



## OFFICE MANAGERS & OFFICE ASSISTANTS: ADDRESSING COMPLEX DYNAMICS AT WORKPLACE

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***“Behind Every Successful Manager, Stands a Competent Office Assistant”***

### **Abstract**

*The roles of office managers and assistants have taken paradigm shift in recent times. With the inception of latest office management practices i.e., office automation, ergonomics, etc., and the organizations taking trans-national stature, the workplaces have become complex. Naturally, the office management, which serves as the heart of any organization has to evolve into newer roles to make it aligned with the organizational requirements. The present paper makes an attempt to introduce the readers to the evolving facets of office managers and assistants. It will also chalk out the expectations that organizations have from the office managers.*

**Key Words:** *Office Managers, Line & Staff functions, HR,*

### **INTRODUCTION**

As the notions of ‘boundary less organizations’ gained impetus across the corridors of global village, corporate houses across the globe were found to be encountering problems facing proper management of offices in recent times. Going global certainly involves lots of paper works, signing of unlimited number of memorandum of understandings or MoUs, managing communications with different stakeholders to the organization, and so on and so forth. Historically, management of offices was considered to be a clerical task, but in the changing business environment, new roles to manage offices started to shape up to address the complex dynamics of office management in corporate houses. With the advent of increased office technology, the administrative office managers need to manage information for the organization. Today, the administrative office manager interacts with all components of the organization by providing needed information, when needed, and in a useable format (Quible, 2001).

### **Defining Office Managers & Office Assistants**

An Office Assistant is a person who performs his duties within well established procedures and processes. On the other hand, an Office Manager is a person in-charge of an office (or rather, in-charge of the entire team of office assistants). Due to the increased utilization of office technology and the interaction with the whole organization, the role of the office assistants & office managers is rapidly evolving. In other terms, they have been designated the roles of administrative office managers. The administrative office manager must not only be savvy in office functions, personnel management, and information management, but also in such realms as technology changes, systems design and analysis, problem-solving, cost management, budgeting, diversity in the workplace, and business globalization. Administrative office management is considered as a supportive function within an organization. Therefore, the administrative office manager should have a solid background in accounting, marketing, management, statistics, economics, and psychology. Other skills include: interpersonal behavior and human relation skills; ethical behavior; ability to delegate responsibility; and accept the viewpoint of others.

The administrative office manager must have the initiative and desire to continue to learn and develop professionally (Quible, 2001). Furthermore, strong communication and soft skills such as business acumen and leadership ability are required (Domeyer, 2000).

Traditionally, the role of office assistants & office managers was confined to mere clerical nature of work. The personnel department of the organization was held accountable for rendering the roles of administrative office managers. But with the passage of time, new roles started to shape up in organizations for the upkeep and maintenance of official work. However, the traditional roles of office assistants/office managers include:



**Traditional Roles of an Office Manager/Assistant**

**THE CHANGING ROLES OF OFFICE MANAGER/OFFICE ASSISTANT**

The roles of office managers/office assistants have gone radical changes in present times. The changes have been mostly evident in the private sector. But the government sector still follows the traditional roles of office management. The office managers in the public or government sector are mostly entrusted with the responsibility of upkeep of office documents. But the office assistants and office managers in private sectors have moved from ‘paper book office’ towards ‘paperless office’. The offices of the private sectors have also been aligned with the principles of ‘ergonomics’ making the work more joyful for the office staff. Below table puts the detailed picture of the changing face of office management in recent times.

<b>The Changing Face of Office Management</b>	
<b>Earlier</b>	<b>Now</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paper book Office</li> <li>• Fixed work timings</li> <li>• Traditional work place consisting of tables, chairs, bulky computers, etc.</li> <li>• Office centric</li> <li>• No external communication</li> <li>• Babu, Clerk, Messenger, secretary, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paperless Office</li> <li>• 'flex' timings</li> <li>• Workplace substituted by Ergonomics</li> <li>• Customer centric</li> <li>• Communication through social media, technology, etc.</li> <li>• Changing titles: management Assistant, Administration Specialist, Administrative Services Manager, Office Support Staff, Office Support Supervisor</li> <li>• Virtual Workplace</li> </ul>

There is a revolution occurring in the way organizations do business. The revolution is having a direct impact on the role of the administrative office manager. The administrative office manager’s role is evolving into a key component in the business organization. In today’s business climate, the administrative office manager not only manages office personnel and functions, as in the past, but must also be skilled in facilitating, solving complex problems, interpersonal behaviour and human relation skills, ethical behaviour, diversity, leadership, and business globalization. The changing role of the administrative office manager is creating opportunities for individuals in the office occupations with the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities. Below are some of the duties & responsibilities that office managers & office assistants have to deliver in recent times:

- A Manager (planning, organizing, staffing, directing, co-ordinating, controlling, motivating).
- A Link: The Manager has to completely rely on the office assistants and managers for the inflow and outflow of information with the different parties concerned. As such, the office manager serves as the main link for providing the information to the higher authorities.
- A Negotiator: The work of Walton and Dutton (1969) suggested that withholding of information and other communications obstacles provide a major source of conflict between departments. While power and politics plays a vital part in the functioning of the departments, it becomes an absolute necessity to collaborate with different departments for the proper functioning of the organization. Office Assistants have to play the role of negotiator to minimize the instances of conflict of interest between the different departments.



- A Conflict Resolver.
- A Change Management Champion: With the immense technological revolution taking place in recent times, it is really a tough task to embrace the practices of office automation which keeps on changing with great pace. Keeping in mind the technological changes, the office managers have to act as change management champions and adapt quickly to the current practices of office automation.
- Public Relations and liaison work: The organization which has adapted to the latest office management practices are bound to deliver on time. Such organizations share a very good public image and different stakeholders love to maintain business ties with them. The liaison works of such organizations are also considered to be good.

### LINE & STAFF FUNCTIONS

Office Managers/Administrators today play active roles in dual responsibilities of line and staff functions. The line hierarchy in the organization consists of functions and managers who are directly concerned in achieving the primary purposes of the organization. Staff in functions such as finance, HR, and engineering provides services to the line to enable them to get on with their job (Armstrong, 2009). As such the roles of office managers and office assistants have gone somewhat strategic in nature. The roles of office managers have become diverse and challenging with high levels of autonomy and responsibility, in an exciting, hard-working and creative environment. Following are some of the line and staff roles delivered by Office Managers in recent times:

Working with the Office Junior/Runner across all elements, including:

1. **Office Maintenance:** An office assistant or office manager is a person who is primary held responsible for the maintenance of the office. right from the cleaning to the upkeep of the office documents, he has to supervise all the activities associated with the maintenance of the office.
2. **Communications:** An office assistant is in charge of in-house telephone system & programming, installation of new lines, handsets, monitoring of phone supplier accounts for anomalies (mobile & landline), maintaining and updating company email groups, etc. An organization in current scenario has to be on its toes to maintain communication with the external environment along with the internal environment for the delivery of better output. Under such circumstances, it becomes the need of the hour to get the organization equipped with the latest communication technologies. And this responsibility lies on the shoulders of an office manager or an assistant.
3. **Office Security:** Organizations fall under high security zones. Managing the security is of utmost importance to protect the confidentiality of the organizations. Office managers have to manage not only external security, but they also have to supervise the internal security as well. Breach of safety & security can hamper the smooth functioning of the organizations.
4. **IT Management:** Office managers are also responsible for IT efficiencies, maintenance and sorting computer issues as they arise via IT support companies. They are also responsible for setting up new employees computers, asset tracking and registration for business insurance & depreciation purposes, exploration, costing, assessment, recommendation, and implementation Of new technologies/services to improve business efficiencies
5. **Social co-ordinator for staff events:** Very often the office managers have to play the role of personnel management. They have to organize events for staff members, celebrate moments of achievements, arrange for award distribution ceremonies, etc.
6. **Human Resources Duties:** Office Managers have also to manage all HR documents, i.e., creating and maintain and update confidential HR records for existing staff as required. For example, preparing new Employee employment contract, letter of offer, staff Company handbook and forms, manage staff leave, sick and absence, including management approvals, record keeping and liaising with staff directly on their leave approval/rejection, holiday entitlement balance, paternity/maternity leave etc., manage All HR records, i.e. Probationary period reviews, performance reviews, any disciplinary actions
7. **Finance Duties:** In small organizations, office managers are responsible for the management of petty cash, chasing and preparing CEO and Managing Director staff expenses in a timely manner each month, and supporting the Finance Manager with other duties as required
8. **PA to the CEO and Managing Director:** Office Managers assists the CEO and MD with any task they require day to day. Both business and personal matters transport, hotel bookings, appointments, any research, event reminders, opening mail, filing etc, providing weekly updates and statuses on these tasks/duties (directly to CEO/MD) are performed by the office managers and assistants.
9. **Other Duties:** Apart from the above mentioned office managers have to undertake any other tasks and responsibilities appropriate to the level of his post as required by the Managing Director/CEO, like provide advice and training to staff on relevant procedures, etc.

## EMERGING RESPONSIBILITIES FOR AN OFFICE MANAGER

With the change in organizational structures and organizations following the organic structure model, immense changes seem indispensable in near future. An organizational structure refers to how jobs are formally divided, grouped, and coordinated and includes work specialization, departmentalization, chain of command, span of control, centralization & decentralization, and formalization (Robbins, 2009). An organic structure is flat, uses cross-hierarchical and cross-functional teams, has low formalization, possesses a comprehensive information network, and relies on participative decision making (Robbins, 2009). As such, roles of office managers/assistants will gradually evolve into leadership roles. As offices are considered to be locus point of control form where the flow of orders and commands takes place, there is no iota of doubt in the fact that office managers will have to take leadership baton in near future where they will have to coordinate with each and every unit of the organization. The below diagram presents the leadership roles and requirements that office managers will have to embrace in the coming years.



1. **Adaptability:** Adaptability refers to the ability of a person to alter itself according to the changing circumstances. With the changing times the circumstances keeps on changing. Therefore, an office manager must demonstrate flexibility in the face of change. He must project a positive demeanour regardless of changes in working conditions. He/she must show the ability to manage multiple conflicting priorities without the loss of composure. Projecting a positive demeanour regardless of changes in working conditions.
2. **Organization:** An office manager must be organized in true sense. As an efficient Time Manager, he must determine the appropriate allocation of time. He must also be an expert in the field of Space Management, i.e. , he must keep the office clean and organized, and appropriately handle all paperwork along with maintaining control over the physical environment, etc. An office manager must also be an efficient Task Manager. He must balance priorities in order to manage workflow, ensuring the completion of essential projects, and meet critical deadlines.
3. **Proactive Anticipation of Needs:** An office manager or an assistant these days demonstrate the ability to foresee problems and prevent them by taking action. He utilises his analytical skills and broad understanding of the business to effectively interpret needs. It can be said that the roles of office managers is in alignment with the strategic needs of the organization.
4. **Broad Understanding of Business Concepts:** An office manager now demonstrates an awareness of fundamental business principles as well as an understanding of the overall industry in which it operates. With the understanding of the business in mind, the office managers can deliver in a much better way.
5. **Team Player:** As office managers or assistants are most indispensable part of an organization and have to work in coordination with the different departments, team playing becomes an absolute necessity for office managers. Working as a competent member of the team, office managers willingly provide back-up support for their co-workers when group goals are appropriate and active.
6. **Judgment:** Office managers today also play a active role in decision making. They have to exhibit sound judgement and ability to make reasonable decision in the absence of direction. They swiftly refer problems and issues to appropriate persons in times of need. As such, they have evolved themselves into a bunch of experts who can actively work effectively without constant direction or guidance.

**The Expectations: Making Boss Happy:** An Efficient & Effective Office Manager shall be:

- Calm & Professional
- Multi tasking



- Proficient with Current Technical Programs
- Facilitate the tone & culture building of an organization
- Aligned firmly with the management team, yet be approachable to hear the ideas and suggestions of subordinates
- Reduce clutter on in-tray: deal with memos and requests that seek to deviate from policies and procedures
- Develop protocols for dealing with the office

### The Expectations

- An Office Manager/Assistant should communicate times for doing business with the office.
- He/she needs to communicate who does what, when, how.
- An office manager/assistant should not become a Gatekeeper.
- An office manager should always maintain the Office Ethics – doing the right thing, always.
- He should never accept bribes from people who want to do favours. Corruption and bribery are the most prevalent practices nowadays in the offices. Healthy Office ethics needs to be developed to combat this ill practice. The responsibility owes on the office managers to combat and wipe out this ill practice.
- Delivery on time enhances effectiveness and efficiency. Therefore, the office manager must ensure that the targets or deadlines are always delivered on time.

### QUALITIES OF A GOOD OFFICE MANAGER/OFFICE ASSISTANT

- **Calm and Professional:** A good office manager should be unflappable and should be always ready to take challenging circumstances in their stride. As an office manager has to coordinate with different departments, good communication skills form an essential prerequisite for an office manager/ office assistant.
- **Technology Upgraded:** Keeping abreast with technological advancement is the key in transmitting and disseminating information. Office Managers need to know their way round a computer and the related software programmes in order to add value to the department. This includes social networks; as they are now an indispensable part of our daily lives.
- **Multi-Tasking:** Office Assistants do not limit themselves to their day to day duties as they are involved in so many tasks e.g. procurement, tender processes, workshop planning, event management, current affairs. In other words, office managers should be multitasked in true sense.

### CONCLUSION

Organizations are no longer constrained by national boundaries (Robbins, 2009). And since the work of an office manager/assistant is basically a service function, they are going to encounter new expectations and roles in near future. The challenges faced by the organizations in the new millennium have been numerous. With the increase in foreign assignments and the organizations going global, they have to operate in multinational environment. Therefore, it is really going to be a very tough job for the office managers to make coordination with all developments on the organization and deliver their best. They will have to work in collaboration with the people who are different in culture, nationality and religion. Along with this, the office managers have also to deal with ethical dilemmas or the situations in which individuals are required to define right and wrong conduct (Robbins, 2009). In an organizational world characterized by increased expectations of worker productivity, and tough competition in the market place; it's not altogether surprising that many employees break rules, and engage in other forms of questionable practices (Robbins, 2009). The office managers have to be up on their toes to curb the malpractices of unethical behaviour so that the offices are not caught in the cobwebs of unethical practices hampering the growth of the organization. In brief, the office managers have to provide efficient clerical services to the organizations keeping in mind the requirements of the organizations in the contemporary scenario.

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