite a bit. They have approximately 550 apartments to administer.

The assistant who does the payroll said that she has tasks that recur every month. These include conducting social charges payments and entering the data required for the payroll.

The following assistant works with research managers and she said about her work that she is “trusted to construct data bases”.

The management assistant of a general director of an American company said that her work consisted of assisting her superior, following his agenda, time management, arranging meetings and providing background information for meetings. “The strategic cases are the director’s responsibility. It is my job to prepare everything for him to be able to concentrate on this strategic side, to offer him the maximum of “comfort”.” She also follows budgets concerning the general management, manages all the documentation of the company and the personnel events and parties. She stated that today the superior and the assistant share the work and that she does a lot of things by herself. There is no typical working day. “In the morning I arrive with a long list of things to do and in the evening, usually, I have not touched the things on this list!” The most difficult thing in this profession is “to know what is urgent and what is not, what can wait, what can be done, how far one has to go... you have to have a good sense of organisation!”

The general management assistant that works for a subsidiary of a German company is in a very responsible position. She has been involved in the establishment of three branch offices. The style of management is based on autonomy and trust and the assistant said that she has been trusted with certain missions. The company has certain projects and this assistant advises all the suppliers and the partners. The assistant also does a lot of internal consulting. Her role is to know how to have things done.

The person who is in charge of personnel development said that she is responsible for the training of employees in non-management posi-

tions: she elaborates the plans for training to the internal works council (comité d'entreprise). She launches the training sessions, she is in contact with those responsible for realizing the training sessions and does the analysis for training needs, she checks them and the results of the actions. When she was asked to describe a typical working day she replied: "If only I could! It is impossible to say. I am continuously torn between the requests of my superior, the requests of people who come to see me, the cases to work on..."

The last interviewee works as an assistant to the Administrative and Financial Director of the company. She said that as the "control" in management was concerned, she did the final monthly accounts, financial statements, she calculated the raw material costs in relation to the "values and volumes" budget that had been defined for the year and she explained these. She also explained the management charts, she prepared the PowerPoint presentations for the executive meeting (comité de direction) that convenes once a month, where the plant managers meet the CEO and presented the month's figures for all the companies and branch offices. She deals with insurance, parking lot and mobile phone issues etc. She works hugely on the management and control functions, i.e. the procedures. What she does not do is to deal with the agenda of the superior. But often she organises meetings, especially the executive meetings. She also does memos and reports and takes notes directly on her PC.

The key persons in the assistants' jobs (A11) are for the first two the director and two assistant managers. For the other two, the key person is the superior, the HR manager, for the fifth they are the manager and a research manager. For the sixth, who does hiring, it is the manager of the agency, the clients who own the property and the tenants. For the seventh her partners are the teams she works with. For the last two the key person is the superior.

The assistants were asked about the likes and dislikes (A12) and the easiest and most demanding tasks (A14) in their work. The first assistant likes the contact with the young, the second the human resources functions. The third assistant found it upsetting that people complain all the time. They are never satisfied and they call her to complain. On the telephone her role is to calm people. She felt that people do not appreciate the work that is done in the background and that is a pain. Otherwise she likes her work. Of course the routine tasks are sometimes tiring. "But I like it when there are new projects to work on." The fourth assistant likes everything in her job even though sometimes there are tasks that are a bit pain but in all, she puts a lot of her heart into her job to accomplish everything well from the start.

Three assistants each stated separately: “I love my profession!” Even though their job descriptions on the whole are quite different, two of them said that they liked HR, i.e. working with people. The first of these two also said that she likes multi skilling, even though it is not always easy to achieve. She likes being able to move about, to go out, she could not imagine being at the office for the entire day. But what is the most tiresome/a pain is to constitute an appraisal of a property if there is a problem, it isn’t always easy to convince the owner.

The second assistant also said that what she liked was the direct contact with people and that she could contribute somehow, as well as being able to identify employees’ competencies. The greatest difficulties she finds in having to evaluate the personnel. “That is the area where I become a very unpopular person. And that is what I hate! (I have had it!) That is very hard to experience and sometimes one feels quite alone. To cope with this, one has to be very solid mentally. Sometimes the impact of emotions is very strong and it is not easy to manage.”

The third assistant who loves her work considered that she has developed quite a bit during the seven years she has been in the present employment. She has been involved in everything and it is the flare for skills and knowledge that pleases her a lot. “My work is much diversified. I also have been lucky to have a superior (Administrative and Financial Director) who has offered this control function job to me and this has enabled me to widen my professional horizons.”

For the sixth assistant, her job is pleasant because she feels that she is in the heart of a company and all that happens there. One has a global vision of what is happening and one understands the decisions that have been taken. What she does not like is that she has to do, undo and redo all the time! “It is a bit frustrating and tiring! Because you get the impression that you are not achieving anything! That you do not produce! Our work remains a bit invisible. In addition, one is constantly interrupted and sometimes it is very hard not to lose the grip of things!”

The seventh assistant enjoys the autonomy and trust that is part of the Anglo-Saxon management culture. However the fact that the environment is very masculine makes her feel that a woman does not have a lot of room. The people she works for are still very much of the older generation and they still have a bit the idea that a woman should sacrifice all for her children and her family. “I am not like that and I have not made such compromises.”

The next question in this theme, A16, dealt with meeting preparations. Only two of the nine assistants interviewed told that they arranged meetings. The first one said that she arranged all the meetings.

She calls a meeting by email. She provides background information for all the meetings, makes sure that all the interested parties are informed, that the venue is reserved, that the material is ready. The second one just mentioned that she organised executive meetings especially and did memos and reports.

Lastly, concerning the job descriptions the assistants were asked about business communication situations (A17). The first two assistants told the interviewers that there was, in the institute, a central email box and everybody had a personal mailbox as well. However, in their internal communication they use paper slips that are put on bulletin boards. They also communicate orally a lot. "In France we love to speak." As concerns external communications, they are starting to send emails or reminders using the email. "In general, if there is a request by the email, we reply by email." One of these two assistants works at the switchboard, "on Wednesday mornings", receives some calls in English, which is all she speaks in English.

The next assistant said that she preferred oral communication whenever possible. If not, the choice is the email. "I reply immediately to internal emails. Whenever the email comes from outside I share it with my director. He has his mailbox, I have mine and we also have a shared one! I also receive a lot of telephone calls but at times an email is good as it remains in black and white."

The following assistant replied that they did a lot of internal emailing. She has had difficulties in adapting because she has the tendency to go for a face-to-face encounter. In the emails she keeps a relatively formal state. Everything depends on to whom the message is addressed. Also written correspondence is used. There are standard letters that are sent to hundreds of people. Her superior also composes letters by himself. They both have a personal mailbox and a shared one. She opens the mail and forwards it.

The next assistant stated that she communicated immensely on the Internet and a lot on the phone. As far as the clients are of concern they very often come to the office. "We do not have to make an effort to find new clients: they find us themselves. It is the grapevine that is working." The present clients are contacted differently depending on the situation. In an urgent matter (water leaking, e.g.), the contact is made by phone. When a written confirmation in an important matter is needed, she sends a letter. Never an email in such case. "Our clients use very little email. Furthermore, an email may be contested! A letter is in black and white and sometimes it is even sent in registered mail with a confirm receipt." She works solely in French.

The following assistant said that they produced a lot of emails internally e.g. the calls for meetings. She has also continued to make notices on paper because this makes it more official with the superior's signature. The notice is circulated in the company. Externally, there are a lot of mails, as well. She uses the phone also but there is the tendency to confirm matters by email. "I like to open all the messages that I get. I spend a lot of time reading and replying them. On the contrary, I do very few written letters. Maybe forty pieces per annum!"

For parties, such as the year end party, she uses little cards that she does herself on PC, with a reply card attached, a map to get there, the programme, etc. But usually she sends the thank-yous by email. "Internally, I am not at all formal. For external messages, this depends on the person in question. It happens also that I am very formal and do almost as in the "old-fashioned" correspondence: there is the polite salutation and the traditional complimentary close. With the flow of exchanges, the formal closing is bound to change."

This assistant uses English a lot because her superior is Anglo-Saxon. In 80% of the mails she uses English and she speaks English with her superior. With other European countries they use English and even in France they write in English, as the message might be sent to the USA or somewhere else.

The next assistant told that her company's official language was English but, in practice, she mainly works in German, whether she is on the phone or writes mails. Everyone manages his or her own work flow. They work on a 99% email basis. Everyone is very much on his or her own with the emails. The directors deal with their own mail and administer it themselves (put it in the envelope). The reports are done directly on a laptop PC at the meeting by the project manager or the director himself. "As far as information is concerned, everything is in our IT system. We know exactly where to go for information."

She communicates in Spanish with Spain and in English with Italy because she does not speak Italian. Her superiors in the hierarchy are French, so all that goes in French. With the parent company she always speaks German and all the directors speak German. However usually English is used.

The following assistant said that a lot was done by the email internally and externally. Both her superior and she have their own mailbox. She does not have access to his and nor does he to hers. Both of them write and deal with their own mails. The assistant also sends some mail on paper, but rarely, and exclusively concerning the administrative work.

She stated that she does not, in fact, like the email because there is no real exchange between people. You send a message, they reply to you and that is it. The entire notion of an exchange between people and all that this may entail is lost. In a real discussion between people, you discuss the issue at hand, and then you may elaborate a bit and you get a lot more information! By the email, all this is impossible. The replies are always very technical in nature, of a certain telegraphic style. “Nothing replaces the oral discussions! This said, I tend to remain relatively formal in my emails, a bit like in my written mail.” She also uses the phone a lot because it is quicker. People also call her very easily about everything. She does not use foreign languages.

The last assistant said that they used the email a lot for external business to business communication and internally with the colleagues. Also written mail is used with certain companies but this depends on the situation and the respondent. She tries to deal with the emails as soon as possible and for the urgent inquiries, she goes for the phone.

### **6.3 Cultural knowledge at work**

Two questions dealt with the cultural side of assistants’ work. The first was about communication and language usage (A17) and in the second the assistants were asked about the cultural knowledge needed at work (A18).

It became clear that the French prefer oral communication face to face or on the phone because six out of nine respondents mentioned this even though they use email a lot. Some traditional letters are also sent.

One assistant told that in her company only the managers of the plants, the directors, the marketing people had mobile phones, i.e. the people that had dealings with the clients. The mobile numbers are rarely communicated. It is customary to filter the phone calls. “The reception is often the barrier that has to be passed to meet the people in this company. Our personnel at the reception have to take all the possible information on the people that call us to avoid disturbing those who work and only to pass the calls that are pertinent. Those responsible (people working) do not have the time to reply all the calls. Here, you do not find the same easy accessibility through the hierarchical levels as you would in the Nordic countries. In France, the higher up one is in the hierarchy, the more difficult it is to (often that is: impossible) reach him on the phone or by the email.”

Email aroused some criticism. The email was considered, by one respondent, cold and distant and furthermore, she pointed out that “not everybody always reads it”. At her work place they use for internal communication little paper slips that are put on bulletin boards because “this is more cosy, friendly and nice”. Two assistants shared the opinion that extensive use of email was a pity because it “cuts short the relationships with other people”. Yet another stated that the adverse effect of the email was that one was continually overwhelmed by the flow of information. She felt that she wasted a lot of time with reading and answering the messages. This assistant circulates notices on paper in the firm.

The respondents also commented the use of complementary forms in letters and email. They said that as concern mail on paper, the complementary close “*Veillez agréer*”, etc. was unavoidable. One assistant said that when there was a letter to send by mail she attached a covering letter. Another assistant told the interviewers that when she did written correspondence for the superior, he usually personalised the letter by adding, for example, by hand “yours sincerely” above his signature.

The assistants said that they were relatively formal in their emails but the complementary forms were simpler compared to conventional correspondence. “Everything depends on to whom I address the message.” It was said that in the emails the final polite phrase was reduced to the simple “*Cordialement*”.

One assistant also mentioned that she addressed her superior using his second name (Mr C.) even though he called her by her first name. They retain the second person plural “vous”. According to her, their relationship is, however co-operational instead of hierarchical. With her former superior they both used first names but in spite of this their relationship was more hierarchical than the present one.

The use of foreign languages at work was rather limited among the nine French assistants interviewed with one exception. Six assistants did not use foreign languages at all and one used and knew English only a little. One used English a lot but then there was one who used English (company’s official language), German and Spanish a lot at work.

The question of cultural knowledge needs was taken up with only two respondents. They told that they have had some difficulties because of cultural differences and said that it was very important to be open and tolerant. The first one’s company in France is the co-ordinating pole of the company for all the South European countries. They are often in contact for example, with Turkey or Greece. She has experienced a lot of difficulty with them because they do not function like they do, at all. She said that

to her emails, they always replied beside the point, sometimes she never got the information necessary to arrange international events.

Both assistants have had difficulties with the Italians. The first one said that they only provided a part of the information needed. The second one described Italians as having a strong ego and extremely ambitious. She also said that the exterior surface and the symbols were very important for them. It is often in these issues where the friction lies. With Spain it is much more “cool”. With the Germans you must be pragmatic, and not stick to details that are unimportant to them.

The other of the two said that it was also very interesting to work with an Anglo-Saxon who is in charge of the company. There are certain things that he does not understand, as concern the personnel. For example, there is the year end party. From the point of view of an Anglo-Saxon, this party is obligatory, as if it was almost an integral part of the job! In France this event must never be obligatory. “If you make it obligatory, no one will attend! For him, it was incomprehensible! In the end, he listened to me and the party was voluntary. There are those that never attend... that is French, and that is just that!”

“On the contrary, the French tolerate badly the relaxed manner of the director at the meetings. When he comes to chair a meeting, he can easily eat an apple at the same time. And this is shocking to some people and I have to explain to them that this is only his habit, comes naturally, he is being himself and it is not a provocative act... and I have a lot of anecdotes like this one! This is why, in this profession, you need a lot of diplomatic! In this profession, one has to have excellent interpersonal skills, as you are constantly “exposed” and in contact with people from all levels. This is also quite nice.”

## 6.4 Changes, challenges and the future

There were three questions for assistants that dealt with the changes, challenges and the future (A10, A13 and A15). The answers to these questions are analysed together because the interviewers took the liberty of changing the questions to suit the situation as they went along.

The interviewers asked the respondents if they have seen a development in the profession. The assistants interviewed together said that IT which arrived ten years ago changed everything. Many things are done more rapidly and with much less lost time. Fewer things are done manually and many directors and managers do their correspondence themselves. On the other hand, they concluded that today, the secretaries did not

know, as well as they used to, everything that was going on in the house, as there were so many things that go past their hands. “This is where the difference lies between a “secretary” and an “assistant”. We do not do correspondence as we used to.”

Two other assistants totally agreed with the above two. One stated that “today you become more an “assistant” than a “secretary”! We are asked to find out about things and make inquiries, to acquire information to the director in order to calm things down, to be of support. You are no longer there just to write letters. You become a partner and a collaborator.” The next assistant went even further and said that the job of a secretary would gradually disappear because it held no added value to the company. Her advice to future management assistants was to specialize e.g. in management, marketing, purchasing etc. to develop in the profession and become a project or product manager.

Of her own plans one said that she did not know if she would still be a management assistant in ten years’ time. She was of the opinion that a management assistant’s profession would always remain.

The following interviewee discussed the changes taking place in the profession. She said that she had had the title “assistant” for almost all her career but not any more. She claimed that the title of “assistant” in the company / in the country did not exist any more in practice: “We no longer have management assistants who are in direct collaboration with the director, who have a certain basic training, who see to his meetings, his timetable and who do his mail. I myself have a director but in fact I have a job with my own responsibilities. The “assistants” here do not have a superior (vertically), but each has her own specialities. I am in the HR and I take care of these affairs but I also have a more evident label: I am responsible for “training and competencies”. In the corporate world, it is indispensable that one has a specialty / a special field. The personal secretary, forever loyal to her superior, does not exist any more! Nowadays, the superior does his own mail, arranges his meetings himself and we are there to work with them in very exact domains.”

Metivier and Åberg state in their travel report that the challenges of the job in France are to manage and execute complex entities of issues, to keep track of things. In addition, the growing load of work and pressure are felt as challenges. An assistant’s job has changed considerably during the last years. At the moment an assistant has to be extremely versatile, independent and more and more often an assistant has to take important decisions. The interviewees stated that an assistant has to be curious, spontaneous, creative (find solutions quickly) highly organised, highly social and a diplomat... and at the same time humble in the sense

that thanks rarely come her way – even if she is the actual builder and implementer of a project.

In the assistant-manager relationship an assistant has to settle to come second. An enlightened superior appreciates an assistant's work even though it often is invisible and the fact that an assistant can be trusted with confidential issues. Often an assistant is like a gate-keeper who does behind the curtains the task assigned or delegated by the manager, and for which others get the credit. However, if the superior knows and confesses what a demanding job an assistant is performing an assistant can find great satisfaction in work. An assistant has to accept her role. It is important that an assistant likes her work. Then one can make one's work how one likes, taking on new areas from, for example, human resources management or communication.

How respected an assistant is depends largely on the individual and the atmosphere of the organisation. Even though there are many superiors and organisations where an assistant's competence is highly valued and the demands of the job are well understood it is still rather usual that the manager does not appreciate assistant's work, in which case she feels that she is considered more stupid than others. If this is the case she does not feel respected and it is difficult for her to find motivation. One of the interviewees complained that the organisation does not want to make use of her abilities and knowledge. (Metivier and Åberg, travel report.)

The assistants evaluated their future views based on the respect they felt. Those in good positions were hopeful and believed that they can advance and gain more responsibility.

Among those interviewed there were people who felt that they were respected employees whose special knowledge was acknowledged and those who felt that they were hardly at all respected. The more varied the tasks and the more international the more respect the organisation showed towards an assistant's work.

To be able to make it in the job all interviewees said that the right attitude is important: "If you like your job you can do anything".

In all the interviews it was stressed how important the telephone and email were in the job. Communication is pressed and there isn't time for correspondence everywhere.

## 6.5 Summary of assistants' work in France

Six of the interviewees had the word “assistant” in their title, two had the word “secretary” and one had neither. They had worked as assistants for a relatively long time, i.e. from seven to forty years. All had after the matriculation examination acquired at least a professional diploma, many had taken further courses but mainly within the company.

The assistants worked for or with high-level superiors, namely six of them had their own special areas to deal with. In addition to the MS Office programmes, there was in the companies a great variety of company-specific programmes in use. Only two had company mobile phones.

Most of the interviewed assistants in France did highly demanding tasks. The question if the assistants had a job description did not come up in the interviews. The researchers Metiviér and Åberg concluded in their travel report that the job descriptions and duties of assistants can vary a great deal and they can work in different fields. An assistant's role can be to do traditional routine tasks, acting as an independent project manager, PR-person and the company image builder, personal assistant, highly independent real estate agent, process administrator or be responsible for HR or marketing. Only one assistant felt that she was not appreciated enough, others felt that their work was respected.

Secretarial duties: The duties varied between organisations and firms. Job descriptions varied from a human resource assistant's to extremely independent coordination and administrative duties. The tasks mentioned included:

- time management for the assistant herself, as well as the manger
- different written and oral communication duties within the company and towards customers and other interest groups
- travel arrangements
- book keeping
- personnel management and training
- contact person and coordinator with suppliers
- independent real estate agent
- traditional correspondence
- statistics
- routine office work like mailing
- project coordination and management.

Because speed is vital in communication, e-mail and phone have replaced traditional letters. When letters are sent the manager draws the letters himself. Six out of nine assistants do not use foreign languages at work,

the others use English from a little to a lot and one uses also German and Spanish.

The French prefer oral communication over all other types but the higher up the person is in the hierarchy of an organisation the more difficult it is to reach him because of filtering.

The division of work between manager and assistant depends on the culture of the organisation and the individuals concerned. Also in those cases where the assistant's professional skills and work are highly regarded by the supervisor the division of work is clear. It is, in many cases, possible for the assistant to complement her job description. It seems that the assistants have more and more influence in the companies. (Metiviér & Åberg, travel report).

## Assistants' work in Germany

### 7.1 Assistants' background

■ The interview questions concerning the assistants' background in Germany were posed to six assistants, the EUMA representative and one training manager and a trainer. The training manager and trainer (later = the trainers) answered in a joint interview the same questions as the EUMA representative but in place of "country" the interviewer asked about the company (E2: "How many assistant are there in your *company*?"). The trainers' answers are analysed with the EUMA answers. These are analysed first and, second, the answers of the six assistants who were interviewed of their own backgrounds are analysed.

#### 7.1.1 Analysis of EUMA representative's and the trainers' interviews

The EUMA representative wrote in her email reply that there were 133 members in the German EUMA. 98 % are female but men are discovering the profession and their numbers are increasing (slowly). Normal training for older management assistants is two and a half to three years as office administrator and further education as management assistants, etc. Nowadays, there are many people who have gone to college and university, e.g. with an MBA. "Studies are done in Germany, seldom with a semester in another country." (Question E2)

The trainers said that in their company there were several hundreds of assistants. About 90 % of them are female. "The basic requirements for the commercial correspondence secretaries are either a high-school diploma or the a-level." The salary level varies a lot from division to division, also depending on the position of the assistants and on the level of the manager. The company does not publish salaries.

According to the EUMA representative, the IT programs the assistants use (E4) are Microsoft Office and SAP, some also use graphic programs. Faxes have nearly disappeared or they have been replaced by PC-faxes.

Scanners and a CD writer can be found in most offices. Management assistants have company mobile phones and laptops. They are not status symbols but working tools. Therefore, an assistant is expected to be – if needed – available also in the evening or on the days off.

The trainers said that the assistants used the whole MS-Office palette especially Excel, PowerPoint and project management systems, and then mainly the SAP systems. “And you’ll find everything about HR there, so from human resources management software which we naturally use ourselves for electronic recruiting tools, budget control instruments, data warehouse tools...”

The trainers said that the main language the assistants spoke was English; some spoke French, and especially Spanish. Those are the main languages. Also other languages such as Chinese are in demand. If somebody is able to speak Indian, it’s an asset. All possible languages are in demand within the company.

All have email. Whether an assistant has a mobile phone depends on the position of the manager she works for and her role, e.g. if the assistant is travelling with (the management).

### **7.1.2 Background of interviewed assistants**

In Germany, six assistants were interviewed. One of them worked part time (25 h/week). The titles they use (in their business cards, question A1) are the following: “Assistant”, “Delegation consultant”, “International Management Assistant”, “Project Assistant” and “Team Assistant” (2). Two of them did not have business cards.

They have worked as assistants (A2) from one year to 13 years (1; 2,5; 4; 9; 10; 13 years). Most of them had taken their A-levels and after that had professional education (A3). One had a university degree in geography. They all have taken further courses (A4); mainly it has been a question of in house training. Among others subjects mentioned were international business, IT, personality training, communications, and time and project management.

The assistants’ superiors (A5) were: vice president of a company, a manager of software business, a project manager, and senior vice president at the HR technology, director of international delegations who consult Latin America and the USA, and the director for service management. One team assistant did not name a superior.

Overall the assistants interviewed did not have special areas which they personally took care of except for one who was a relocation adviser. (A6)

There are very many IT programmes they use on a daily basis (A7): The Ms Office package, SAP (e.g. for booking trips), Internet, Intranet, Outlook, Lotus Notes (data bases), NetMeeting WebEx, and many company specific programs like Interflex (for time management).

The languages these assistants can speak and write were (A8):

- German, native tongue
- English, either good or very good
- French, all knew at some level from good to elementary
- Spanish, three knew a little
- Italian, one knew some.

Four assistants had company mobile phones and two did not (A9). The interviewer also took note of the working conditions. This is where she found the greatest differences. “Some worked in landscaped offices, where there could have been a hundred people and some shared an office with two to three colleagues at the most. The equipment was similar: phone/cellular phone, computer, printer, Xerox and a fax machine. Some also had scanners. The relationship with the superior seemed good.” (Solonen, travel report)

## 7.2 Job description

In Germany, three manager-assistant-pairs, one manager and three team assistants of the same company, one training manager, a trainer and EUMA representative were asked about the job descriptions. The training manager and trainer (later = the trainers) answered in a joint interview the same questions as the EUMA representative but in place of the country the interviewer asked about the company (E1: “What do management assistants do for you in your *company*?”). Their answers are analysed with the EUMA answers. The views of the EUMA representative are presented first, secondly the job descriptions of the management-assistant-pairs and thirdly the job descriptions of the manager and the three team assistants of the same company.

### 7.2.1 Analysis of EUMA representative's and trainers' interviews

The EUMA representative stated that in Germany most of the EUMA members worked for a CEO, Managing Director, Vice Presidents or owners of companies (E1). The trainers said that in their company the assistants could, for example work in training, in human resources, in purchasing department, business marketing development, service and support... The operational area is really big. The management assistants in the company are above all responsible for the division administrative support. On the one hand, they are responsible for the calendar maintenance, travel management, on the other hand for event management, as well. Above all, they assist with projects and also work at the department of team assistance. The assistants are involved with the recruiting process as well, especially in the pre-selection, and in setting up the appointments in the budget process. Regarding the role, they are responsible to the individual managers but are also responsible to several superiors in the form of team- and project assistance.

### 7.2.2 Job descriptions of management-assistant -pairs

In Germany, researcher Solonen was able to interview both parties of three manager-assistant -pairs. An assistant's job description has in earlier studies (Aaltio 1985, 10) been noticed to be formed by the tasks the superior does. We present the job descriptions as pairs.

The manager's job description is presented first, second the assistant's job description based on the assistant's interview and thirdly we present the supervisor's (=manager) view of the assistant's job description. This way it is easy to see if there is a relationship between the tasks of the manager and the assistant and are their views on an assistant's job description in agreement or not.

**Pair 1. The manager** (question S1), Vice President said that he was responsible for the Purchasing Department and the global business which means purchasing and acquisitions.

**Pair 1. The assistant** (question A10, 11, 12, 14, 16 and 17) told the interviewer that she worked as a secretary to the whole department and as an assistant to her superior. She does not have a written job description, but the requirements for the job were good German and the education as such, either vocational training in office work, Bürokauffrau (=office clerk) or an equivalent (university) degree; English and French or some other second foreign language; computer skills in the different programmes;

politeness and people skills in your work. Professional experience is desirable but not a requirement.

She does travel arrangements, time management and office supply orders for her colleagues within the department. She is also responsible for the internal and external phone calls as the department secretary. She organises complete business trips for her superior, “not only in the system for booking the flights but also to contact the contact persons in Germany or abroad. To organise the hotel, put documents together, prepare his e-mails, or if he wishes to have something special with him for the trip. Really organising the whole thing.”

Her work revolves around daily tasks. Lots of routine but also spontaneous things that then take a lot of time. “You can’t really say that every Monday there’s a task--, so it’s actually a little bit of everything every day and then some unexpected incidents.”

Her role in the organisation is to be the link between her colleagues and the superior. She communicates matters from her superior to the colleagues and if they want to talk to him, they go to her and make an appointment. She also has another role. “I’m sort of somebody, I think, who has to collect a lot of information. I have to know a lot about the company with regard to our partners... And maybe I’m also an expert for the things that you don’t really know what do with.”

The key persons in her job are the superior and the team leaders, for whom she does some preliminary work. But other than that, she does a lot on her own. In the broadest sense the key persons also include the secretaries of the superior of her superior.

In her work she likes organising projects, at her own pace. The best is the diversity of the job. “To organise really big meetings means lots of stress, but you’ll see the results of your work right away.” She does not like to do things in a rush, under time pressure. Or when she receives information too late or none at all. If something has changed during the process and she has already organised it, and then everything has to be done all over again.

She feels that it is easy for her to build a foundation and to make a contact with people. “It’s quite easy for me to start a chat”. She is communicative. Her most demanding tasks are the projects or things that are not done every day such as once a year there is a big buyer conference with colleagues from overseas, from Asia and the USA.

Next the assistant was asked about meeting preparations (A16). She told that with smaller meetings which they had regularly, she did the Outlook -invitations. When people outside the company will be coming, she calls them. Then she books a room and orders catering, so that there’ll be coffee

there or water or the like. She prints the handouts, for annual meetings the assistants make all the presentations. Normally she is not present in the meetings and there is not much for her to do afterwards, either.

She told the interviewer that the first contacts with hotels etc. were made by phone. Also if needed, she uses the phone to make a contact quickly. Overseas phone calls with foreign colleagues are made in English. Everything else is done in German.

She uses email “in particular if there are going to be some difficulties or if... if you know the colleague is not there. The company might be abroad and it’s 3 am over there, then I obviously can’t call them at all. If I want to include my boss in the email or in the contact itself, then of course via email to inform (people), or naturally if the whole division needs to get the information, then I’m obviously not going to call everyone, I’ll do it via email.”

**The superior** (S2, 3) told the interviewer that the assistant was there to support him in his duties but she also supports the two team leaders in the department. He estimated that her contribution was divided equally between him and the purchasing division. She is responsible for the internal processes, time management, travel management, organisation. She is there to support the individual colleagues but especially to make the superior’s load lighter, and to arrange and coordinate appointments. She screens external phone calls, sorts and redirects mail. The superior also assigns her projects, e.g. a move from one building to another.

The work division is clear. The superior organises and manages. He also said that he made all his presentations himself. The assistant is there to take off some of the workload, “like another arm”.

**Pair 2. The manager** (question S1) is senior vice president at HR Technology. His responsibilities include managing HR information systems and being the bridge between the HR and IT functions.

**Pair 2. The assistant** (questions A10, 11, 12, 14, 16 and 17) has an official written job description and her tasks include the superior’s time management, which is in part setting up meeting requests and booking rooms. Travel management is part of her job too. The superior travels on a weekly basis, she sets up the shuttles, the hotel, she books the flights and sees to it that he has got all the documents needed. She also deals with external customers so that they have a proper hotel and that they are picked up safely from the airport and are brought to the premises.

She also takes minutes of meetings. She organises offsite events or small workshops. She writes articles for the department. She sets up purchase orders, does head count numbers and invoices on a regular basis.

Her work is mainly day in, day out. She has a meeting with the superior every morning for an hour; they go through the calendar, the tasks and the problems that came up the day before.

There are also some regular meetings that take place every week. Her role is to be the gatekeeper. If something happens the team members contact her first and she then hands it over to the superior. The key persons in her job are the people in her team and the other assistants at HR.

In her job she likes challenges and the feeling of managing through the challenges. She also likes event management and being able to see things unfolding from the beginning to the end. What she does not like is a high dependency on other people. Easy for her is (A14) communication, networking and organising. The most demanding tasks are setting up meetings.

The tasks this assistant does in order to prepare meetings are first to check if all the participants have accepted the invitation. Then she has to see if there's a parallel call because there can be meetings and calls parallel. She also checks if e.g. a flipchart or a projector is needed. In case of bigger meetings she also checks that the room is appropriate. If a board member comes, the room must be first class. After the meeting the assistant writes down the to do's. "If some to do's come up for my boss or for myself I'll write them down. And also sometimes I have to write the meeting minutes and send them to the participants."

This assistant has all kinds of spoken business communication situations in her everyday work (A17). On the phone she sets up meeting requests and receives information. The official corporate language is German. But generally, because the company has so many subsidiaries in the world everyone speaks English. "Because it is the business language." She uses English in the contacts with other countries or other team members who come from other countries.

E-mail is a central communication medium. The assistant estimated that she wrote over 70 e-mails a day. "So it is very, very... It is the communication. And the mobile is... Basically, if I'm not at my desk, I switch my landline, my phone, to my mobile phone so that I'm always reachable for the people."

**The superior** (S2, 3) said that his assistant did multiple tasks and she also supported at special occasions, for smaller tasks, the team members. Furthermore, if somebody out of the system office is on vacation or sick or something like that she will help.

Her core task is administrative support, maintaining the calendar, setting up meeting requests, but also e.g. processing travel expenses, etc. Event organisation is part of the job. They have during the course of a year

multiple events, which are team offsite events, weekly regular meetings and special workshops which happen quite regularly, at least once a month. Rooms need to be booked, or certain equipment needs to be purchased. Setting up purchase orders that are called internal orders, taking care of invoices for the whole controlling team, budget control is also a supporting function there. And then, communication in the sense of supporting the activities to communicate at the company. There are different communications channels, e.g. email newsletters; portal pages etc.

Of their division of work (S3) this superior said that his assistant should work like a gatekeeper. She should make sure that by the time something comes to his desk it's clear and verified. Very often, she decides up front if the superior should participate in meetings or not. She also prepares background information etc. She contributes to prioritising things.

**Pair 3. The manager** (question S1) is a Director of the International Delegations. He is responsible for the delegations to North and Latin America. That includes consulting the company's delegates who are being relocated from Germany to the USA, Canada and Latin America. In addition, he is an account manager for a division in the company.

**Pair 3. The assistant** (questions A10, 11, 12, 14, 16 and 17) said that her work varied a lot depending on the number of delegations that are pending. She has a job description which states that her duties include consulting and supporting the employees who are going to be sent abroad. Her role in the organisation is to advise and to consult people who are going abroad and to make sure that equal treatment is guaranteed.

The people she meets in her job are the expatriates, the employees and partially also their wives and children. "They come here to us for a consultation talk, it takes usually about two to three hours and during this... during this time they can ask all the questions they have." Other than that the main partners and contact persons are the partners in the respective countries (where the company has activity). And then of course there is a lot of communication with colleagues on a regular basis.

What she likes about her work is that she can organise travels, and do it in a way, which is as pleasant as possible. On the other hand, it is never possible to make all wishes come true, to satisfy all needs and that's why there are sometimes bitter disappointments that she feels she is causing. "Yeah, it can be really stressful sometimes. So when you need to declare unpleasant things and tell the customer... have to tell him "That's not how it goes"."

Easiest in her work are the routine tasks, whereas it is difficult is to reconcile the various demands by the various participants.

In this assistant's job, most of the spoken communication takes place in the consultation talks. They are mainly in German but partially also in English. It depends on the nationality of the employee, "often there's also a foreign-language wife there, who of course also wants to understand. But it's mainly in German." Then there are the everyday phone calls with partners in the personnel departments within the fields, who are the clients, who give the assignment to relocate their employee. Phone calls with our partners in the USA, Latin America and Mexico are partly in German, some of the employees speak German, or then also in English.

The company language is German, whereas in meetings attended by visitors from abroad English is spoken. Email is a really important instrument of communication because the time-frame between Germany and the USA or Latin America is naturally restricted. "Especially with Latin America it's often only two to three hours that you have together on the phone, and then, of course, the other person is tied with meetings, and then sometimes the time is really short. And that's when email comes in handy. Nowadays the fax machine is barely used also for safety reasons."

**The superior** (S2, 3) stated that the assistant was actually a Delegations Consultant. She consults the delegates who are being sent off to the USA or to Latin American countries. It starts with preparing a delegation. There will be, e.g. a counselling interview, then the remuneration will be determined, a contract written. Then the delegate will also be attended to during the secondment. The mentoring will go on until they return to the home country. And that is the principal task. In addition, she is also an account manager for one division and she is responsible for the process in the Department of Delegation Process.

When asked about the type of work division between him and the consultant, the superior said that was a bit difficult to answer as she had a really independent scope of work as a delegations consultant. There really is not any work division. He is the manager. If there should be questions that she is not able to decide (on her own) then he can support her.

### 7.2.3 One manager and three team assistants

**The manager** interviewed in a company that uses team assistants (question S1) is a head of service assurance R&D. Service assurance team looks after databases and management systems that control the operation of telecommunications networks. He does not have a personal assistant, whereas in the company there are assistants that have certain areas of expertise and he uses them all. (S2, 3) According to this manager, the

assistants' work spans from simple administrative tasks, such as meeting room reservations and finding a phone number that he has forgotten, to travel arrangements, follow-up of R&D costs and the budgets and what the people do. There are some assistants doing more the general tasks and depending on the individual competences and personality, there are others who are rather concentrating on, for instance collaboration on sales follow-up or cost follow-up. The assistants help the whole team. The work of assistants includes tasks from work place support – “so that all the people have a chair and a table to sit at and the equipment needed”. The team assistant is also an important contact point. However, in this company, the managers answer their own emails or in case of their absence they direct their mails to colleagues.

**The team assistants** of the same company told the interviewer about their tasks (A10). The first assistant said that she worked part-time and shared a position with a colleague. They have a written job description. They consult a team of 180 colleagues and their main work comprises of organising their trips; from booking them, hotel bookings and car bookings, everything that has to do with global business trips. Many appointments are often being rescheduled or cancelled. That is why there is also a lot of re-booking to do. Another main task is event organising. In addition there are many small administrative duties. There is no weekly program, the work is done on a daily basis.

The second assistant consults a team of about 120 people. There is a general job description that says “travel booking, orders and administrative tasks”, but there are no details. Her main duties revolve around travel arrangements. They use an online booking tool, Amadeus, to book European flights, hotels and rental cars etc. Intercontinental flights are booked through a travel agency. She estimated that that almost 70 % of her work ran on a daily basis. “So it's totally unforeseeable... You can't really plan it.” She described her role in the organisation as being “the do-it-all girl” with a service job.

The third team assistant interviewed sees that her role in the organisation is a combination of a team and a management assistant. She also has a job description that states that her job is a combination of the work as a project assistant and the sales development assistant. She told that it was planned that she would do more of the sales development, but this doesn't work that easily and, therefore, she works more as a project assistant and supports the management. Her duties include office management, travel arrangements, organising meetings and events, purchasing of internal tools, writing the minutes of the management team and the project team meetings. She does the follow-up for the sales and supports

the sales development manager. She does the statistics for the working hours of the projects and the SAP budget follow-up for the project. She does not have a weekly program it is more business on a daily basis. “Every day it’s different.”

The key persons in these three team assistants’ jobs (A11) are for the first assistant the superior and the team leaders, the project managers; for the second everyone working in the department and for the third one the programme manager, or project manager and the project management team for the management tasks.

The first assistant likes (A12) the variety in the job and she also mentioned organising events as a very enjoyable task. What she finds annoying is that there are no good prospects for promotion for assistants. The second one likes everything in her job; especially that she can help and support others. The third one also likes the variety but she does not like writing the minutes because she believes that nobody reads them anyway.

Two of the team assistants were of the opinion that there was nothing really difficult in their jobs (A14). The third one said that organising was easy for her. The most demanding task for the first assistant was last minute event organising, the second one found doing things under pressure demanding and the third one had had difficulties in getting into a project.

These three team assistants do variable amounts of meeting preparations (A16). The first one said that she only sent an email to the reception for them to book meeting rooms. The second one books rooms, the catering, finds projectors, flip charts, etc. and makes sure that they are working. The third one has most to do. She schedules meetings, sends invitations and reserves rooms. She also takes the minutes and sends them out.

All the team assistants told the same story about spoken business communications situations (A17). Only when they need some urgent information do they phone. But mainly they use email or SMS because people are in meetings or on trips. They use both email and mobile phone every day very often. Mostly communication is in English but, of course, they use German with colleagues who are German.

### 7.3 Cultural knowledge at work

There were two questions dealing with the cultural aspects of work in the set of questions posed to assistants, A17 which was about the use of different languages and communications situations and A18 in which the assistants were asked about the need for cultural knowledge. All six assistants answered these questions.

The German assistants interviewed use besides German a lot of both spoken and written English. They use it when calling foreign colleagues overseas or, rarely, to book a hotel room abroad, sometimes foreign suppliers call. Phone is usually used if a quick reply is needed or to make an initial contact.

Email is used to follow up, to have things in writing, to overcome the obstacles of reaching people at inconvenient times. SMS are used to get the target person's attention and also not to disturb people with phone calls.

When asked about cultural knowledge, one assistant explained that in the company they had company specific jargon, i.e. they use terms that cannot be heard anywhere else. The organisational culture can also be seen in the behaviour patterns, a clear hierarchy can be detected in the way people speak to each other. The assistant in question stated that the organisation was conservative and formal address was typical. Only younger colleagues do not use the formal formulation between them.

One assistant said that overall it was important to accept and acknowledge that there are different cultures. "It's a great asset when you know the culture of the person you're dealing with." However two of the six assistants said that cultural questions did not have a role in their work.

One of the other four assistants had experiences of Asian colleagues. She compared European and Asian work cultures and said that in Europe, more scope can be left for own thinking but in Asia they stick to what has been told. They are very conscientious but you have to say in advance precisely how you want things to be done. "It can be really exhausting to try to remember to tell them everything right away, everything you want to have. Otherwise you'll be writing loads of emails afterwards." She has also noticed a difference in the way their Asian colleagues treat the assistant. They do not take any notice of the assistant, do not greet her and only want to talk to the boss.

One of the assistants had noticed that the Americans do not necessarily understand what is being said if the terms used are of British origin. She also said that the Americans are very marketing oriented and it may be difficult to figure out what is real and what is make believe.

Germans need patience with the Latin Americans. The assistant who has lots of contact with them said that people were amazingly helpful, really polite but that everything did not happen right away. “When I ask a question, I also expect to get a clear answer.”

Finnish and German differences also came under discussion. Finns were considered more flexible, more open to new technology and to react faster. It was stated that the Finns used first names in address and are more equal in the workplace. Working is less formal with open door policy. In comparison, Germans are more hierarchical and formal.

## **7.4 Changes, challenges and the future**

### **7.4.1 Assistants' views**

The assistants were first asked about the biggest change in their work during the last five years (A10) and of the biggest changes (A13) overall.

Three of the six assistants interviewed had not yet worked for 5 years and one of them had not experienced any big changes but the other two had. For one the biggest changes in her work happened when a colleague retired a year ago. She was a purchasing assistant and this assistant took over some of the retired one's work. And that is how she disposed of some of the secretarial work and she is now more in the purchasing. For the other, the biggest change was that her superior changed from an American who was in America to a German superior.

For the fourth assistant, the biggest change during the last five years has been a change in the field of duties. She had worked at the assistance department and four years ago she moved to R&D department.

For the fifth assistant, the biggest change has been that everything has become a lot more structured and regulated. There's a lot more control in order to see if the company guidelines are followed. “The processes are defined a lot more explicitly, before you'd make decisions on a gut level, to act on your instincts, to just trust that it's going to be ok. Cleared issues in private conversations with management, with the domestic partners. It's all considerably more restricted now. So the guidelines have become much stricter, that's the feeling I'm getting.”

For the sixth assistant, the biggest change was the transition from team assistant to project assistant because the job description of a team assistant was different from the one of a project assistant. A team assistant does more administrative work, such as travel management and project

assistance. A project assistant works with a small group of people with more detailed project tasks.

The next question dealt with the challenges of today and tomorrow (A15). The greatest challenges at company level according to the first assistant was that the company is international and getting bigger and bigger. She finds it is extremely important to get along with the other cultures, every single employee should know on some level how to encounter your business partner. "I think that's the challenge, to find something international in common." Another challenge is that everything is becoming faster and more hectic. The challenge is to learn how to deal with it, not to let yourself be sucked into the hectic "vicious circle" but still do your job determinedly without having to think that everything has to be taken care of right away and that you always have to be available.

She thought that the most important thing for assistants is to keep on educating and training themselves further and have an open mind for new things. The first assistant's personal goals for the coming 10 years are to make a career in a certain direction, but in general, to take over more projects to get away from the daily work.

The second assistant found the question of challenges tricky because there was an international merger coming soon. She thought that there would be more travelling to countries like China, Russia and so on. "So that it'll go more into the direction of complicated global travelling, i.e. getting visas and so on." She also anticipated that assistant positions will become more wanted, because the scope of duties has become more independent. It means that the assistants do not really have that much to do with their bosses anymore. "So that it'll go towards Office Manager."

The third assistant saw as the challenge in her work that it is becoming more global. Networking is going to be more international and global. One has to have a certain understanding of business administration as an assistant. The assistant will not necessarily be sitting next to the boss, not even in the same building. One has to learn to work differently because the boss may not be located in the same country anymore, or maybe his mother tongue is different from the assistant's. Another challenge is that the work load of an assistant becomes too big; because of cost savings new assistants are not hired. "You have to be involved more, have to do more and... yes, you have to cope with many different things now."

Of her own future the third assistant said that in "10 years I don't want to be doing the same as I am doing now". She would like to work in personal assistance with 10–15, maximum of 20 people and really to have supporting duties.

Assistant number four stated that challenges in her job were always being up-to-date on IT, with PowerPoint and other developments that come up. Also being open for new challenges because every day is a new challenge. She considered different languages to be a challenge, as well. English is no problem but maybe in 10 years time it's Chinese, Japanese or French that is in demand. "So, it's the development, the global development that is a challenge as well in my eyes." A further challenge is education which must be kept up-to-date through the years. One objective for her is living abroad. Another is to study further.

For the fifth assistant, the biggest challenge was that worldwide standardised processes had to be created. "We have to define a uniform process, and to convert that all into a uniform tool, to which everyone involved will then have access to." A challenge also for the individual assistants will be to be able to manage all these new processes, to learn that, and to think even more globally. To have even more understanding on the local conditions. Her personal objective is also to go abroad.

The sixth assistant thought that her role might change a little bit because the project she was working with has ended. Therefore her role might change to the management assistant -type of work. And there are likely to be changes in the firm because of a merger with another company because, in this company, organisation changes once or twice a year even in normal circumstances. The challenges in general for the assistants in the future are that the work is changing from secretarial work to team assistant work. Assistants need to learn a lot of business related issues to have influence in their role. She herself is studying economics in the university of distance learning and her objectives are to finish studies in five years and do administrative work possibly on management level.

#### **7.4.2 Managers' views**

Four managers answered the three questions (S4–6) that dealt with changes, challenges and the future of assistants.

As the challenges of manager–assistant co-operation the managers stressed the importance of a common understanding, having a similar working style, harmony and trust, "everything else can be learned".

In a company with team assistants only, the manager interviewed saw as a drawback compared to earlier times that now the manager is in contact with several assistants. This means that communication might be a bit more complicated. Another thing, rather sad than disturbing, is that most of the information also goes via email. Now that the assistant

does not sit by the manager certain items might get lost in the communication. A manager really makes appointments in his calendar to see the assistants to go through things. The situation is different compared to earlier when you could think that the assistants would cover all aspects of your business life, 100 % or 360 degrees. On the other hand, the current situation is quite more efficient and effective. No one can be good and effective on all aspects of business life. However, the assistant that you deal most with should sit closest to you.

The four managers saw the future job description of assistants' to include more specialized tasks and therefore there will be a fundamental increase in the requirements for higher special qualifications. Manual duties such as the traditional secretarial tasks will disappear, they may be automated or companies will hire cheaper labour force to those positions. Assistants will specialize according to their competences. Some assistants may become managers.

The visions of the managers of the current assistant's future role differed according to the manager and his task. The first manager saw that in the future his assistant could become a buyer and the second one saw the current consultant as a manager within the delegation centre.

The other two managers took a more general perspective. It was considered that in the future language skills were crucial. Although it is already today crucial to have Microsoft Office knowledge, it will be even more important in the future to broaden this knowledge around business applications, purchasing applications, reporting applications, controlling applications etc. They believed that more project organisations were evolving and, therefore, in many organisations assistants will support multiple project managers. This means that assistants need to be very flexible, very open, and communicative and also to be strong team players. There are a lot of day in and day out -challenges, and even this becomes more dynamic. The ideal is to have multi-tasking capability.

An understanding of cultural differences and how to deal with them and how to manage, or assist the manager in managing a multicultural team is an asset. There will be employees from different countries, even from different continents. "In multicultural organisations is definitely something, which is taking on to the future role of an assistant." Assistance will also play a more vital role in event management, workshop management, supporting communicating activities, taking care on their own of at least smaller projects. The managers saw that in general, administrative activities will decrease. This will have two consequences. The first one is, what we have today; one assistant per manager. The second is that in the future the one assistant will support multiple managers and she continues

to focus on administrative tasks only. But the other direction is that the role itself will grow more extensive and into one that is beyond administration, the assistant will do communication support, more organisational activities around workshops, events, project work, etc.

### 7.4.3 EUMA representative's and trainers' views

There were four questions (E4–7) that dealt with the changes, challenges and the future of assistants' work. The first one dealt with the biggest challenges of everyday work.

The EUMA representative was of the opinion that the biggest challenge was described best by “expect the unexpected”, e.g. today your company is fine and everything is okay, tomorrow you are in the middle of a merger to a Chinese company.

The trainers saw that challenges of today were to be highly flexible and to be able to work under extreme stress because things change very quickly. Daily plans have to be adjusted accordingly, meetings need to be set up in the company with various managers, calendars have to be synchronized and rooms have to be organised very quickly. Customer and team work orientations were seen as very important.

They also stated that in the future virtual teams would become even more relevant. Even today a team assistant may be assisting a manager and a team which is divided in five or six different locations all over the world, in different time zones. Great organisational skills are needed to bring all the participants together, to coordinate their decision making and their everyday work, to gather them in virtual meetings with the required tools: telephone conference, video conference, Internet meeting and so on. Also the intercultural competences are needed because the colleagues can be from China, India, America and so on.

The following question was about the biggest changes that have taken place during the past five years. The EUMA representative replied it was globalization together with more international contacts (one additional language is a must, two is even better). An assistant becomes more and more a partner instead of being a “super secretary” for the boss. They act as replacements as many bosses are traveling a lot and need their assistants to be in the office and be sure that everything is “done in their way”. Working around 10 hours a day is normal. Therefore, several occupational diseases have already entered the world of assistants: “Mouse arm” (shoulder/back problems), tinnitus, and burn-out syndrome.

The trainers saw that the expectations towards the assistance or to the assistants have become higher in a sense that they're taking over more and more areas of work; e.g. controlling and budgeting or recruiting processes. Before it was purely the administrative duties that were the main tasks; things that had to do with the daily business, also planning the calendars etc, the "traditional" secretarial work. That has changed. In addition to those duties, there are now many new areas of work.

Next it was asked what assistants will be doing ten years from now and what are the future challenges. The EUMA representative declined from answering the question about the tasks ten years from now but she saw as the challenges facing the assistants in the future being that of becoming an "executive widow" whose superior works somewhere else, going through mergers and acquisitions and the demands of increasing availability via laptop/blackberry (e.g. reading mails at home); overall coping with change.

The trainers said that the portion of the purely administrative duties was going to be somewhat smaller, but that they would be done as part of other processes. The assistants' need to adjust to new and altered situations is going to intensify and spread. "We'll take steps towards a change, there'll be more and even stronger globalisation, and those would be the challenges of the next 10 years."

## 7.5 Summary of the interviews in Germany

Five of the six assistants interviewed had the word assistant in their title, one was a consultant. They had worked as assistants from one to 13 years. Three assistants had a second-level two- year education. One had a pharmaceutical education, one had a university degree in geography and one had graduated from a commercial college. They had all taken in house training courses. They worked for top level managers and teams. Their tasks were mainly traditional secretarial duties: written and oral communication with internal and external customers, meeting and travel arrangements. Only one had a special area that she personally saw to. Three mentioned that they had job descriptions.

In Germany, the assistants had a wide command of IT programmes: Microsoft Office and SAP Internet, Intranet, Outlook, Lotus Notes, NetMeeting WebEx, and many company specific programs like Interflex. Their native tongue is German and all know English and French. Of the foreign languages the assistants use English. Many assistants felt that the need for cultural knowledge and foreign languages would grow in

the future. The countries and continents mentioned were Asia, Canada, China, Finland, India, Europe the USA and Latin America.

Four of the assistants had company mobile phones. They use phone in urgent business and to send and receive SMS. Email was a very important communication medium.

Managers, assistants and the EUMA representative all had similar views on assistants' job descriptions, the changes, the challenges and the future of the job. The assistants work on a daily basis, every day is different. The assistants' main tasks were:

- administrative support
- answering and screening the phone calls
- time management
- travel arrangement
- event management
- meeting arrangement
- minute taking, documentation
- invoicing
- processing travel expenses.

The division of labour between assistant and superior is clear. The assistant carries some of the superior's workload; the superior takes the decisions concerning personnel and monetary issues.

The challenges are created by new technology, globalisation, multi-cultural organisations, the need for openness, command of languages, the ability to predict changes, increasing pace and the need to tolerate stress.

It was anticipated that the traditional secretarial role will disappear all together; an assistant specialises and gets more responsibility. She is likely to become a project coordinator, the person with an overview of things.

## Assistants' work in the Netherlands

■ The results in this chapter are based on the travel report by Marketta Keisu because the original memory card was misplaced. The answers to assistant background questions and the answers from the EUMA representative were received in writing in the case of one assistant.

### 8.1 Assistants' background

In the Netherlands, there are over 10.000 assistants and most of them are multilingual. Only a fraction of management assistants is male. There is no general educational background for assistants although there are some very well known professional institutes such as Schoevers (question E2). The general salary level of multilingual management assistant is between 2.500 and 4.000 euros a month (question E3).

The three assistants interviewed had the following titles (question A1): "Office manager", "Executive secretary", "Secretary of medical staff". Two of these have worked as assistants from 20 to more than 25 years (question A2) and their education is HBO (secondary professional level). The third's education is MBO (middle professional education) (question A3). Due to taking further courses (e.g. in university and to keep up technical skills) and to a solid and extensive experience in the field they all estimated their competence to be much higher than the original educational level.

The IT programmes the assistants know how to use are: Word, Outlook, PowerPoint and Excel (A7). The languages (A8) they can speak and write are: Dutch, German, English and some French.

To the question of mobile phone (A9) all we have is an answer from one assistant and it is yes, she has a company owned phone.

The interviewer also took note of the circumstances of work. Two of the assistants had an personal office. The third interviewee shares an office with four other assistants. This she considers to be too many.

## 8.2 Job description

Management assistants' job descriptions are many in the Netherlands depending on the organisation, the tasks and the position of the superior and the level at which the assistant in question works. Assistants work at three levels:

- I. execute
- II. facilitate
- III. initiate (question E1).

The assistants mostly speak English, but a lot of them speak German, French and Spanish. They all have e-mail and a lot of them have a mobile phone (question E4).

The duties that the assistants perform are varied (questions A10–12, 14, 16, 17). The following were mentioned:

- the daily calendar of the superior,
- meetings: organisation of the meetings of the management, agenda, premises, minute taking, follow-up
- visits
- leading other assistants
- supporting superior's work
- gathering and dispensing information
- filing
- intranet
- being in charge of the library.

One of the assistants stated that she met her superior for 15 minutes on a weekly basis. This meeting is quick and efficient. She prepares and does as much as she knows and can and the superior who is the president of the board of doctors, either accepts or dismisses. Other contacts at work are with people who are in charge of meeting rooms and catering and also library committee. Most of the contacts are with doctors. This interviewee said that she was allowed to solve problems and even demanding challenges. Sometimes she feels that he could do with some help but does not feel that it is available. She mentioned that the most challenging task was to organise meetings to a great number of people.

The second interviewee works as a management assistant in air-traffic control. Her superior is the CEO, with whom she negotiates over the phone a great deal. Her weekly programme is totally dependent on the management's. She does as much as she knows how and can and the superior does the rest. She said that she was a member in a so called "crisis

team” and therefore is on duty 24/7. She said that she also works with six assistants. She declared that her job description had continuously become more demanding.

One of the assistants considered the division of work between managers and assistants a challenging task. She stressed that it was essential that the superior trusts his assistant and gives enough responsibility to the assistant. This interviewee had experienced that the division of labour depends on how busy the superior is. If the superior is very busy the assistant gets to do demanding tasks. This assistant has from time to time during her career had the opportunity to act as a substitute for her superior which she has found satisfying. This interviewee was about to change her field of work because work as management assistant had nothing more to offer. “How happy you are in the job depends on who you work with and how open the atmosphere is.”

The manager interviewed mentioned that most challenging in the division of work between managers and assistants was delegating responsibility to the assistants.

### **8.3 Cultural knowledge at work**

The Dutch assistants know many languages: Dutch, German, English and French. It was considered that cultural knowledge is important when organising international visits (meals, transportation, and housing). “For example there is a big difference between Germans (formal address) and Americans (free and informal speech).”

### **8.4 Changes, challenges and the future**

The main challenge is to keep up with the changes and development, maintain well-being and balance in life and work. (E7)

The manager who was interviewed in the Netherlands was of the opinion that the tasks would be the same in the future. “We always need someone to attend to the calendar”, but the way work is done will be different, for example instead of papers there will be a memory card. This manager also believed that assistant education would be on a high level. He also mentioned that he believes that in the future thanks to the internet and intranet it would be easier for the superior to perform the duties that assistants now perform. (S4–6)

One of the assistants said that assistants would always serve a supporting function but the tools will change. For example previously there were no work machines but now a computer fits on one's palm. The Euma representative said that she thought that assistants' position would remain "the important person next to the boss".

The second assistant believes that assistants will get more responsibility in the future. She also said that internationalization and the EU change companies and, therefore, the job descriptions of assistants change.

## **8.5 Summary of the interviews in the Netherlands**

None of the three "assistants" were called assistants, one was office manager and two had the word "secretary" in their title. They had gained their contemporary qualifications mainly through experience and by taking further courses. They know MS-office programs and most of them have a company mobile phone. The languages include Dutch, German, English and French.

The tasks are on average normal secretarial duties, but have continuously become more demanding. Their duties are formed by the superior's. Cultural knowledge is important in international connections.

It was anticipated that the tasks of assistants would be the same in ten years' time but the tools will change. The challenge will be to keep up with the changes.

## Assistants' work in Poland

### 9.1 Assistants' background

■ There are between 500,000 and 600,000 secretaries/assistants in Poland (question E2). The female- to male ratio is 90% female and 10% male. This includes national and local governments, parties and other political organizations. 12% have finished only secondary school, 34% have a master's degree, and the rest have graduated from colleges, post-graduate studies or have a doctoral degree (in Institutes). Both women and men study administration, management, sociology, psychology and international relations after secondary school.

The general salary level of a multilingual management assistant varies quite a bit, depending on qualifications and where one works. In state administration the salary is usually from 300 to 500 Euros a month, in small private firms it is 500 to 600 a month and in international or large Polish companies it is generally from 1000 to 1200 Euros a month, although this can run as high as 2000 euros. (Question E3)

The researchers Salenius and Robbins interviewed three assistants. Two of them had the title "assistant" and one was "purchasing and administration specialist" (question A1). They had worked as assistants from 5 months to 5 years (question A2). Two of them were still studying and one had a degree in Economics (question A3). Question A4 dealt with further courses after receiving a degree. The one who had received a degree had not taken any further courses. Their superiors (question A5) were a managing director; a president of a travel bureau who before her present job had worked as a PR and marketing manager for 12 years at LOT Polish airlines; and a manager of a training company.

None of the assistants considered themselves to have any special areas that they personally take care of (question A6). However in a joint interview a superior stated that his assistant could "be called as a specialized task force to help in some issues which are coming up". Another one's superior said that "Smiling! Smiling is her duty!" referring to the fact

that she handled the reception and therefore was the first person who customers met.

The IT programmes used by these assistants are: Ms-office programs: Word, Excel, Outlook Express, Outlook Exchange, Customer Relationships Manager by Abate and Symposia which is a Polish system for small companies. (question A7). The languages they can speak and write (A8) included Polish and English, two knew also Russian. Arabic, Ukrainian and Italian all received one nomination.

Two of the Polish assistants had a company mobile phone (A9). The third assistant stated that she did not have one “because I mostly stay in the office”.

The researchers also took note of the working conditions. This is where they found the greatest differences. “Some worked in landscaped offices, where there could have been a hundred people and some shared an office with two to three colleagues at the most. The equipment was similar: phone/cellular phone, computer, printer, Xerox and a fax machine. Some also had scanners. The relationship with the superior seemed good.” (Robbins & Salenius, travel report)

## 9.2 Job description

Here we present the results of the interviews with a Euma representative, three managers and their assistants. The EUMA representative described the job of an assistant as follows (question E1): Management assistants’ tasks are varied and include the following:

- management of technology and projects
- organization and planning of office work
- internet and intranet communication
- building of database (clients, customers and others in the working environment)
- creating the firm’s image and taking care of public relations
- applying for and buying equipment for the office
- planning meetings and events
- cooperating with customers and media
- creating and giving presentations
- controlling time-tables and agendas
- preparation of documents, procedures and events
- usually they work for two, three or even more managers.

The assistants use Windows, can speak English (90%), but about 20% speak two or three languages. They have mobile phones and e-mail. (Question E4)

Salenius and Robbins also interviewed both parties of three manager-assistant pairs. The managers job description is presented first, secondly the assistant's job description based on the assistant's interview and thirdly we present the supervisor's (=manager) view of the assistant's job description.

**Pair 1. The manager** (question S1), president of an office specializing in servicing business trips, has the general responsibility of the whole activity. The company employs 30 people and serves about 500 corporate customers, it has the leading position in Poland in its' specific tourism area.

**Pair 1. The assistant** (questions A10, 11, 12, 14, 16, 17) said that "the first hour in the morning from nine to ten is actually every day the same. It's one phone call after another." She does everything, tries to help everyone else in the office. She takes care of the reception, greets the customers and solves their problems and directs them to the proper department or the proper person. Thus the key persons she meets (question A11) are the customers. Work feels difficult when busy; also it is difficult to smile every day. (Question A14) Concerning meeting arrangement (question 16A) she takes care that everything goes well. She sends invitations to guests, makes sure everybody is on the list, does the necessary preparations, the room, catering, the programme, the materials. These are meetings with customers of the companies that they cooperate with. Such meetings take place two to three times in a quarter. Question A12 dealt with the things the assistants like or dislike in their jobs. The assistant, with her superior present, said that she liked to have contact with people, with clients. She likes helping people. She also likes her friends from the office. "It's a really great atmosphere at work". There is nothing she dislikes.

**The superior** (questions S2, 3) stated that "this kind of business, it's much unexpected". Every day, something that is not routine may happen. Therefore, an assistant has to be open for any new ideas or problems – anything new. "I expect that anything I will ask her she can do. But this is also good for her because every day is different - it's not boring. "It is important for the assistant to communicate with the superior and read her mind. The manager starts many things and then the assistant takes over. About the work division between herself and the assistant this superior stated that the assistant had the first contact with the clients when they come to the office. If a client calls it is her duty to try to help the person who is calling to make contact with the proper person. If the problem is

not very complicated she can solve the problem right away. That's the first part. The second is that she is responsible for some PR and marketing things because the company does not have a separate division for marketing. "Because I am the marketing person so she helps me in these matters." The assistant creates newsletters and takes care of the client database. She sends the newsletters to clients by email. "She arranges meetings with our clients to train them for example, so she is like also marketing person in our office. And of course on the daily basis some administrative things – some supplying of some goods and something like that. But this not the important part. Everybody can do it. Paperwork."

**Pair 2.** (Question S1) **The manager**, managing director of a sales and marketing company is responsible for the operations and for the company in Poland which is a part of an Austrian company. This Polish company employs about 50 people.

**Pair 2.** (Questions A10, 11, 12, 14, 16, 17) **The assistant** stated that during the last three years her tasks have stayed more or less the same. She started with purchases and she still purchases all the goods the company sells. She also supervises the ink production. The company has outsourced accounting and IT and she is responsible for the contacts with these companies as well. "We have or at least we try to achieve some standards with sending documents to our accounting office which I also included in my weekly plan." The assistant likes the fact that she has a lot of new demanding projects that she can learn from and develop herself and get experiences. She does not like routine, easy tasks but routine is unavoidable. She also does not like the role of a company policeman she has to adopt with some people. She has to gather all the documents to give to the accounting office and there are people who do not like to do the necessary paperwork.

Her weekly programme is rather predetermined. She has planned her weekly program so that she knows what she does every week on certain days. It is mostly based on her contacts with the suppliers because the company has a logistic system for purchasing and the orders have to be placed on certain days. Her work does not involve meeting arrangements. The company uses Outlook Exchange with the idea that everybody can propose a date for a meeting.

**The superior** (question S2, 3) said that the assistant was not a typical assistant even though she helps him with, for example, the running and coordinating of meetings. "But this is quite a broader responsibility than just planning and preparing documents to sign. This is the standard issue." The assistant also coordinates the areas where they have the outsourcing, such as finance and accounting and also with the contacts

with IT. Because the superior can not do all, the responsibility for coordination of these departments, which are outsourced has been delegated to the assistant.

**Pair 3.** (Question S1) **The manager** of a training company teaching adults said that she was responsible for the company and its daily managing and its future.

**Pair 3.** (Questions A10, 11, 12, 14, 16, 17) **The assistant** said that they had daily and weekly duties. “We have a varied operating schedule so that we can deal with everything during the week, not leaving anything for the next. And of course, if someone does not have time to do something, others help him or her.” If there is a meeting with clients the assistant arranges beverages. This assistant considers the knowledge she can gain in the job very important but she does not like getting up early in the morning to go to work.

**The superior** (question S2, 3) said that the assistants did things pertaining to her duties. “They do not have any responsibility but usually they do what I have to do. A good assistant is absolutely like me – my schedule, my mirror. The main rule is, be my voice.” The assistants’ tasks include answering the phone, e-mails and arranging things.

For these three assistants, the spoken business communication (question A17) situations are mainly in Polish. Between colleagues e-mail is used. With customers it is easier to start with a letter and after that use the telephone more.

### 9.3 Cultural knowledge at work

The importance of the English language seems little (A17). It was estimated by one interviewee that the percentage is one per cent compared to Polish.

One of the companies does business with Japanese companies. The assistant commented that the Japanese were very formal compared to Polish or German people. She considers them a bit withdrawn.

“For example, Polish people very often don’t answer emails or they say OK I’ll do this and then they don’t. They don’t bother about it. But with the Japanese I have to answer every email and confirm everything. I if I say I’ll do this by tomorrow so I have to do this by tomorrow because otherwise they won’t know what is going on and basically this is offending.”

The Japanese are very sensitive to rank, to hierarchy in the organization.

“For example when one of the presidents visited Poland his assistant had to carry his luggage, from the airport. He just let the luggage and got in a taxi and his assistant had to take it and follow. Also in Poland there is a custom that women come first and men open the door for women but in Japan the boss comes first. So he was very surprised with this Polish custom and it was very funny for him and then after he got to know about it he always opened the door for me because I am a woman. It was very different; it was very amazing for him.”

One of the supervisors interviewed stated that Germans use a very formal address, always by second name and with titles. In his opinion the Japanese look very formal but “if you know them, after six or seven years – they are also very normal persons, party people.” He said that the formality expresses itself differently in Germany and Japan. In Germany it is law and norm abiding “written documents” formality where as in Japan it is “human formality” where everyone is involved in the decision-making. “It has to go to the general manager and back, you have to ask everybody”.

The Poles consider themselves less formal than Germans or Austrians. On the other hand, religion is not a subject that the Poles wish to discuss with distant acquaintances. It is considered very intimate and personal to ask about religion.

## 9.4 Changes, challenges and the future

The assistants were asked about the biggest change in their work during the last five years (question A10). Two of the assistants had not worked long enough to answer this question. But the firm in which the third assistant works has grown from a company of eight to 50 people in five years’ time. The assistant has worked there all that time and her job has also changed some what during these years but basically the tasks are the same. To the question of challenges (A15) this assistant said that so much has already happened during the past five years that she can not imagine how the company will look like in ten years time and if she even works there. Now that the company is growing it offers a challenge and she feels that she needs the challenge to be happy. “If we grow as quickly as now, at some point I will have to split the workload with another person.”

To the question of the overall biggest changes in work (question A13) one of the “new” assistants answered: “I’m still learning. I have to do something new every day so I got a new duty or actually every day I get a new experience.” What comes to personal objectives for the coming ten years the other “new” assistant expects to gain knowledge from the

job. “Young assistants must know about the trends and where and how we can work. Those things we learn through jobs like this one.”

For management assistants, the future challenge according to one assistant will be that they will have to have more and more education on different fields, especially on IT, prompted by communication needs. They will have to know about IT, how to use IT and how to apply it in the organization.

The EUMA representative saw that the biggest challenge was to find time for all the necessary tasks; sometimes they can work up to ten hours on Saturday and may even work on Sundays. (Question E4)

One assistant saw that the greatest challenge for the organisation was manifested by the customers. “I think, let’s just say that people, our clients are more and more demanding so we have to work harder and harder.” A manager stated that one of the most important things was to serve customers in the best possible way. An assistant has to be really very flexible and the challenge is that customers are *very* demanding.

The managers (question S4) saw some possible sources of challenges in management assistant cooperation. The challenges depend on the manager’s personality, education and the professional way of managing. She was of the opinion that when assistants are well educated and enthusiastic there are fewer problems.

Another type of challenge which has to be solved is the growth of the company which also means that the tasks the assistant is dealing with are increasing more and more.

When asked about the type of job description and the role assistants will have in ten years’ (S5, S6) time, the managers anticipated a more influential role for them: the first manager hopes that assistants will be very independent and give her the opportunity to be mobile. “I mean to travel around the world with a notebook or telephone or whatever. And I’d like to have an assistant over here who can deal with everything. The people should know me very well and represent me very well and be able to work with people and things – just write me a report and not ask too many questions, not bother me (LAUGH). It’s a criterion for a good assistant. An assistant should know me and know the work and how I will behave and what kind of decision I make.” She was also of the opinion that assistants would develop with the company and that their number would increase. Some assistants will become directors, which has also happened before.

The second manager saw progress in the position of assistants as well. He said that ten years ago there were secretaries, now they are assistants and ten years from now they will be office managers.

On her behalf, the Euma representative (E4 -7) replied that on top of the list of the biggest changes in an assistant's work during the past five years have been the development of IT, globalization and diversification of enterprises. Ten years from now the assistants' position will be high and strong but it depends on themselves and their bosses. The future challenges facing a managerial assistant are more work and less time. They will have to choose between career and family.

## 9.5 Summary of the interviews in Poland

Three assistants were interviewed. Two of them had the word "assistant" in their title. All three had worked as assistants a relatively short time, from 5 months to 5 years. Two were still students and the one with a degree in Economics had not taken any further courses after graduation. All worked for top executives but did not themselves consider having any special areas that they take care of.

The IT programmes used are MS-office: Word, Excel, Outlook Express and Exchange and some company specific programmes.

The question of written job descriptions did not come up in the interviews. Assistants perform mainly traditional secretarial duties: written and oral communication with internal and external customers, meeting and travel arrangements. Some have their special fields. The division of labour between an assistant and a superior is clear. The assistant carries some of the superior's workload; the superior takes the decisions concerning personnel and monetary issues (Robbins & Salenius, travel report).

All the interviewed assistants can besides Polish speak and write English, two also knew Russian. In Poland, according to these interviews, foreign languages do not have an important role in assistant qualifications. The use of other languages than Polish is minimal. English is used in international connections. Letters, e-mail and phone are all used as communication media. Two of the assistants had a company mobile phone.

New technology, diversity, globalisation and multiculturalism, time management, openness, command of languages, the ability to predict changes, tempo and ability to tolerate stress are some of the future challenges facing the management assistants in Poland. Furthermore, the management - assistant personality fit was considered a challenge, as well as the growing demands by customers and a growing work load. In the future, the traditional secretarial role will disappear all together; an assistant will specialize and assume more responsibility. She is likely to become a project coordinator, the person with an overview of things.

# 10

## Assistants' work in Spain

■ In Spain, four assistants and their managers were interviewed in four different companies. The companies were very different, indeed: a fish factory, a cultural enterprise, a non-profit research institute and an automotive factory. Researchers Savinainen and Beltran-Herrera noted that the working conditions of the assistants were very similar though they work for different kinds of companies.

### 10.1 Assistants' background

The first interview question (A1) was about the title on the interviewees' business cards. They all had different titles which were administrative assistant, management assistant, production assistant and secretary of direction. One had a plain business card on which she wrote her name.

They had worked as assistants from 4 years to 15 years. As a general observation, Savinainen and Beltran-Herrera stated in their travel report that "the level of management assistants was very high. All of them had graduated as management assistants from ISSA" (The University of Navarra's campus in San Sebastian specialising in training Management Assistants.) The reason for this is of course that ISSA arranged the interviews. All of the assistants had educated themselves further. Courses in accounting, law, marketing, protocol, quality and environmental audits were mentioned. The most popular ones had been language and IT courses that were mentioned by three respondents.

The number of people the Spanish assistants worked with varied from one superior with two assistants to teamwork. Two assistants worked for only one superior. These superiors were the Production Manager and the Director. The director also had another assistant. One of the interviewees worked half time because of maternity and had a replacement for the rest of the day. This assistant had one boss (managing director), but the work was described as team work including other people in the organisation.

Another assistant also talked about team work, she works for the General Manager, with the sales department and the Financial Manager.

Question number A6 was about the assistants' personal special area of work. They all had a different one. One respondent takes care of administrative work related to delivery service, one works in the sales area which deals with clients, suppliers, accounting and transaction agreements. One assistant's special area consists of everything related to hiring and the work of researchers, the human resource side of things. Only the last ones duties could be described as traditional: her main duty is to support and help the manager and organize board meetings.

In question A7 the interviewed assistants were asked to state their knowledge and usage of IT programmes. They mentioned:

- Excel
- Word
- PowerPoint
- Photoshop
- Spyro E.R.P., a program to manage supplying. Everyone also uses e-mail and the internet.

Question number eight dealt with language skills. They mentioned

- Spanish
- English (2 fluent, 1 good knowledge)
- French (1 fluent)
- Italian (1 fluent)
- Chinese (1 a little)
- German
- Basque.

All of the respondents stated that they knew English and three mentioned French. Both of these can be studied at ISSA. Two mentioned Basque and two had studied German, one at ISSA and one had had lessons in her previous job. One stated that she used English every day, French less and that she wrote better in English than in Basque and French. One assistant stated that she did not need English in her current job.

The last question that dealt with assistants' background was about a mobile phone. None of the respondents had a company mobile phone.

## 10.2 Job description

In Spain, as in Germany and Poland but unlike in some other target countries the researchers were able to interview both parties of manager-assistant pairs. The manager's job description is presented first, secondly the assistant's job description based on the assistant's interview and thirdly we present the supervisor's (=manager) view of the assistant's job description.

**Pair 1.** (Question S1) **The manager**, general director of a non-profit research institute, stated that he was responsible for strategies, he attended board meetings, and he was involved in management planning issues. He considered himself to have every responsibility that upper level management usually has.

**Pair 1.** (Questions A10, 11, 12, 14, 16, 17) **The assistant** stated that first of all she had daily, weekly and monthly routine tasks. "I start work at 9 o'clock, first check and read the mail, then assign the tasks to be done for that day". She answers the phone, takes care of time management and arranges manager's trips, organises meetings and congresses. She takes the minutes of meetings. She schedules the timetable of the participants in the meeting; writes the minutes, the agenda. She also arranges the trips to them, does the documentation. After the meeting she checks what is being done and what needs to be done.

This assistant controls three programmes through which the hiring of new personnel is managed. She orientates the graduates and is in charge of processing their curricula. She manages the financial support from the government and the EU. She also does the cost statements and budgets. She stated that over the years, her responsibilities have increased.

The key persons/partners (question A11) in her job are: the sales department, the financial manager, the general vice manager and other secretaries of other departments and administration. Business communication is handled by e-mail as "it is easy and fast to use". (Question A17)

She likes organizing events, "last year I took part in the organization of this big international event and I loved it". She likes less the mechanical tasks i.e. to update information in the database, because "it is boring". (Question A12).

**The superior** (questions S2, 3) said that the assistant was a "shared assistant" who also worked with the communication and sales departments. She performs the traditional secretarial tasks: keeps an agenda, arranges meetings, answers the phone. She prepares presentations, is in charge of the written part of agendas and minutes of the meeting. She deals with all the areas of hiring new researchers, their introduction, financial support, the grants, the relationships with the Ministry of Education; these

are the main tasks. She also plays a main role in the coordination of new information; she gets acquainted with the news related to the organization and distributes this information.

**Pair 2.** (Question S1) **The manager**, director of a fish factory, said that his job was “to see that the work is done, and in the best possible way. Everything is under my responsibility.”

**Pair 2.** (Questions A10, 11, 16) **The assistant** said that the content of her workday depended on the season, what has arrived to the port, if there is fish or not. “If there is fish, then I have to deal with that first, we look for people who can help, then we have to look for buyers, etc.” Other days she checks the calls received and orders that have been placed, the usual. She places orders every day.

She likes in her job the dynamic days, but not being under pressure. (Question A12). The relationships with clients are easy for her to handle, but she does not enjoy bookkeeping (boring) or answering the phone. (Question A14).

Most of business communication is handled by e-mail for “it is safe and easy to use”. Some traditional correspondence is used with the people who like it. (Question A17)

**The superior** (questions S2, 3) said that his assistant did a little bit of everything. Among her main tasks she solves problems, those which the manager might not be able to solve, as long as it is not a question of a crucial matter. She also deals with clients and does the pay check. In general, the work is done on a daily basis. There is trade everyday. If there is fish a day can be organized superficially a day before but everything might change radically.

**Pair 3.** (Question S1) **The manager**, managing director of a cultural enterprise, said that he was in charge of the management of the company. He sees himself as a “team trainer” and his main responsibility is to define the strategies, to plan the implementation and operation.

**Pair 3.** (Questions A10, 11) **The assistant** interviewed works 4 hours daily because of family reasons. The company has hired another assistant for the rest of the day to help her with the things she cannot do. They do not have a “work schedule” but they read the newspapers daily to see if there are news, critics, etc. on the company. The interviewee checks the e-mails, there are plenty of them because she has the main e-mail address in the company. She answers inquiries customers daily about rooms for conferences, concerts, etc. and they have to be answered as soon as possible. She also forwards e-mails to the right departments. E-mail has replaced the telephone; everything is mostly done by e-mail. “So, the 4 hours I spend here is answering the e-mails.” Also the whole maintenance

of the office supplies, checking that the machines work, and that material is available is included in her duties. The job is very versatile, things appear daily: the superior has to travel – the assistant takes care of travel arrangements, when there is a board meeting – the assistants organize it, and so on.

This assistant really likes her job, being in contact with people from shareholders to artists, the whole cultural aspect. There are only tiny little things she does not like, such as handling complaints. (Question A12).

The most demanding task (question A14, 16) in this assistant's job has been to maintain the relationships with different institutions, to deal with the city major, with politicians, also with the people of the local cabinet, to organize their journeys, their staying, security, all protocol unfamiliar a priori, to have to write down very important, confidential information, to write letters on one's own. The organisation of administrative board meetings is demanding. Even setting a date for a meeting is hard because of the politicians' busy schedules, the assistants have to try to book a time with their secretaries, fix a date, and from that on move forward letting people involved know about the meeting. An invitation with agenda is formulated. Along with the invitation a report that has been prepared by the assistants is sent for politicians to read. Their assistants confirm their attendance and a day before the meeting everything is being checked and the PP presentations finalized. On the day of the meeting, the assistants are there and listen to what is being said, take the minutes and notes concerning everything that assistants may require further information on. Last, they prepare the minutes of the meeting, to summarize the relevant and most important information dealt with during the meeting.

Another difficult part of her job is saying no to people who call to book seats for a concert or events like that. Booking tickets are not part of the job. The easiest thing for this interviewee is dealing with people, "I deal a lot with them and it becomes easier and easier, at the beginning I was nervous".

Some oral communication (question A17) is conducted in foreign languages on the occasions that the manager goes on business trips abroad and people from overseas call them; when sending letters English is used. French is used, when inquiries from France are received, nowadays also Basque is used because some institutions demand it. In the relationships with politicians' secretaries Basque is used and also with public relations most documents have to be translated to Basque.

**The superior** (questions S2, 3) considered the assistants' most important task to work as a "filter" of entrant phone calls and visits, knowing and differentiation between important and non-important calls and

visits. The assistants are the ones people first come into contact with. The assistants make sure an information problem gets solved (an interview request, etc). The assistants perform office tasks, photocopy needed material and make sure there is the right number of equipment, pens, paper and CD's (for conference needs). Among other things their duties may involve technical support on the preparation of documents, making presentations for board meetings or creating a written document for a speech at a University.

The assistant in question (the main assistant) deals with the external relations. The assistant is more of an auxiliary person in the management team than a secretary. An assistant takes the managers place every now and then and certain tasks can be delegated to her.

**Pair 4.** (Question S1) **The manager**, a plant manager of an automotive factory, said that in his position he is responsible for production, manufacture and also for logistics and maintenance mainly. Also some quality aspects of the manufacture are under his responsibility.

**Pair 4.** (Questions A10, 12, 14, 16, 17) **The Assistant** stated that she received the schedules from the customers with the requirements every day, and she had to enter all the data in the system taking into account the transit times in each plan because it depended on the country with the delivery material. She also makes reservations for air freight and containers to go by sea, and to take care of all the requirements of the customers in different countries.

She works with the IT staff, with the administration and maintenance department, in case of environmental issues and with the purchase department when she has to contact suppliers abroad. (Question A11).

The interviewee likes in her job that she works in a multilingual environment and can develop communicational skills because with the technological development as there are continous developments. She has to write a lot, to empathize with customers and that is the thing she likes the most. She does not like the routines, like entering the data in the computer. (Question A12).

The easiest for this assistant is managing in different situations with different customers or even in different situations in businesses. The interviewee could not mention any difficult tasks (question A14), and she has no tasks related to meeting preparations. (Question A16).

With customers she communicates in English, French and Spanish. (Question A17)

The first thing **the superior** (question S2, 3) stated was that that in fact the assistant in question was not exactly his assistant, "she's a person who works not only for me but also for the whole department of the pro-

duction”. The manager also said that in their department, they needed to keep in touch with customers frequently or even daily and, therefore, the most important thing the assistant did was the contact with the customers. This superior is the only one she has, but she works for the company in general and not for any one person. The tasks the assistant and the superior perform are completely different. There is a list of tasks to be done by the assistant. When required she does other things as well, but normally she receives the orders from customers, makes phone calls to logistics, customers and in matters concerning quality.

### **10.3 Cultural knowledge at work**

Question number A17 dealt with language usage and communication media. Only two assistants responded to this question. The languages they use are English, French, Spanish and Basque. The other of the two stated that they do business letters in Spanish and Basque.

In question number A18 it was inquired what type of cultural knowledge the respondents need. From the answers one can see that cultural knowledge is highly valued among assistants; an assistant should be up to date by reading newspapers, be aware of the political, economic and cultural situation of the country. It was also recognized that cultural knowledge of other countries was important due to international connections.

### **10.4 Changes, challenges and the future**

The assistants saw that their duties had changed from “coffee making” to more management level tasks and that this type of development will continue. “The assistants are in charge when the boss is absent.” There is more freedom to do things one’s own way. They find that they still have office chores but they are nowadays less important. Assistants may assume some special area and this calls for further skills in marketing, finance etc. tools to work.

Technological change has also had its effect on this development. One could not survive without a computer and IT-skills. E-mail has replaced the telephone; almost everything is done by e-mail. Also when the superior is not in the office the connections are easy and fast to handle with e-mail.

In ten years' time some assistants will reach the management level depending on their personal goals. The assistants said that they hoped to be of value to the company, to do the job the best way possible so that people around would be happy with what they do. The respondents are not after their supervisors' posts. For the company they wanted prosperity, to sell more and to grow.

The managers stated that the assistants' job description will change in ten years' time (question S5). The traditional secretary will disappear. "No one needs a person to answer their phone or to write a letter for them."

Assistants will take on more responsibilities, they will be more autonomous and foreign languages are going to be very important. As important languages, the managers mentioned English, French, Chinese, Basque and Spanish. An assistant has to have empathy and the capacity to deal with other people's emotions, as well as interpersonal skills. IT knowledge is of equal importance, as well as administrative, numerical and commercial knowledge. To keep up-to-date as far as the latest technology is concerned is seen as very important.

## 10.5 Summary of the interviews in Spain

Three out of four were called assistants, one had the word "secretary" in her title. They had worked as assistants from 4 to 15 years. They had all graduated as management assistants and taken further courses especially in languages and IT. They worked for top level managers and had one or more superiors; two described their work as team work. They all had different areas of speciality depending on the line of business of the company and the manager's job. The question of written job descriptions did not come up in the interviews. Savinainen and Beltran-Herrera said that the assistants were creative in solving problem situations pertaining to management and organisation; they were also able to develop their work with some independency.

All of them have a command of IT programmes, at least three foreign languages and their mother tongue (Spanish). English is the most important Of foreign languages even though one assistant does not need it at work. Also some French is needed. The respondents' command of foreign languages was larger than the actual use at the current job. The mother tongue Spanish was important and the local language Basque likewise.

None of the assistants had a company mobile phone. E-mail was by far the most important medium of communication

The managers and assistants seemed to have a very similar view of the assistants' job description, cultural needs and the changes, the challenges and the future of the job. The assistants' main tasks were:

- checking the mail
- answering the phone
- time management
- travel arrangements
- meeting arrangements
- minute taking, documentation
- a special area depending on the place of work.

Work division between superiors and their assistants was as follows: a normal division between the superiors and the assistants, but in some cases the assistants have more independency to make their own decisions.

Cultural knowledge and languages were considered important and the ability to adapt. It was also anticipated that in the future there will be no more secretaries only assistants with more responsibilities and independency. The challenge is to keep up with the changes especially of the technological development. The assistants need constantly to maintain IT knowledge and they need to know new languages in business situations, for example, Chinese (Savinainen & Beltran, travel report).

# 11

## Assistants' work in Sweden

- In Sweden, three assistants and two managers were interviewed in two different companies by Marjaana Halsas.

### 11.1 Assistants' background

- Question A1 dealt with the title of the assistants. The three assistants had three different titles: executive assistant, marketing assistant and assistant to president and CEO. The last mentioned said that in conversation though she used the title MD's secretary, because she was one of those who considered secretary a fine title.

Question A2 was about the years worked as an assistant. Two of the assistants had worked as assistants for 15 years and one for 38 years. Concerning their education (question A3,) one assistant told that she was a high school and commercial college graduate, one was a high school graduate and one had primary school as her background. They all had taken further courses (question A4) for example in law, English and IT to be more competent.

Question A5 was about the assistant's superiors and their positions. One of the assistants had several superiors. The superior in the highest position is President of the company and Executive vice President of Management Board. He works in Finland, which means that they do distance work. Another of her superiors is the Business Controller and the third the Overseas Business Unit Manager. The other assistant's superior is the Vice President in marketing but she also assists the whole management group. The third assistant has just one superior that she works for: the President & CEO.

Question A6 was if the assistants had any special area that they personally were in charge of. One of the assistants has a special area. She is responsible for company home pages and edits the customer magazine.

The other two had their hands full of general assistant's duties, which meant there was no time for anything else.

The Swedish assistants use the following IT-programs (question A7): MS-office: Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Outlook calendar. Their language abilities were as follows (question A8):

- Swedish
- English
- German,
- French,
- Spanish,
- Danish,
- Norwegian.

All three assistants had a good command of the English language. For two it was also the corporate language, "daily usage is 75 % of all communication". One assistant stated that her

"German has been fluent, but some rusting has occurred during the years". She does not need German at work very often. French – satisfactory, she does not need it in work life. One assistant knew spoken Danish and Norwegian.

In Sweden, the assistants all have a mobile phone, use it a lot also to send SMS. Two of the assistants have the mobile phone on them all the time 24/7 (question A9).

## 11.2 Job descriptions

Questions A10, S2 and S3 were about the assistant's role in the organisation, weekly programme and job description.

The first assistant is at the moment fully employed in assistant's work with three superiors in very high positions (question S3). These are also the key persons in her job (question A11). The tasks may vary a lot depending on the superior. She takes care of travel arrangements, plans and organises meetings, takes minutes by shorthand. In meetings she always has her portable computer with her. The presentations are sent to her beforehand and this way she has all the material collected in her computer where she can send it to those who need it. She processes invitations and thank you-letters and other PR-communication. She transmits information to superiors, checks enquiries, e-mail and meeting requests and receives part of the calls (those that come through the telephone extension), in order for the superior not to waste time. This requires solid experience and know-how

of the company's operations from her. She prepares presentation materials and edits the material from the superior to presentable form. One of her superiors was also interviewed. He works in the firm's business area as the Vice President and CFO (Chief Financial Officer) answering for the company's economy and growth. He writes his own e-mails but the assistant has access to everything he writes.

The second assistant is responsible for the company home pages, she edits the customer magazine and performs daily secretarial duties for her superior and the management group. She books and organises meetings and visits, trips, time management and offers. She is also herself invited to some meetings. Attending marketing meetings which she also many times organizes helps her in writing the articles to the magazine. Business correspondence is mainly handled by others. The superior's calls go through her and she is in the position to screen all email. She often also takes care of e-mail communication for her superior. The key persons in her job are the marketing manager, marketing engineers and the assistant to the CEO, because their superiors often make business trips together.

The third assistant's duties include booking and organising meetings, invitations, documents etc. providing presentation materials for visits and drafts the minutes of meetings. She seldom prepares the presentations though because there is a separate department that prepares presentations. On superiors' request, she organises on even quite large congresses and events including everything from facts to rooms and entertainment. Her work involves a lot of travel arrangements because her superior is constantly on the go. If needed she travels with him. She sends out invitations if need be. She also handles all customer feedback that her superior receives (insurance company equals many complaints). This work is challenging and takes a lot of time. One has to be in contact with the agent and follow the situation until the customer has been contacted by the right person. Written communication by email is fairly informal due to organisational culture. The key persons in this assistant's job are her superior, his chauffeur and some other assistants in the company. The superior is a concern manager in product insurance in the Nordic and Baltic countries with 6500 employees. The superior said that "principally one can say that the assistant takes care of my life" This is also the most important task from his point of view. He delegates her as much of his workload as he can.

All three like their jobs (question A 12). The best is freedom and flexibility in daily work and a nice, positive supervisor. They like to be in the centre of things, to take part, to be where it all happens. To be able to take initiative and make suggestions. Difficult for one assistant

is to make PowerPoint presentations in a hurry in spite of courses taken. Customer complaints are no favourites either.

What is difficult for one can be easy for another (question A14). So it is with PowerPoint. One said accompanied with much laughter that she is good with it. She also said that she is quick and focused with a high threshold for stress. The second assistant said that her strength is that she is sociable; it is easy for her to meet people, to remember their names and faces.

Question A17 was about spoken business communication. All three assistants speak English every day. From their answers it became clear that English is the most important language or as important as Swedish. English is spoken on the phone, when sending e-mail and in correspondence. One assistant also speaks German, French and Spanish when in contact with those countries. Another has many contacts within the Nordic countries and then she speaks Danish and Norwegian.

### **11.3 Cultural knowledge at work**

In Sweden, the assistants interviewed all needed English every day and stated that they had a very good knowledge of the language. Mother tongue is of course important. (Question A17)

One assistant said that it was important to know and keep up one's knowledge of different cultures and business cultures. There are differences of expression e.g. by e-mail. "Here in the North we are quite short in our messages, but in the South and other parts of the world they expect a little longer style, about the weather, be a little friendlier and so on." The other assistant did not feel a need for cultural knowledge, because she is only in contact with "Swedes, Norwegians and Finns and there has never been a problem". The third assistant was of the opinion that Finns are different. "They put a greater emphasis on the table to look stylish, that people sit in right places and that the titles are just right."

### **11.4 Changes, challenges and the future**

The assistants interviewed were of the opinion that the entire time one must adjust to changes. Assistants find it important not to panic in the face of changes, one is supposed to be very flexible, co-operative, thorough and quick and most of all reliable. One needs a lot of initiative and one

has to be able to anticipate things. One has to know one's place in the organisation and how to make oneself useful and market one's talents not to be forgotten.

The role changes a lot depending on with whom one works. "My previous superior resigned last year and then my duties changed also. That is a thing you have to be ready for all the time."

After ten years, assistants are still needed but maybe only at the top. It is important to keep up and develop knowledge in languages (Spanish especially is a new language in Sweden), economy, law, social competence and cultural knowledge.

The managers said that an assistant's work has changed considerably over the years. IT demands technical knowledge. E-mail has changed many routines. In the future work will be more independent and other type of knowledge in excess to secretarial knowledge is needed. Specialisation can be the future; a pool of assistants with different qualifications may be formed. The assistants will do slightly different tasks depending on the work at hand.

New generation of managers with good IT-skills may have a different view of managing and much better technical qualifications than the old. This may change the relationship and role between an assistant and her superior. Young managers, "the click and go-generation", may want to be more independent than the old ones. On the other hand, other qualifications are more important than IT-skills in leading positions

Both the assistants and the management saw the future positively and hoped to continue co-operation as long as possible. They anticipate hardly any change in mutual roles and a long and confidential relationship is highly regarded. In face of organisational changes it is important that their views match and they talk and write as one.

## 11.5 Summary of the interviews in Sweden

All three had the title "assistant". Two of the assistants had worked as assistants for 15 years and one for 38 years. They had medium- or low level education but had taken further courses e.g. in English and IT. Their superiors were of the highest company level. The question of written job descriptions did not come up in the interviews.

Swedish and English were the dominating languages and they all needed MS-office programmes in their work. All had a company mobile phone and two of them carried it with them all the time. They all liked their jobs and had a good chemistry with their superiors.

Some tasks were common to all assistants. These include travel and meeting arrangements, invitations and room bookings, collecting and distributing information, getting out presentations. The assistant with a special area to take care of has also other duties related i.e. to the customer magazine which comes out three times a year.

What the manager does has a profound impact on each work day. All days differ from one another and everything can change very quickly. This means that an assistant has to be quick, precise and flexible. One must not get irritated by the changes in schedules.

In the future there will be fewer personal assistants and more assistants that specialize in a specific area and work in a pool.

# 12

## Assistants' work in Europe

### 12.1 Big picture

■ Based on the interviews conducted in eight European countries on assistant's background, job description, need for cultural knowledge and changes and challenges we can draw a picture of assistants and their work in Europe.

#### 12.1.1 Assistants' background

Altogether 34 people, all women, were interviewed in the role of an assistant. 21 of these had the word "assistant" in their title, 7 had the word "secretary" and six had neither. There were various prefixes such as executive, personal, management, project and team to specify the duties (see the table below).

In Belgium, there were neither assistants nor secretaries, in the Netherlands there were no assistants and in Germany, Poland or Sweden there were no secretaries. In Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland some assistants had other titles. In Finland in two cases the English and Finnish versions differed from one another. In Finnish these assistants were called secretaries.

According to this study, the European assistant is a woman and most often called an assistant.

The question of a written job description did not come up in the interviews in most cases. In Belgium the assistants did not have a job description and in Finland, two out of four and in Germany, three out of six had a job description.

The interviewed assistants had worked as assistants from five months to 40 years. There were quite a few that have had a very long career as an assistant and mostly it seemed that the longer in the job the more responsible the tasks. Those who have been longer in the job have a more basic education than those with less experience. Second or third level management assistant education was the most usual one.

COUNTRY	TITLES		
	Secretaries	Assistants	Others
Belgium			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Sales and Marketing Executive</li> <li>▪ Market Coordinator</li> </ul>
Finland		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Executive Assistant</li> <li>▪ Executive Assistant to the Director General</li> <li>▪ Assistant to President and CEO</li> <li>▪ Personal Assistant to the President</li> </ul>	
France	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Qualified Secretary (2)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Assistant</li> <li>▪ Management Assistant (4)</li> <li>▪ General Management Assistant</li> <li>▪ Executive Assistant of the HR</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Responsible for Training and Competences</li> </ul>
Germany		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Assistant</li> <li>▪ International Management Assistant</li> <li>▪ Project Assistant</li> <li>▪ Team Assistant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Delegation Consultant</li> </ul>
The Netherlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Executive Secretary</li> <li>▪ Secretary of Medical staff</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Office Manager</li> </ul>
Poland		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Assistant(2)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Purchasing and Administration Specialist</li> </ul>
Spain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Secretary of Direction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Administrative Assistant</li> <li>▪ Management Assistant</li> <li>▪ Production Assistant</li> </ul>	
Sweden		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Executive Assistant</li> <li>▪ Marketing Assistant</li> <li>▪ Assistant to President and CEO</li> </ul>	

Table 6. The titles of the interviewed assistants by country.

According to the results, assistants are real life-long learners. Almost all assistants had taken further courses to develop themselves. Some had only taken courses organised by the employing company but it was more usual to take courses outside the company. Language and IT courses were on top of the list.

The knowledge of IT programs and languages assistants can speak and write is thus impressive. In most work places there were some company specific IT programmes in use but MS Office was mentioned and used by all.

Leaving aside the mother tongue, all assistants knew English. The French were not asked about their language abilities but at least one of them had studied English and also further courses had been taken in English.

Finnish assistants differed from the others by their knowledge of Swedish. This can be explained by the fact that Swedish is Finland's second official language. The Spanish assistants' speciality was Basque. Other languages quite commonly known across Europe were French and German. Some knew also Russian and/or Spanish. Some individual assistants knew at least some Italian, Danish, Norwegian, Chinese or Arabic.

### 12.1.2 Assistants' job descriptions

The tasks of assistants varied depending on the company and the superior's job. The workdays were described as busy and unpredictable. No one liked routines, they craved for challenging jobs. Based on the interviewees' job descriptions the assistants can be classified into four groups: personal assistants, team assistants, assistants with a special area and non assistants.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>1</b> Personal Assistants, 13</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>2</b> Team Assistants, 5</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>3</b> Management assistants with own special area, 9</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>4</b> Non Assistants, 7</p>

Table 7. The classification of assistants and their numbers in the research material.

1. Personal Assistants usually work for one top level superior or a few of them at the most. At the office she is situated next to the manager's office. A traditional assistant's role is to support the superior. The most important task is time management. That is the core duty. She also handles travel arrangements, plans and organises meetings, takes minutes, prepares presentations or edits the material from the superior to presentable form, writes invitations and thank you-letters, receives guests, transmits information, checks and writes mail and e-mail and receives (part of the) calls in order for the manager not to waist time. High level of trust between the assistant and the superior is the prerequisite for a good working relationship. 13 of the interviewed assistants can be classified to this group of assistants.
2. Team assistants work for a team. In the office team, assistants can form a pool. Team assistants perform same kind of duties as the traditional assistants but they work for a team of people. Also the

traditional tasks can be divided among the assistants meaning that each specializes in some of the tasks. One can be responsible for travel arrangements, another one for meeting arrangements and a further one for preparing documents. It seems that the work of a team assistant is close to the traditional secretarial duties and the job description is rather narrow. 5 of the interviewed assistants can be classified to this group of assistants.

3. Management assistants with a special area are assistants whose job has two dimensions. First there are the traditional duties to perform but then they have their own special area. In this study, the special areas were (some mentioned in several sections because they can be classified under all of them):

Communication:

- customer magazine
- quarterly and annual reports

Finance:

- quarterly and annual reports
- payroll
- budget control

IT related:

- managing the contents of the company portal and the CRM system
- Intra updates

Personnel:

- the red-letter days
- organising personnel events
- payroll
- training
- competence evaluations
- hiring of personnel

Sales and Marketing:

- public relations
- sales administration
- delivery administration
- customer magazine

Secretarial:

- he red-letter days
- quarterly and annual reports
- organising personnel events
- organising board meetings.

Nine of the interviewed assistants can be classified to this group of assistants.

4. The non assistants where those whose main tasks actually comprised of something else than the traditional assistants' duties. In fact, some of these assistants did not have any of them or only a little of assisting another person. Seven of the interviewed assistants can be classified to this group of assistants. Some of them still had the title assistant but in some cases also the title told about the real contents of work.

In France, the person interviewed as an assistant and who was “Responsible for Training and Competences” could have been called a Training Manager, in Germany there was a “Delegation Consultant” responsible for expatriates and in Poland a “Purchasing and Administration Specialist.” On the other hand in France there was a “Management Assistant” who actually works as a real estate agent and another “General Management Assistant” whose job could better be described as being a project manager. This person has worked for the company for 20 years and advanced but the title has not followed her development.

### 12.1.3 Cultural knowledge at work

There were only two questions concerning cultural knowledge and, therefore, the results were scarce. Different languages make the cultural knowledge most needed on the job and most of all English. In multinationals, the working language is English. Only in France and Poland the assistants' need of English or other foreign languages was very little. The French prefer oral communication but the people in top positions are almost impossible to reach because of filtering.

Perceptivity and openness to different cultures was considered important for assistants. It was considered that the importance of cultural knowledge and foreign languages will still grow in the future.

#### 12.1.4 Changes, challenges and the future

The duties of assistants as such have not changed much but, rather, the way they are performed. For example, traditional letter writing has almost completely given way to emails. In Bäcklund's (1990) study electronic typewriters were mentioned but today an assistant cannot work without a computer. It is not an exaggeration to say that an IT revolution has taken place in assistants' work, as in every other sector of work and even free time. An interesting feature concerning equipment is the mobile phone. There were differences between the countries. In Belgium and Spain, assistants did not have a mobile phone. In Finland and Sweden, all assistants had mobile phones, some even two. In France two out of nine, in Germany four out of six, in the Netherlands most and in Poland two out of three assistants had one.

Having or not having a mobile phone can be interpreted from several perspectives. It can be related to the culture of the country, the way people normally live, e.g. in Finland and Sweden there are the great mobile phone producers Nokia and Ericsson and it is totally natural that everyone has a private mobile phone. However, everyone does not have a company covered mobile phone. A company may provide a person with a mobile phone either because the person enjoys high prestige and/or because it is important that the person can be reached at all times. It seems that the higher up the assistant's superior works, the more likely the assistant is to have a mobile phone.

Carrying the mobile phone all the time means in a way that the person carrying the phone is at work 24 hours a day. This may cause fatigue and one of the challenges of the future and for some already today is how to separate one's work and free time.

In general, it was assumed that assistants will have a more independent and specialised role with a larger spectre of tasks in the future. Some saw assistants doing distance work, which again was made possible by the contemporary equipment, mobile phones, laptops and remote access to the company network.

Many commented that the traditional secretarial role will disappear all together. On the other hand, it was also said that assistants may work for a team or a department. Based on the interviews, a change towards a situation where there are more team assistants can be seen as a development back to basic secretarial work and thus negative and detrimental to the profession. On the contrary, the development towards an assistant having her special area and maybe later on an independent job can be seen as a

positive developmental direction. In the future an assistant's job can be the first career step in an organization.

Many changes were seen as challenges. Technical development, internationalization or globalization, diversity and multicultural organisations and a new breed of managers can change the job of an assistant. It is important to keep up with the development. In some answers it was anticipated that there will be a demand for the command of Chinese as the companies do more and more business in China and India, as well.

## **12.2 Implications of results to assistant education at HAAGA-HELIA**

The management assistants' studies at HAAGA-HELIA focus on multicultural communications expertise, information expertise, and business expertise (see chapter 2.3.1). Compared to the results of this study, the core competence areas are well chosen. In the future when a new curriculum is developed attention should be paid to detail more than changing the general competence areas where the direction seems right.

In fine-tuning the program, some questions could be asked. English is important and will remain but which other languages should the students study and which ones should be offered? Perhaps surprisingly, it seems that letter writing has almost disappeared and been replaced by email. Still in 2004 in Söderqvist's study, it was found that letters are an essential part of business communication and, therefore, teaching letter writing skills is very important. Based on the results of this study, it seems that it is more important to know how to write emails than to know how to write letters. Therefore we need to ask if the students learn to know the email etiquette of each country whose language they study.

Looking at the above list of assistants' special areas, one could ask if in the curriculum students' time and effort is directed to studying the right areas of business expertise. Could it be enough to learn only the basics of some subjects and on the other hand offer more profound knowledge on some others? The IT user knowledge is of utmost importance in an assistant's job. Does the curriculum provide the knowledge needed and do the students applying for the diploma program know what an important part IT skills play in the studies and especially in their future work? However, one can only learn general things before entering the labour market but learning on the job is crucial in this profession. Therefore, a good basis for future learning is the key to success. The assistants need to

be given a solid basis to rely on and good learning skills. At a later date it might be time to consider revising the name of the degree programmes. To continuously stay attractive to serious contenders it might be better to highlight other features of the programmes instead of the work of an assistant. “A Degree Programme for Office Professionals with language skills” is a suggestion.

The assistants should not be forgotten after graduation, either. It became quite clear during the interviews that assistants are very keen on developing themselves. Therefore, it seems that there is a continuous market for further training for assistants for educational institutions. Especially language and IT courses have been popular.

Another suggestion for educational institutes for further education is to educate the new generation of managers to use assistants’ services for the benefit of themselves and that of their business.

# 13

## Summary of study and discussion

■ This study was conducted to describe assistants' work and management/assistant interaction in chosen European countries. The aim was to find out and understand how assistants in different countries support management, how the work of management assistants' has changed in recent years and what kind of future visions there are for their field of work, to be able to better educate future assistants at HAAGA-HELIA in Finland. Up-to-date international knowledge of assistants' work is central in further development of the current curriculum because at work we are increasingly in contact with different cultures. The aim was to find out and understand how assistants in different countries support management in order for them to be able to concentrate in their core competence areas. The report is a description of management assistants' work practices in different counties.

The data for this study was compiled from eight European countries: Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden were collected by interviews between September 2006 and October 2007. Interviews were conducted by twelve HAAGA-HELIA teachers of the management assistant programmes. The total number of interviews was 57.

After discussing the earlier studies on assistants' work, the current assistant education curriculum was presented, as well as the future prospects in working life based on two studies by EK (Confederation of Finnish Industries).

The first research question was what support to management and work place community involves in different European countries. This question was answered in the country by country analyses of the interview data. It became quite clear that the company, the line of business and the manager's job are the decisive factors in determining the contents of an assistant's job. It was found out that the assistants and their superiors saw the duties of the assistant in the same way.

The second question relating to the changes in assistants' work, role and influence was partly answered in the previous chapters but it can be

added that at least concerning the titles there most certainly has been a change. “Secretary” is a title from the past and “assistant” is the title of today. But in ten years’ time even “assistant” may be an outdated title and may be replaced, e.g. by a title such as an “office manager”. Along with the title the centrality and the responsibilities of assistants seem to have grown. As a proof of this is the fact that so many had a personal special area.

Already now in many cases the title that the assistants carry does not correspond to the duties that they perform. Especially in France some people with the title assistant should have been called an “HR developer”, a “real estate agent”, a “project manager”, a “controller”, etc. We have been interested to know if the importance of assistants has grown and looked for an answer in the name, for example. But, as it turned out, the importance of assistants has grown so much that some of the interviewees had gone beyond being assistants, only the title that did not correspond their duties was left.

Also when comparing the job descriptions found out in this study and compare them to the duties presented by Bäcklund (1990) we can see that the basic duties have remained but the spectre of different things to do has grown bigger. Interestingly though in Bäcklund’s study one of the Finnish secretaries had a personal special area, namely the personnel magazine.

There are many challenges in the future that face everyone at work. One of them is multiculturalism, as was stated by the EK and also came up in the interviews. This means that language skills, respect for others and knowledge and understanding of other cultures are needed. In EK’s reports it was stated that English will be the most important language and this was verified by this study. Furthermore, in EK’s future views the importance of writing skills was expressed. As an answer to the third research question it also became clear in the interviews that email is the media of today and if nothing unexpected happens it will stay that way in the future, as well. Email has taken over from all other types of communication. It seems that only few letters are still written and also phone calls are features of the past, email is the word of the day. There are less phone calls and face to face contacts where spoken skills are required with the exception of France which verifies the rule. The French love face to face communication in French.

Expertise will be of value in the future when companies are looking for competitive advance. It was also expected by the interviewees that assistants will do more specialized tasks.

EK's reports stated that membership in various networks will be of growing importance in 2020 as will the ability to change. The forecast made by EK contains many items that are reality for assistants even today. Among these are the networks and the ability to change. According to the interviews, most of the respondents' workdays are spent dealing with various people in various networks. Also changes great and small are part of the job. An assistant has to be ready for quick changes and not get irritated if the plans are constantly revised or renewed. It is not an exaggeration to say that assistants are among the first to notice changes if not in the whole economy but at least in the company's line of business. They are in the heart of business.

Finally, it can be said that we went out looking for differences in assistants' work in Europe and what we found was that there were more similarities than differences. This result verifies Bäcklund's (1990) statement that secretarial profession is very international and the basic duties are globally relatively the same, even if the country, background education, equipment, methods and organisations vary. She also concluded that both the nature of duties, professional role and work-related problems seem to be amazingly alike among secretaries all over the world.

Even though the profession is very similar all over the world, based on the interviews we were able to outline four different types of assistants. The tasks these assistants perform in their jobs are in accordance with the ones that are included in the ISCO category's 3431 job description. However, the education of the assistants varies between countries and it seems that it does not quite correspond to the third skills level everywhere and that there is still room for improvement. Concerning further research, it would be most interesting to compare the educational levels of the assistants in the four categories of assistants to see if it is possible to find a correlation between the categories and the level of education, taking in consideration the age of the respondent as an intervening variable.

Furthermore, it would also be interesting to see how an assistant's career develops. Could it be that the four categories represent different stages in an assistant's career from team assistant to personal assistant to management assistant with a special area to a non-assistant and what circumstances create the points of departure.

Tacit knowledge was not among the subjects of research in this study and yet it is easy to read between the lines that an assistant if anybody must possess great deals of tacit knowledge. It would be most interesting to study what types of tacit knowledge they possess and how it could be made visible. The assistants are likely to possess knowledge of the company and organisation, of the line of business and the superior's special

area of business, other employees and their duties, of products or services (Bäcklund 1990, 10). For the sake of the profession and its future, it would be of utmost importance to find ways of portraying the tacit knowledge e.g. by using process charts. In this study, we have done our best to make the duties visible on an overall level. However, in the organisations a more detailed description is needed to show the centrality of assistants, to increase respect towards the job and to be better able to induct the future generations to the job.

In conclusion, we can say that we wanted to know how assistants' work in Europe looks like from the Finnish perspective because HAAGA-HELIA's degree programmes for management assistants have been path finders in the field and intend to stay that way. The curriculum we follow today is the result of forty years of development and gives qualifications at least to jobs at the 3<sup>rd</sup> ISCO skills levels. In some countries, i.e. Spain, management assistants' education is also of high level but in some others there is still room for development. It is also important to combat the labour market tendencies of forming assistant pools with routine functions. As the assistants are given a thorough education their skills should not be wasted in insignificant tasks.

All in all, this has been a multipurpose endeavour with high expectations as so many professional people have been involved in it. In conclusion we can state that mainly the results have met the expectations and we can all begin to reap the benefits in our daily work.

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## APPENDIX 1

ISCO MAJOR GROUP TITLES	ISCO SKILLS LEVELS	HAVÉN:
1 Legislators, senior officials and managers 2 Professionals 3 Technicians and associate professionals	not defined 4 <sup>th</sup> 3 <sup>rd</sup>	Expert level occupations
4 Clerks 5 Service workers and shop and market sales workers 6 Skilled agricultural and fishery workers 7 Craft and related trades workers 8 Plant and machine operators and assemblers 9 Elementary occupations 0 Armed forces	2 <sup>nd</sup> 2 <sup>nd</sup> 2 <sup>nd</sup> 2 <sup>nd</sup> 2 <sup>nd</sup> 1 <sup>st</sup> not defined	Worker level occupations

### ISCO skills levels

4 <sup>th</sup> level	University degree required
3 <sup>rd</sup> level	First stage of tertiary education (not leading directly to an advanced research qualification) (ISCED-97)
2 <sup>nd</sup> level	Secondary education and/or formal training such as on-the-job training and experience, or apprenticeships)
1 <sup>st</sup> level	Primary school education.

Sources: ILO (2007d), Statistics Finland (2007b), Havén (2007).

## APPENDIX 2

The interviewers and interviewees in Bäcklund's (1990) study in the countries that have relevance to the study at hand. The table was drawn up based on the information found in Bäcklund's study in pages 3 and 4.

COUNTRY	INTERVIEWER	INTERVIEWEE	TIME
Belgium	Sonia Schlossman	Pat Taylor	4/87
Finland	Elisabeth Enger	Marina Kollin	3/89
	Elisabeth Enger	Arja Rajakallio	3/89
	Sonia Schlossman	Camilla Sidenius	1/86
France	Susanne Gäre	Martine Guède	8/84
	Ulla Selander	Marie Claude Cousedon	3/81
	Anna Trenning Himmelsbach	Elyane Becker	8/89
Germany	Sonia Schlossman	Maria Presher	2/87
		Cordula Scultz	2/87
The Netherlands	Anders Ingvarsson	Reijan Kavanagh	1/89
Poland	Jadwiga Kurowska	Anna Kowalczyk	8/88
Spain	Bo Levin	Ana Alberdi	5/83

## APPENDIX 3

### Application process for the Leonardo mobility project:

#### “The Exchange of Expertise between Management Assistant Work and Education in Europe.”

#### General overview of the project at Helsinki Business School

Helsinki Business Polytechnic is one of the leading polytechnics in Finland. Our school is business-oriented and in our Management Assistant Education Department we educate multilingual management assistants with multicultural communications expertise (languages, cultures, communication, etc.), business expertise (marketing, accounting, etc.) and information expertise (information production, retrieval, etc.). More information about our school can be found on our Web pages: [www.helia.fi](http://www.helia.fi)

The Management Assistant Education Department of Helsinki Business Polytechnic is going to apply for the Leonardo Mobility Project. The deadline for this application will be February 10, 2006. At the moment, we are drafting this application and therefore we are looking for partners in Ireland, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Spain, Sweden, Germany and Poland.

The purpose of this Leonardo mobility project is to send two of our teachers (16 teachers in all) to each country ( 8 countries in all) in order to visit companies and partner schools, with the goal of increasing the knowledge of management assistant work and education in each respective country. Some of our teachers will be language teachers and others professional teachers in our Management Assistant Education Department. Our wish is to send eight teachers to four countries in both 2006 and 2007.

Our teachers will meet the following people in each respective country:

- the local chair of the European Management Assistant Organization (EUMA)
- assistants and managers in three companies (public/private and national/international companies)
- teaching staff in partner schools

Our teachers will meet and interview the local chair of the European Management Assistant Organization (EUMA) in order to get information about assistant work and its situation in the particular country.

They will also visit companies and interview management assistants and managers using a questionnaire about management assistant work in that specific country. We are interested in all kind of companies - private and public ones, as well as national and international ones. We wish that each teacher could visit on the average three companies in one week.

The aim is to get information for our pedagogical training, and to develop international connections. If possible, our teachers will also gather material regarding business correspondence and communication for pedagogical purposes. In return, the teachers of Helsinki Business Polytechnic will talk about assistant education and work in Finland. In addition, our purpose is to discuss with these companies co-operation issues such as work and pedagogical projects, for example in the field of thesis and work placement.

In addition, our teachers will visit one partner school in each respective country in order to explore their pedagogical methods and materials when teaching foreign languages and professional studies. Our teachers will use a questionnaire inquiring into how partner schools handle their work connections, what kind of jobs students obtain after graduation, and how partner school teachers update their business knowledge skills. The purpose of these visits is also to stimulate personal contacts with partner schools and to encourage their teachers through Erasmus exchange programs to visit Helsinki Business School. In return, our teachers will share their proficiency and knowledge, talking about pedagogical systems and materials used in our school, along with other themes such as our students' social standing in the working environment after graduation.

Finally, each teacher will write a report and analyse the results of his/her visit. All reports will be collected and translated into English. This summary report will be sent to each partner. In addition, our teachers will arrange a public presentation at Helsinki Business Polytechnic about their visits and the results thereof.

As you know, we are currently drafting this application and cannot guarantee at this stage that it will be successful. If our application is accepted, financial support will be granted to Helsinki Business Polytechnic only for travel costs. However, we are hoping that you will be our partner in this interesting and potentially rewarding project, as we are all more than willing to expand our co-operation.

## APPENDIX 4

### LEONARDO MOBILITY PROJECT of Helia University of Business and Applied Sciences 1.9.2006 – 31.12.2007

#### The Exchange of Expertise between Management Assistant Work and Education in Europe (abbr. TEEMAWEE)

##### Helia's partner institutions for Leonardo project

COUNTRY	INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION	CONTACT PERSON	ADDRESS, TEL.	OTHERS
Finland	Helia University of Business and Applied Sciences	Paula Ronkainen, Manager of the Leonardo Mobility Project Catherine Metivier	Ratapihantie 13, 00520 Helsinki, Finland Tel. + 358 9 1489 0741 Fax: +358 9 1489 0761	
Belgium	Erasmushogeschool Brussel	Dominiek Timmermans	Nijverheidskaai, 170, 1070 Brussel, Belgium Tel.+32 2 213 61 86 Fax:+32 2 213 61 88	
Spain	Issa/University of Navarra www.issa.edu	Coro Aycart, (Financial Manager) Luz Marina Ruiz	Cuesta de Aldapeta 49 20009 San Sebastián tel. +34 943 46 71 44	
The Netherlands	Windesheim University of Professional Education www.widesheim.nl	Ewing Selcraig	International office, P.O. 10090, 8000 GB Zwolle, the Netherlands tel. 31 38 4699145	
Ireland	Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) www.dit.ie	Roger Sherlock	Aungier Street, Dublin 2, Ireland tel. +353 1 402 3000	
Poland	Nowy Scz School of Business National-Louis University www.wsb-nlu.edu.pl	Urszula Potoniec- Mêdoñ	ul. Zielona 27 33–300 Nowy Scz, Poland tel. +48.18.44.99.128	
France	St Ambroise, Chambéry	Nadine Roux- Michollet	2, rue Bardin, 73025 Chambéry cedex, France Tel. 04 79 33 12 55	
Sweden	Högskolan Dalarna	Märet Brunnstedt Ulf Magnusson (Language Institution)	Campus Framtidsdalen 781 88 Borlänge, Sweden Tel: +46 23 77 8000 Fax: +46 23 77 8080	
Germany	Fachhochschule Worms www.fh-worms.de	Joachim Mayer	Erenburgerstrasse 19 67549 Worms, Germany phone: +49 6241 509 266 fax: +49 6241 509 282	

## EUMA partners

COUNTRY	INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION	CONTACT PERSON	ADDRESS, TEL.	OTHERS
Belgium	EUMA Belgium	Leen Vandaele National Chairman of EUMA Belgium	Merellaan 22 BE-2950 Kapellen	
Holland	EUMA Holland	Carla Veldhuisen- Ennik, National Chairman of EUMA Netherlands	Luchtverkeersleiding Nederland P.O.Box 75200 NL-117 ZT Schiphol	
Finland (their contacts to Swedish companies)	EUMA Finland	Sanna Oivo (VR-yhtymä)	Vilhonkatu 13, 00100 Helsinki Tel. 0307 20828, Fax. 0307 22590	
Poland	EUMA Poland	Halina Fuchsel, National Chairman of EUMA Poland	PSSiJO Ogrodowa P-00-896 Warsaw	

## Partner companies (direct contacts)

COUNTRY	INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION	CONTACT PERSON	ADDRESS, TEL.	OTHERS
Germany	Nokia GmbH Nokia Networks	Bertold Dickhaus	Heltorfer Strasse 1, 40472 Dus- seldorf	
	Bosch		Detlef Nass, AA/HRM Tel.+49 (721) 942 1863	
	Siemens	Ekkehard Wirth	Siemens AG, IDC AM Postfach 3240, D-91050 Erlangen	
Sweden	Kemira	Anneli Juutinen		
	If	Mimmi Eriksson		

## APPENDIX 5

### Leonardo Mobility Project:

The Exchange of Expertise between Management Assistant Work and Education in Europe (TEEMAWEE)

#### TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Please find enclosed the relevant question proposals from the following:

- Assistants in companies
- Superiors in companies
- EUMA representatives
- University representatives
- University teachers

These questions might still change somewhat. We hope that you could provide answers to the background questions prior to the interview, so that most of the interview time could be used for discussing deeper issues. In addition to these questions, our visitors will present the following areas:

- Helia University of Business and Applied Sciences
- Degree Programme for Multilingual Management Assistants (structure, pedagogical strategy, applicants, students, graduates and cooperation of that degree programme with "working life" and R&D)
- Finnish assistants (number of, work contents)

We hope that our teachers would be able to interview the following:

- A minimum of 3 assistants and 3 superiors as agreed. However, since this data is not especially large for R&D purposes, we would appreciate company interviews of up to 6 assistants and 6 superiors.
- University degree programme managers
- University teachers

In case of any questions concerning visit details, please contact the visiting teacher. In case of any questions concerning R & D, please contact me at the following:

Dr Sc (IB) Minna Söderqvist  
Tel +358 50 3101725  
Ratapihantie 13  
FI – 00520 HELSINKI  
FINLAND

## APPENDIX 6

### A. ASSISTANT BACKGROUND QUESTIONS

1	What title do you use on your business card?	
2	How many years have you worked as an assistant?	
3	What is your educational level?	
4	What further courses have you taken since receiving your degree?	
5	Who are your superiors? In what positions have they worked?	
6	Do you have a special area in this organization which you personally take care of? If so, describe your duties relating to it.	
7	What IT programmes do you know how to use? Which ones do you use on a daily basis?	
8	What languages can you speak and write? How would you describe your spoken and written language skills in these languages?	
9	Do you have a mobile phone?	

#### In addition to these areas, we are also going to speak about the following:

- 10 What you do, what kind of a weekly programme you have, if you have a job description (if so, what it is), what your role in the organization is, the biggest change in your work during the last five years?
- 11 Whom you meet, who the key persons/key partners in your job are?
- 12 What you like/don't like about your work?
- 13 What the biggest changes in your work have been?
- 14 What is easy for you and why, what your most demanding tasks are and why?
- 15 What the challenges of today and tomorrow are and why, what the challenges in general for assistants will be in the future, what professional objectives for the coming ten years you have for yourself, for your job and for your organization?
- 16 What you do in order to prepare meetings, what your role is during them, what you do after them, for example for follow-up?
- 17 What type of spoken business communication situations you have in your everyday work, what you need to be able to do in your mother tongue, what you need to be able to do in foreign languages (which languages), how and when you use a mobile phone and email?
- 18 What type of cultural knowledge you need to use everyday on the national, organizational and professional levels?

## APPENDIX 7

### S. QUESTIONS FOR SUPERIORS

- 1 What are your responsibilities; what do you do?
- 2 What does your assistant do for you? What are the most important tasks s/he does? Does s/he also work for someone else? If so, for whom?
- 3 What type of work division do you have with your assistant?
- 4 What types of challenges do you see regarding your cooperation?
- 5 What type of job description do you think your assistant will have in ten years? With whom and for whom will s/he work?
- 6 What is your vision regarding an assistant's role in your organization ten years from now?

### E. QUESTIONS FOR EUMA REPRESENTATIVES

- 1 What do management assistants do for you in your country? With whom and for whom do they work?
- 2 How many assistants (multilingual management assistants) are there in your country? What is the female-to-male ratio? What is their general educational background? Where have they studied?
- 3 What is the general salary level of a multilingual management assistant?
- 4 What IT programmes do they use? What languages do they speak? Do they have mobile phones and email? How would you describe the work of an assistant in your country today? What are the biggest challenges in their everyday work?
- 5 What have been the biggest changes during the past five years in an assistant's work?
- 6 What do you think assistants will be doing ten years from now? What will be their position in the organization?
- 7 What are the future challenges facing a managerial assistant?

## APPENDIX 8

### QUESTIONS FOR UNIVERSITY REPRESENTATIVES BACKGROUND QUESTIONS:

Could we get a copy of your curriculum?	
What are the major subjects taught?	
How long is the education?	
How do you market your degree programme?	
How many applicants do you have yearly?	
How many students do you have?	
How many teachers do you have?	
How do your teachers maintain their know-how?	
How many graduates do you have yearly?	
Do your students have domestic and international work placement?	
What is a typical job description for a new graduate?	
How is work placement organized?	
How long is work placement?	
Do you have fees? If so, how much are they?	
Do you have male students? If so, what percentage are they of the total student population?	
How many volumes do you have in your library?	
How many computers do you have for teachers?	
How many computers do you have for students (both for group work and class use)?	
What IT programmes do you teach?	
What type of company co-operation do you have? How is it organized?	
What type of R&D is done at your university?	
Who does R&D at your university?	
Are you interested in R&D cooperation with the ASTO unit (business languages and cultures, information management, business, IT and communication)?	
Are you interested in teaching cooperative projects?	

Who is responsible for cooperation with "working life?" (name and contact information)	
Who is responsible for BBA theses?	
Who is responsible for work placements?	
Who is the international coordinator for assistant education?	
Who is responsible for R&D concerning assistant education, business languages and cultures, communication, business, IT and information management?	
Who is responsible for assistant education (or its equivalent)?	
Who are the nearest counterparts of the Helia visitors?	
Who are your (other) Erasmus or bilateral international or domestic partners?	

## APPENDIX 9

### QUESTIONS FOR COLLEAGUES

- 1 What are the topics and contents that you teach? What are the learning objectives of your courses and degree programmes?
- 2 What materials do you use?
- 3 What pedagogical methods do you use?
- 4 Are you interested in future cooperation projects regarding teaching and/or R&D?
- 5 How do you teach spoken business communication? In what languages do you offer it? In how many ECTS can you study business languages and cultures?

## APPENDIX 10

### 6 LEONARDO TRAINING FOR TEACHERS OF HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences

#### 6.1 First training in autumn 2006

**Time** Monday 11 September 2006 at 09:00 – 14:00

**Participants** Leonardo participants of Helia University of Business and Applied Sciences

#### **Subjects**

- 1 Project overview (Paula Ronkainen)
- 2 Travel arrangements (Paula Ronkainen)
- 3 Travel invoice and RapLeo reporting (Paula Ronkainen)
- 4 Material checking (Minna Söderqvist + all)
- 5 Interview questions (Minna Söderqvist)
- 6 Reporting (Minna Söderqvist)
- 7 Reports handling at degree programme group and competence based group (Paula Ronkainen, Minna Söderqvist)
- 8 General guidelines for teachers' own materials (Paula Ronkainen)

#### 6.2 Second training in January 2007

**Time** Friday 19 January 2007 from 14.00 to 16.00

**Participants** Leonardo participants of HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences

#### **Subjects**

- 1 Project overview (Paula Ronkainen)
- 2 Travel arrangements and reporting (Paula Ronkainen)
- 3 Travel application and invoice
- 4 Reporting (rapleo and Minna's report)
- 5 Leonardo experiences (Pekka Savinainen & Pedro Beltran-Herrera, Tuula Tuomainen, Marjaana Halsas, Marketta Keisu)
- 6 Interview questions and Material checking (Paula Ronkainen)

## APPENDIX 11

Marketta Keisu, MA.:

**ON LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN HAAGA-HELIA PARTNER INSTITUTES OF HIGHER EDUCATION (An extract from a larger report "On the language proficiency of European management assistants")**

### 1 Introduction

This report discusses the language teaching methods and other learning materials used in HAAGA-HELIA's partner institutes of higher education.

Although an extensive amount of material was produced (a total of 212 pages (A4) of transcribed material), the material addresses issues of language only to a limited extent. This is because the questions addressed the overall job profiles of European management assistants, and there were very few questions that addressed language directly. In this report, the focus is on the material that addresses language teaching.

HAAGA-HELIA teachers visited eight partner institutes of higher education, but only three of them provided management assistant education (Belgium, Spain and France). This is because in other countries management assistant education is not provided by universities or other institutes of higher education, but rather by secretarial colleges. Because such colleges are not HAAGA-HELIA partners, information about their language instruction is also not available. This report presents the language instruction of HAAGA-HELIA's partner institutes of higher education, with the aim of providing food for thought for HAAGA-HELIA's own teachers. Most of the material below is limited to language education in institutes of higher education in Belgium and Spain.

### 2 On objectives, topics and contents

#### 2.1 Language teaching in Belgium

English teaching has the aim of preparing students to work *online*. Students are expected to know how to use the Internet and dictionaries, and also to translate using contextual tools. English teaching also includes practice in simultaneous interpretation in groups.

During the first year of studies, English grammar is adopted using independent study methods. The teacher has noted, however, that the results have been poor. During the first year of studies, students are also expected to give a presentation before the class because presentation skills are considered important. After the presentation, the student is expected to lead a discussion on it in class.

The teacher makes use of the Internet, for example [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk) and [www.voanews.com](http://www.voanews.com) (*Voice of America*), which offers special recordings of news stories. The teachers prepares questions on the news, and also *fill-out-the-blanks* tasks, which the students complete while listening to the recordings. The students can find the text in full on the Internet after class.

During the second year, the focus moves from grammar to business correspondence. Emphasis is matters such as idioms and formal structure, for example. Students complete written assignments that are e-mailed to the teacher. Feedback is given in the next lesson: the teacher marks recurring errors, which are then reviewed together with the student. Translations are also made in class, with focus on segments that are difficult to translate.

Students take a *European citizenship* course, which involves a variety of assignments relating to Europe and the EU. Students are expected, for example, to prepare topics for discussion on current EU affairs. They can also take a course on *current affairs in culture*, addressing issues relating to the UK, and a *problem-based learning* course, addressing topics of current interest, as well as politics and education in the U.K.

In Belgium, a research study in English is completed in connection with work-placement during the third year of studies. Students investigate, for example, how well communications function in their company. The company, too, can provide the student with a research topic. A written report is submitted on the research.

The Belgian teacher emphasised the importance of one's mother tongue: the assistant's most important language is the assistant's mother tongue. The manager must be able to trust his or her assistant to write letters that are grammatically correct and in the right style.

The following negotiation skills are also practiced: chairing meetings, organising meetings, handling deadlines, building team spirit and conflict resolution in groups.

Native-language business correspondence includes topics such as offer requests, offers, orders, claims etc. The course also cover writing an article for a personnel magazine, note-taking exercises and preparing minutes of meetings.

## 2.2 Language teaching in Spain

The English classes introduce students to business life, global markets and English communications in a global marketplace. Student practice answering the phone, business correspondence and meeting people, which are considered important ways to build self-confidence. Good oral and written skills in English are prerequisites for successful communication.

In a course on oral skills, students analyse concrete communications situations that are commonly faced by management assistants. Students also practice giving presentations and speeches, learn to manage tension when giving presentations, and also complete articulation, breathing and dictation exercises.

The German teacher emphasises talking and grammar in class. According to this teacher, reading and listening to CDs is to be done at home.

### 2.3 On pedagogical methods

The teacher's task is to provide guidance and explanations, not to lecture. The student's task is *to do* because "learning is doing". Students should be encouraged to go to the library and study during their free time.

Variety during lessons is important. Theory should be combined with practice (for example, doing theory exercises and telephone conversation exercises in turn). Reading, writing, listening and talking can be similarly combined.

Collective methods are also emphasised: students first complete exercises at home and then discuss them in class. Group work is preferred over the language lab because in the real world one talks with people, not machines. Oral communications can be practiced using role games and short presentations.

### 2.4 On materials

Commonly available materials are used in Spain because this makes it easy to pertain to a European framework. Lots of material on English is available, for example a correspondence handbook with CD (Oxford University Press), a booklet on telephone conversations (Cambridge) or other available material (Longman and Hyneman).

Other materials used include material from real life, company materials, games, CDs, movies (translations hidden; movie analysis), television, television commercials (commercial analysis), literature and the Internet.

## 3 Summary and conclusion

This report concerns European management assistants' language education. The goal has been to review the pedagogical language teaching methods and other learning materials used in HAAGA-HELIA's partner institutes of higher education. However, as only three of the partner institutes provided management assistant education, the pedagogical methods and learning materials of these schools have been presented only on a general level. In other words, based on the material available, it was not possible to analyse comprehensively what kinds of language education is provided specifically for students of management assistance. This report is based on material collected by 12 HAAGA-HELIA teachers who participated in the project in 2006–2007.

Language was a prominent concern when the management assistants were asked about current and future challenges. Globalisation and the contact with foreign languages this brings along were considered a challenge. The language education of management assistants should also take into account the increasing significance of Asia in the global economy should also be taken into account in management assistants' language education.

On the basis of the interviews, it can be said language education in HAAGA-HELIA's partner institutes of higher education is broad in both objectives and content. Especially our partner schools in Belgium and Spain emphasise language instruction. Business correspondence as well as oral, presentation and negotiation

skills are extensively taught. Students are also prepared to meet challenges in the global market.

Many teachers make use of the opportunities provided by the Internet in their teaching. Other commonly used materials include real-life examples and television. Students are taught to look for information on the Internet and other sources. Given that it is not possible to learn everything during the studies, and that there is a constant need to keep up to date with current trends, it is important that students actively seek information from different sources and also acquire the habit of lifelong learning. Indeed, a EUMA representative from the Netherlands emphasised the importance of continuous learning and learning from experience. Experience and practice surely play a key role in a management assistant's language proficiency. The ability of management assistants to seek information and continually develop their language skills requires that they have a solid basic education, however.

It was noted that grammar is not best learned independently, but rather in class. In connection with questions relating to teaching in general, the interviewees emphasised that the teacher's role is to provide guidance, not to lecture. Group work and team spirit were considered important.

Both a Swedish and a German management assistant said that they communicated with Finns in English. Students who have graduated from HAAGA-HELIA's management assistant programmes should have a strong proficiency in Swedish and German, however. In Spain, students were taught self-confidence and trust in their abilities. Indeed, it would be important to emphasise self-confidence also in HAAGA-HELIA's programmes. The interviews indicated also that correct native language grammar and proficiency are considered important challenges today and in the future. It would also be worthwhile to focus on these issues in HAAGA-HELIA's programmes.