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It's a brave new world for administrative assistants

Employers seeking flexible communicators for a wide range of tasks once done by managers

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For Susan Gendreau and her co-workers at Qualidigm, a nationally recognized medical consulting and research company, working as an administrative assistant means more than fetching coffee, writing notes and scheduling appointments.

Gendreau has a unique skill set that Qualidigm prizes. Among the 50-plus employees at the company's Rocky Hill office, she is a master at tapping into the resources and people that make the health care consultancy tick.

Depending on what the nonprofit needs, Gendreau helps plan corporate events for office staff and clients, manages a team of medical professionals, handles billing and invoices, researches and writes proposals for funding and contributes ideas for marketing materials.

"Employers want administrative assistants who are flexible, committed and know what they are doing," said Gendreau. "We play a pivotal role in helping businesses attract clients."

Gendreau says nothing is off limits for administrative assistants. It's not unusual to change light bulbs in the bathroom, troubleshoot the company's high-tech phone system and review internal audit reports.

It's a far cry from the job description Gendreau encountered when she took the administrative assistant position in 1992. At the time, she was between jobs as a daycare worker and expected to be in this position for three months.

Fueled by leaner budgets and pared-down workforces during the tough economic times, administrative assistants are shouldering more responsibilities than ever before.



For Susan Gendreau, the administrative assistant job she accepted 20 years ago at Qualidigm has turned into an even more challenging role that makes the most of her flexibility and unique skill set.

PHOTO/PABLO ROBLES

While managers want workers who are proficient with the most up-to-date technology programs and software applications available, they also need staff who can help and train others, said Carla Adams, an assistant professor in the business, engineering and technology division at Manchester Community College.

There are 4.3 million administrative assistants and secretaries working across the nation and another 1.4 million office supervisors and support staff.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, nearly 500,000 administrative assistant and secretarial positions will be added between 2008 and 2018, representing 11 percent growth.

Administrative assistants “have become an extension of the individuals that we support,” said Robert Marshall, president for the Connecticut River Valley Chapter of the International Association of Administrative Professionals.

“We are tasked with a lot more technology than ever before. Part of my current job [at UnitedHealth Group] is acting as business segment liaison, which handles all IT requests and set ups for new hires,” said Marshall, who has held various administrative positions at UnitedHealth Group.

“We are given projects to manage, research to compile and given tasks that would have been given to managers in the past,” said Marshall.

That’s one reason Marshall’s organization in Hartford is offering a business workshop for administrative professionals later this month as part of its Administrative Professionals Week (April 22-28) program.

Meetings like these help professionals improve their earnings potential and provide resources on how to enhance relationships with industry peers, said Marshall.

Compensation for administrative assistant jobs is up about 4 percent over last year, according to the 2012 Salary Guide, published by Office Team, a division of Robert Half Company.

In the Greater Hartford area, the average salary in 2012 for an entry-level administrative assistant ranges between \$28,800 and \$35,500; administrative assistants with some experience garner anywhere between \$32,300 and \$42,800 while senior admins earn between \$51,500 and \$69,900.

Demand for degree and certificate programs has been increasing. Manchester Community College has 100 students enrolled in various day and evening classes, most of them women who want to polish their skills or learn a new trade so they can return to the workforce, said Adams.



Carla Adams works with a student at Manchester Community College.

PHOTO: PABLO ROBLES

The courses emphasize law, finance, web technology, medical, project management and insurance. Adams said it typically takes 12 to 24 months to complete the courses, depending on a student's goals.

Strong overall growth in the medical industry, the push for electronic records and the effects of the healthcare reform are fueling demand for administrative workers.

Adams has noticed an uptick in the number of students taking medical courses as part of their administrative assistant program.

These days, hiring managers are having a tough time finding skilled administrative professionals.

Kelleigh Marquard, a market manager with Office Team, said employers are more creative when it comes to filling positions. Recruiters are tapping into their networks, offering employee referral bonuses and relying on specialized staffing firms for help in finding workers.

"Companies are boosting efficiencies by hiring administrative professionals with the skill sets to cover multiple job functions," said Marquard.

"Administrative professionals need to be articulate and polished in their interactions with internal and external customers, both in person and on the phone," said Marquard. "There is a greater emphasis on writing abilities as email and social media become the predominant communication tools."

Adams agrees and says it's an area she covers all the time in her classes.

"We have a young generation of people using text, instant messaging and email to communicate with each other," said Adams. "I tell my students that they need to know how to write a letter. They need to be able to speak clearly and effectively. If they can do that, the jobs are out there."