

**MANAGEMENT PAPERS:  
REVIEWED RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS**



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**Heather Maguire**

Faculty of Business  
University of Southern Queensland  
Toowoomba Qld 4350  
Australia

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Faculty of Business, University of Southern Queensland  
Telephone: (076) 31 1881  
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**AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF THE  
APPLICABILITY OF THE GHETTO THESIS TO  
SECRETARIAL WORK IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND**



**HEATHER MAGUIRE**

## AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF THE APPLICABILITY OF THE GHETTO THESIS TO SECRETARIAL WORK IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

Heather Maguire

### ABSTRACT

In recent years, innovations in office technology combined with organisational restructuring have demonstrated the potential to alter traditional perceptions of secretarial work as a 'female ghetto' occupation. This paper reports the findings of a study of secretarial work in Australia and New Zealand. The study investigated secretarial work from both labour market and organisational perspectives in order to assess the current status of this type of work. The findings indicate that secretarial work has progressed out of its traditional 'ghetto' status in respect to autonomy, pay and working conditions. However, in respect to promotional opportunities and stereotyped gender attributes, the 'ghettoised' nature of the occupation is still evident.

**KEYWORDS:** ghetto thesis; secretarial work; dual labour market;

### PERSONAL DETAILS:

**Heather Maguire** is a Lecturer in Administrative Management with the Faculty of Business, University of Southern Queensland.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1989 Lloyd predicted that radical changes would take place in office work during the last decade of the twentieth century with demographic, economic, social and technological changes combined with the pressure of the marketplace causing significant changes in both corporate and individual attitudes to office work and organisation.

As Lloyd's predicted changes take effect, considerable debate has arisen as to the future role of the secretary. Authors such as Carroll (1993) predict that changing workforce demographics and new technology will see the demise of secretaries while others such as Stone (1994) claim that in today's flatter organisations secretaries are taking on tasks previously considered the province of management.

Predictions of a reduced labour market for secretaries are proving false - no decrease has been experienced in the numbers of women working in this occupation today (Wichroski, 1994). In addition, Heaton (1993) reports the results of a survey by the European Association of Professional Secretaries which indicates that new technology is better securing the role of secretaries and making companies better value their services.

Even if the secretary's role is better secured and valued, organisations, however, are likely to be faced with a diminishing supply of employees in this female-dominated profession (Eigen, 1991). Women who previously might have considered secretarial work are now pursuing careers that offer more pay or more prestige or both. The conflict between demand and supply for this occupational group prompted this research study which assessed whether any change had occurred in the status traditionally afforded this type of work. If traditional perceptions of secretarial work, including low status, poor pay and limited opportunities for promotion are restricting the number of workers entering this profession, there exists an urgent need to test the accuracy of these perceptions. If these perceptions prove true, organisations will need to quickly address these issues to find effective means of attaining and retaining efficient secretarial staff. If false, then professional bodies, organisations and current secretarial staff will need to set about amending negative perceptions of the secretarial role.

A strong body of literature exists, particularly in the period from 1965 - 1989, to describe the poor conditions within secretarial work, while from the early 70's a new body of literature examined the impact of information technology on secretarial work. It was not until 1993 that the attribution of 'ghetto' status was seriously questioned by Truss who undertook a study of secretarial work in Britain, France and Germany. The study reported in this paper contributes to the literature by questioning the attribution of 'ghetto' status, by means of the first empirical investigation of the status of secretarial work in Australia and New Zealand.

### BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

The attribution and perpetuation of 'ghetto' status in respect to secretarial work has arisen from the applicability of a combination of labour market and discrimination theories.

Secretarial work has been described as the most persistently female of all occupations (Silverstone and Towler, 1983). This is the feature of secretarial work which receives the most attention in the literature. This aspect of secretarial work is the one most commonly suggested by the literature as being the major contributor to the classification of such work as a 'ghetto' occupation (Benet, 1972). Support for Benet's ghetto thesis is found in Davies (1974), McNally (1979) and Crompton and Jones (1984) whose empirical studies demonstrated that secretarial work effectively constituted a female occupational slum within which rewards were limited, as were promotional opportunities.

The concept of female work 'ghettoes' is based on dual labour market theory which comprises three related hypotheses:

- (a) two sectors exist within the labour market, that is, a primary sector comprising 'good' well-paid jobs and a secondary sector comprising 'bad' low-paid jobs;
- (b) primary and secondary sectors of the labour market differ with respect to wage entry mechanisms and wage determination processes;

(c) limited mobility exists between the two sectors so that workers tend to become trapped in the secondary sector.

(Norris, 1993)

Traditionally the concentration of women both within particular sectors of employment and in specific occupations within sectors has been cited as evidence of the segregation of women into a 'secondary' labour force (Crompton & Jones, 1984). Since secretarial work is female dominated, that is, 99% of Australian stenographers and typists are female (Norris, 1993), it is likely that secretarial work will reflect the characteristics of secondary labour market occupations. Occupations which are female dominated and which display the characteristics of secondary labour market employment are referred to as female work 'ghettoes.'

A variety of definitions of female 'ghetto' occupations is to be found within the literature and the most common components of these are summarised in Figure 1.

Segregation theory lies at the heart of dual labour market theory and the concept of 'ghetto' occupations. Walby (1988, p 17) describes segregation as the '*concentration of persons by ascriptive criterion .. in particular sectors of employment.*' The labour market comprises two types of segregation. Horizontal segregation refers to the recruitment of men and women into sex-typed 'masculine' and 'feminine' occupations (Williams and Thorpe, 1992) while vertical segregation exists where men and women work within the same categories of employment but men are more commonly employed in the more skilled and better paid jobs while women carry out the less skilled and poorly paid jobs within the same categories of work (Lonsdale, 1985).

It would appear that secretarial work may be influenced by both horizontal and vertical segregation theories as depicted in Figure 2. The concentration of women into office jobs sex-typed as female (secretary, typist, keyboard operator, filing clerk) while men occupy the higher grades likely to be connected to promotion ladders is well documented in studies such as those by Holcombe (1973), Anderson (1976), McNally (1979), Barker and Downing (1980), Davies (1982), Crompton and Jones (1984), Zimmeck (1986), and Walby (1986).

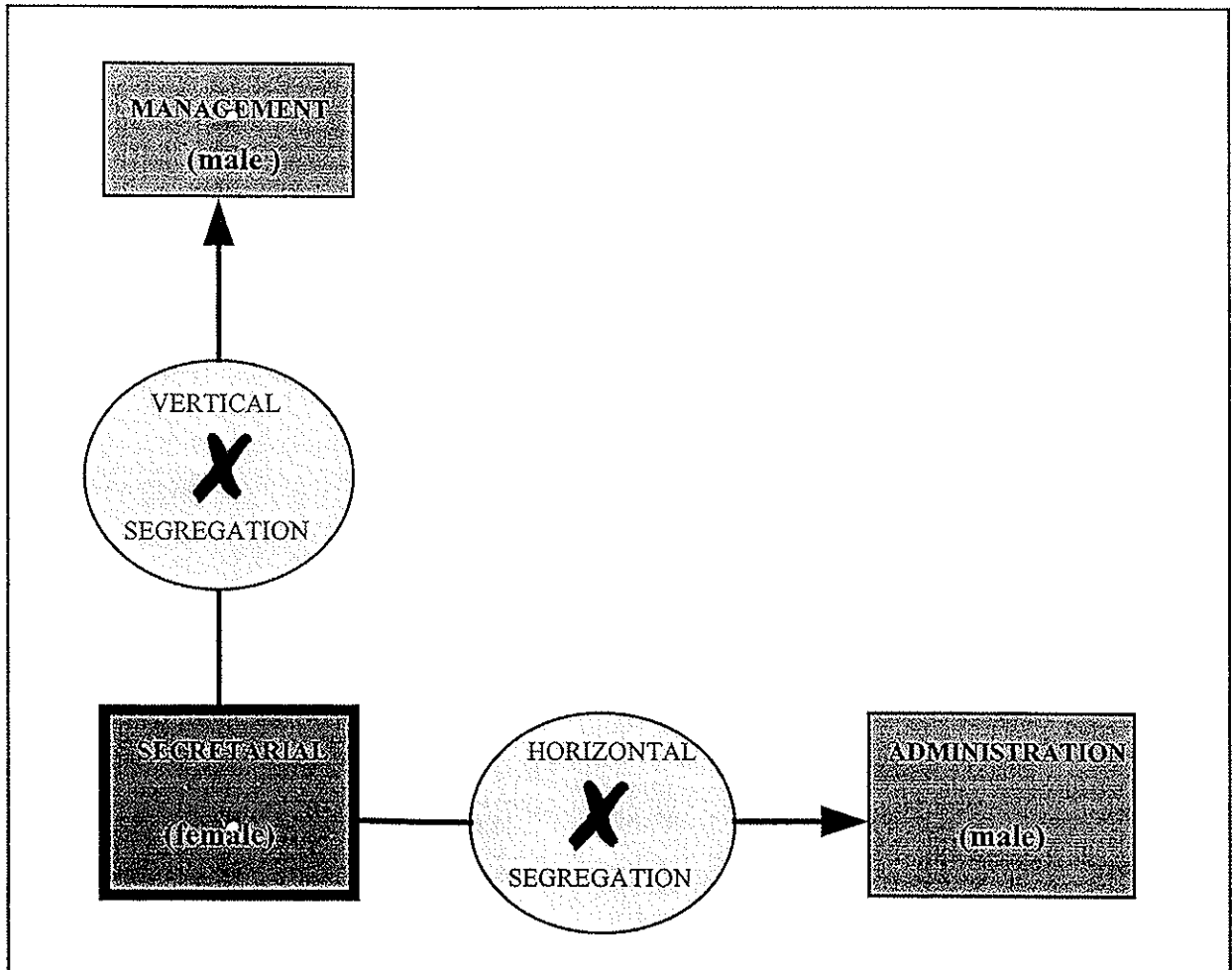
Figure 1: Characteristics of Female 'Ghetto' Occupations

Characteristic	As Proposed by
typified by disproportionately more women than men	Hakim, 1978; Crompton and Jones, 1984; Silverstone and Towler, 1984; Scott, 1986; Siltanen, 1986; Crompton and Sanderson, 1990.
Through a process of 'sex typing' are associated with poor working conditions	Lowe, 1987; Truss et al, 1992; Walby and Bagguley, 1990.
Through a process of 'sex typing' are associated with low pay	Lowe, 1987; Truss et al, 1992; Walby and Bagguley, 1990.
Through a process of 'sex typing' are associated with narrow job content	Lowe, 1987; Truss et al, 1992; Walby and Bagguley, 1990.
Through a process of 'sex typing' are associated with little opportunity for autonomy	Lowe, 1987; Truss et al, 1992; Walby and Bagguley, 1990.
Through a process of 'sex typing' are associated with few prospects for promotion	Crompton and Jones, 1984; Lowe, 1987; Truss et al, 1992; Walby and Bagguley, 1990.
Through a process of 'sex typing' are associated with stereotyped gender attributions that serve to perpetuate their segregated nature	Lowe, 1987; Truss et al, 1992; Walby and Bagguley, 1990.
Incumbents are channeled into them by lack of other choices and the operation of the labour market	Lowe, 1987.

The traditional sex segregation of office employment as shown in Figure 2 has combined with the operation of human capital theory to compound the difficulties encountered in improving the status of secretarial work. Human capital theory argues that employers select labour on the basis of the human capital which each worker has accrued in the form of education, qualifications, training, experience and skills (Bradley, 1989). In respect to the acquisition of human capital secretarial staff have traditionally been placed in a no-win situation. Historically the perception of secretaries requiring 'dexterity' rather than skill and the lack of promotional opportunities for female office workers have discouraged the acquisition of further education, qualifications or training. The lack of educational qualifications and skill are then used to justify low pay and restricted opportunities for promotion.



Figure 2: Horizontal and Vertical Segregation in the Office Context



Given that the human capital acquired by female employees has increased and that socialisation processes no longer produce low expectations of the working lives of women, one needs to look elsewhere to determine why secretarial work does not appear to be acquiring the promotional opportunities and status that many recent authors are proclaiming it deserves. Patriarchy may offer an explanation. Walby describes patriarchy as 'a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women' (1988, p 214).

Wajcman's (1991) work points to the strong relationship between patriarchy and the status of secretarial work. She proposes that the concept of patriarchy can be used to explain -

- the socialisation of skill;
- the fact that skill is defined to give priority to traditionally male work; and
- the fact that the skills that women use are not fully recognised and valued.

The attribution, fundamental to patriarchal ideology, of different inherent characteristics to each sex fitting each for different types of labour, was more forced in the case of clerical labour since there was a lack of work taking place under dangerous conditions or requiring brute strength (Zimmeck, 1986). In clerical work a line was drawn between the intellectual (considered the province of men) and the routine (considered the province of women). The most obvious example of the patriarchal nature of office relations (Giles, 1985; McNally, 1979; Barker and Downing, 1979) has been the personal ownership of his secretary by a male executive. Benet (1972) blames this personal ownership of each secretary by her boss for the continued 'ghettoisation' of secretarial work.

The present study selected a number of variables commonly used within the literature to assess the status of secretarial work. These variables were then investigated within the context of the dynamic organisational environment of the 1990s.

## ORGANISATIONAL BACKGROUND

Much of the literature relating to secretarial work in the 1990s suggests that secretaries are 'on the brink' of change. Secretaries are facing a point where their perceived role could change from purely subordinate, to that of administrative/managerial team member.

The following section addresses each of the variables used to assess the status of secretarial work along with change factors as hypothesised by the relevant literature.

### Task Variety and Complexity

In respect to task variety and complexity, little evidence has been reported of the deskilling of clerical/secretarial work predicted by the 1970's literature. In contrast recent

literature refers to the upskilling of secretarial work which finds empirical support in the work of Schmitt, Gilliland, Landis and Devine (1993) as well as the current survey. The upskilling of secretarial work may reduce the sex typing of office work as it may become difficult to recognise management work as skilled/intellectual (and thus the province of men) and to provide no such recognition for secretarial work when evidence is provided of considerable overlap of duties. The successful reduction of sex typing is however, likely to be restricted by the perpetuation of patriarchal relationships in the office context (Kanter, 1978).

### Task Discretion

In respect to task discretion, Long's 1993 study provides empirical evidence of increasing levels of task discretion amongst secretarial staff following advances in information technology. Support for Long's findings was found in the current survey.

### Promotional Opportunities

In respect to promotional opportunities considerable agreement exists within the literature in respect to the continued lack of promotional opportunities despite increases in task variety, task complexity and autonomy. Once again this finding was supported by the current study. It would appear that secretarial workers face a number of organisational barriers not faced by other female employees. These specific barriers include -

- the practice of rug rankings (whereby secretarial pay and promotion are dependent on her boss's status in the organisation);
- the lack of clear evolution of a career path resulting from the diversity of tasks performed; and
- the broad range of terminology used to describe the secretarial role.

### Pay Levels

In respect to secretarial compensation, the literature suggests that secretarial work has traditionally been low paid because of -

- its position within the secondary labour market;
- the historical gender construction of clerical work;

- the use of rug rankings to determine secretarial pay;
- the lack of recognition for the skills and qualities required for secretarial work; and
- the fact that secretaries are not perceived to hold revenue producing positions.

It could be expected that increasing complexity and diversity of skills required by secretarial staff accompanied by the decreased use of rug rankings would result in increased pay levels. Little evidence of such a situation was revealed by the literature possibly because of organisational pressure to maintain internal pay relativities. That is, if secretarial workers received increased compensation, a chain of demands for pay increases by other organisational employees could result.

### Working Conditions

In respect to working conditions, the survey set out to investigate the debate in the literature as to whether office technology has

- polarised the workforce into a male elite working in the highly skilled 'thinking' or 'planning' jobs and women in the skilled monotonous and repetitive jobs
- OR
- enhanced equal opportunities for women workers and decreased sex-specific job segregation

### Stereotyped Gender Attributes

The perpetuation of stereotyped gender attributes is well supported in the literature as well as by the results of the current study. Wichroski (1994) suggests that allocation of responsibility for peripheral tasks such as office housekeeping is often determined by the nature of the personal relationship between boss and secretary, and, although openly performed, are often denied recognition. It is this aspect of secretarial work which offers the greatest potential to continue the denigration of the status of the occupation and which sets it apart from a number of other sex-typed occupations.

The aim of the current study was to investigate the variables discussed above in the context of Australian and New Zealand business organisations in order to assess the relevance of the ghetto thesis to secretarial work currently being conducted in these two countries.

## METHODOLOGY

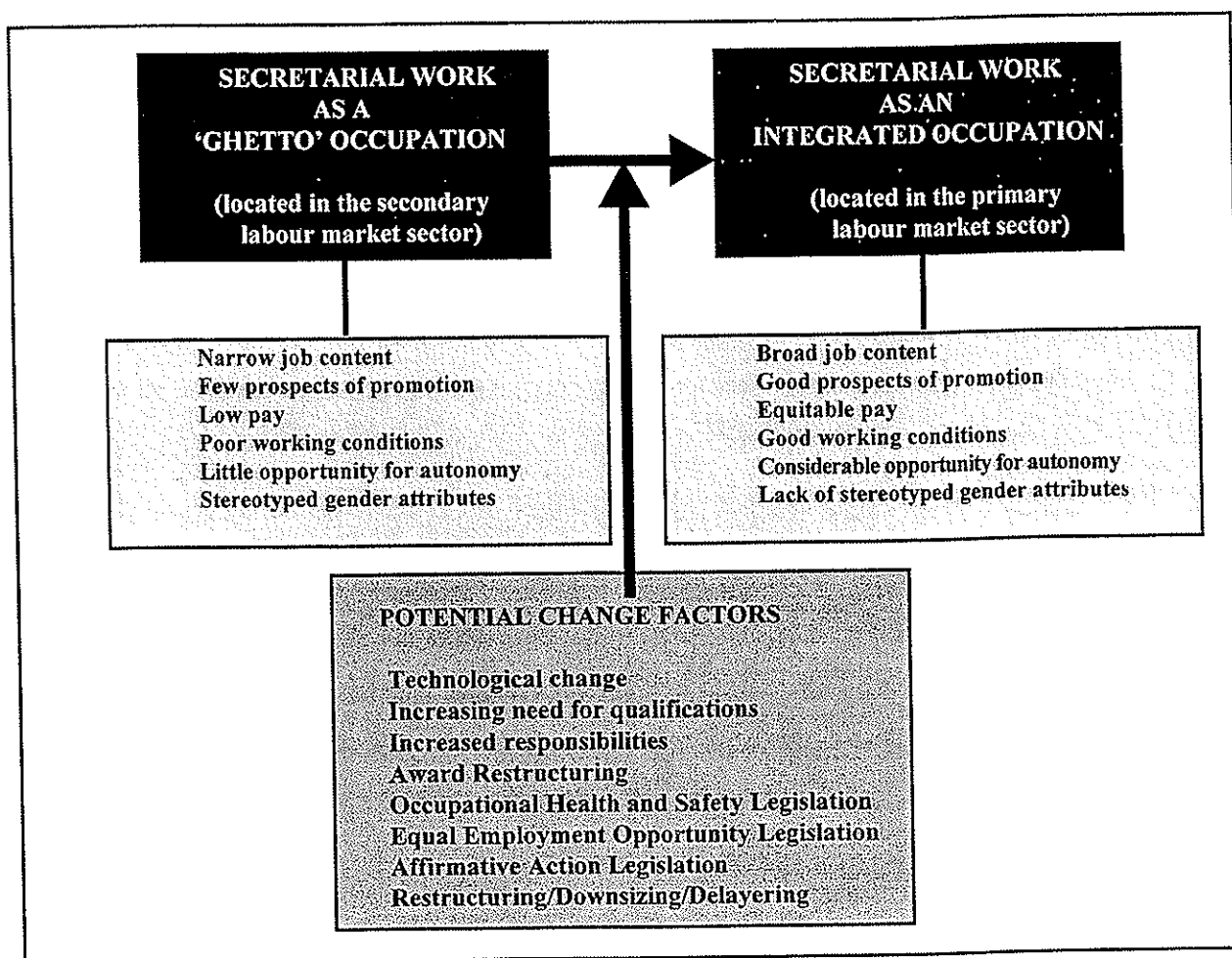
The study was based in part on work carried out by Truss of the London School of Business who conducted a similar survey in relation to secretarial work in the UK, France and Germany in 1992.

Unlike previous studies of secretarial work, the current study employed a very broad definition of 'secretary' by surveying members of professional secretarial bodies in Australia and New Zealand. Such a sampling frame was considered appropriate because of the problem of identifying organisational secretaries due to wide diversities in tasks performed and classification titles.

The study also differed from previous works by including in the survey a wide range of industry types, a range of organisational sizes and both private and public sector employees. This allowed an investigation of links between these variables and the status of secretarial work, and also helped prevent sample bias which may have resulted from selecting a particular industry, organisational size, or sector.

The model for the study (Figure 3) was based on the debate in respect to whether secretarial work could be depicted as characteristic of the secondary labour market ('ghetto' occupation) or of the primary labour market (integrated occupation). The 1970's analyses focused on the intensification of secretarial work as a ghetto occupation whereas in the 1990's the literature focuses on the possible decline of the applicability of the ghetto thesis.

Figure 3: Current Debate re the Status of Secretarial Work



The model employed in the current study (Figure 4) indicates that the survey was designed to answer the question posed by the debate outlined in Figure 3, by investigating the status of secretarial work in respect to the six variables most commonly identified with 'ghetto' occupations.

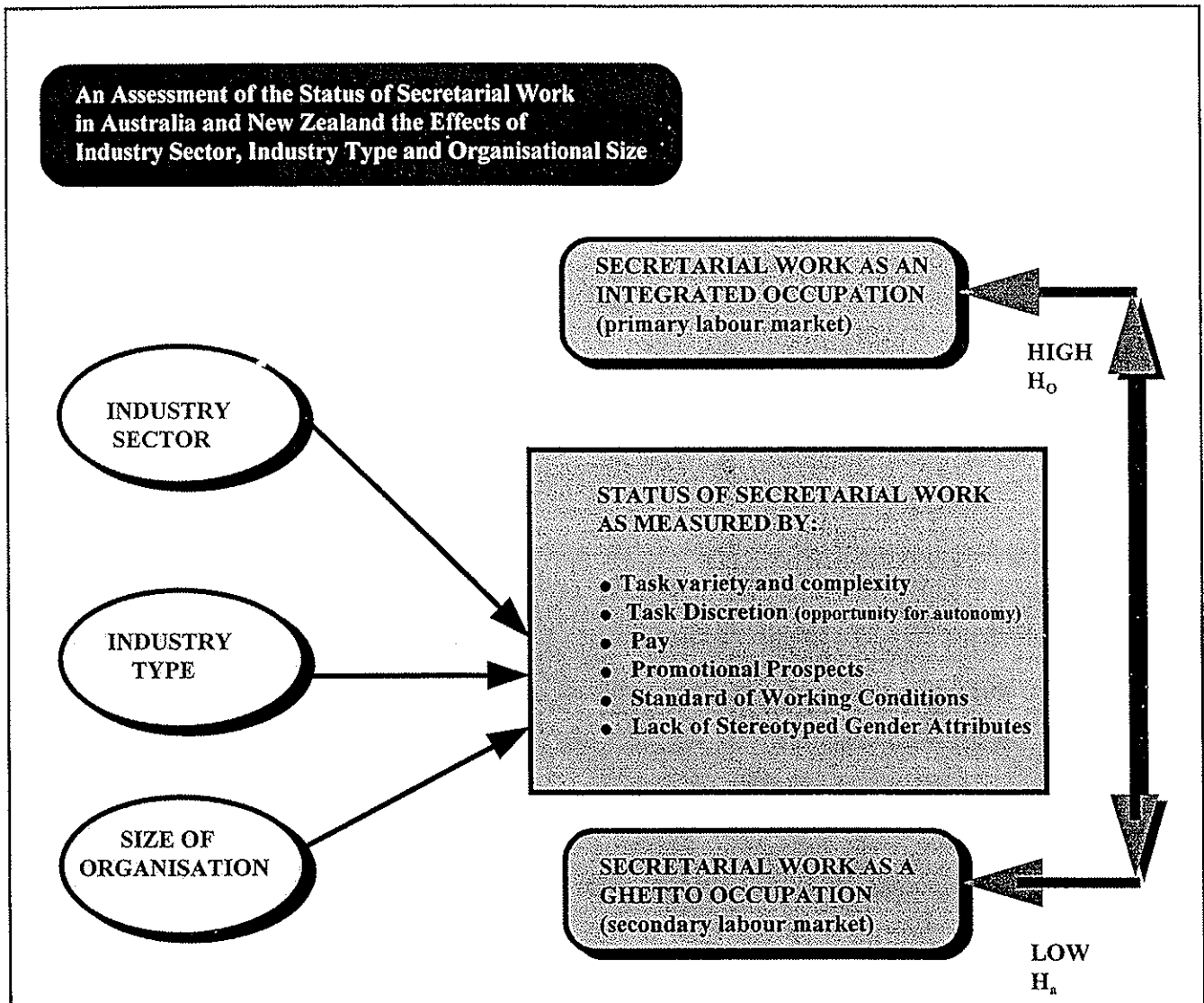
As depicted in Figure 4, the model was designed to test the following key hypothesis:

$H_{(0)}$  Secretarial work in Australia and New Zealand does **not** reflect the characteristics of 'ghetto' occupations

Since organisational theory and the industrial relations literature indicate that there may be some variation in occupational status according to type of industry, organisational size or

sector, the data set was also used to assess the significance or non-significance of these variables in relation to the ghetto thesis<sup>1</sup>.

Figure 4: Model of Study Assessing the Status of Secretarial Work in Australia and New Zealand



The design approach employed comprised a cross sectional (Luck and Rubin, 1987; Zikmund, 1991), one-shot (Luck and Rubin, 1987) descriptive study of secretarial work in Australia and New Zealand. The survey covered a wide range of industry types and included small, medium and large organisations from both public and private sectors. The primary objective of the study was to produce accurate descriptions of the variables depicting the status of secretarial work in these two countries. Description of the

<sup>1</sup> The relationship between status of secretarial work and industry type, sector or organisational size

variables relating to the status of secretarial work required that benchmarks be set for each variable in order to differentiate ghetto/integrated status. This created a number of difficulties as the concept of ghetto status does not lead to simple measurement. An ideal type 'ghetto' occupation is a complex attribution resulting from the combination of low values for a number of variables as indicated in Figure 4. Arbitrary benchmarks were set based on an extensive literature review in order to give as much scope as possible to the attribution of 'ghetto' status.

The relevant population for the survey comprised secretarial workers in Australia and New Zealand. Membership lists of professional secretarial bodies in both countries were used as the sampling frame. Systematic probability sampling (Luck and Rubin, 1987) was employed resulting in a sample of 1000 secretarial workers. The initial response rate was 64.4%. However a number of respondents, although identifying with the secretarial profession, were omitted from further analysis in the belief that the inclusion of their responses could reduce the validity of the results. These respondents included full time teachers and academics and those who were self-employed. A small number of survey forms contained insufficient detail, while in other cases the respondent had replied to both first and second mailings. After these anomalies were addressed, usable responses totalled 577 (57.7%).

A mail survey comprising a four page questionnaire was used to collect data relating to each of the six variables reported in the literature as determining the applicability of the 'ghetto' thesis. The questionnaire comprised mainly fixed-alternative questions due to time and cost constraints imposed. The questionnaire was pilot tested on a group of 20 secretarial workers at the University of Southern Queensland and minor adjustments were made to a small number of questions.

The questionnaire was mailed to respondents along with a covering letter from the Institute of Professional Secretaries (Australia) for Australian respondents or from the New Zealand Society of Executive Secretaries for New Zealand respondents. Respondents received a postpaid return envelope to encourage a high response rate. A split mailing was

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are the subject of another paper and will not be discussed further in this paper.



used with respondents receiving a second questionnaire together with covering letter approximately two weeks after the initial mailing.

Data obtained from the questionnaire were regarded principally as nominal or ordinal in nature. Following coding of a small number of open-ended questions, data was input and analysed using SPSS for Windows (Version 6.0).

To test the core hypothesis the mean of each of the variables measuring the status of secretarial work was compared to a prescribed benchmark. An alpha level of .05 was set and z-tests were conducted for the Australian, New Zealand and Total Sample data for all variables apart from stereotyped gender attributes for which a p-test of proportions was conducted.

## RESULTS

### Demographics

Approximately 70% of the 644 responses were received from Australian secretaries and 30% from secretaries working in New Zealand. As predicted by the literature 99.5% of respondents were female supporting the description of this occupational group as one of the most highly feminised occupations in Western industrialised nations (Truss, 1993).

Respondents were older than could have been expected with a t-test on age revealing that New Zealand respondents (average age 42) were significantly (2-tailed  $p = .043$ ) older than Australian respondents. Of particular concern in respect to the age statistics was the under representation of the younger age groups (less than 6% of respondents belonged to the <26 age group) and the strong over representation of the older age groups (43% of respondents were aged between 45 and 55). These statistics suggest that secretarial work is failing to attract younger employees and that secretaries tend to become trapped within their occupation as suggested by the 'ghetto' thesis. The concept of entrapment is supported by the unusual relationship between age and satisfaction. While Muchinsky (1990) suggests that a positive relationship between these two factors is the norm, the data from the current study show a negative relationship up to age 55 and a mixed relationship for the remaining age groups.

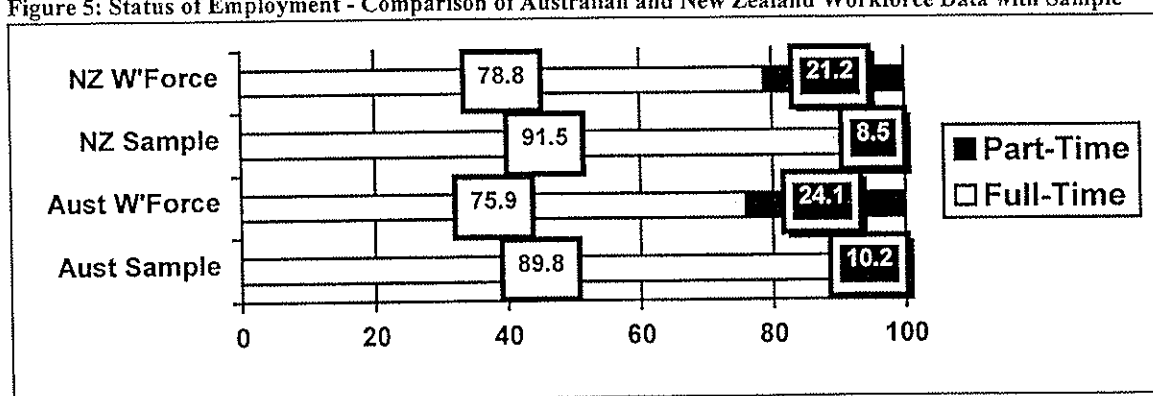
Even though all respondents were members of professional secretarial bodies a diverse range of occupational groups were represented including educators, managers, and self-employed. Screening was carried out based on tasks performed in order to ensure that respondents included in further analysis were in fact conducting 'secretarial' work. The screening process reduced the number of useable responses to 577. Details of classification for the respondents to be included in further analysis are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Final Classifications Given to Current Position

Classification	Australia (n = 388)		New Zealand (n = 189)		Combined Sample (n = 577)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Clerk	7	1.8	2	1.1	9	1.6
Manager	5	1.3	4	2.1	9	1.6
Administrative Assistant	25	6.4	7	3.7	32	5.5
Office Manager	25	6.4	10	5.3	35	6.1
Administration Officer	48	12.4	14	7.4	62	10.7
Personal Assistant	71	18.3	56	29.6	127	22.0
Secretary	102	26.3	47	24.9	149	25.8
Executive Secretary/Assistant	105	27.1	49	25.9	154	26.7
TOTAL	388	100%	189	100%	577	100%

A significant underrepresentation of part-time workers (Figure 5) was evidenced. Low levels of part-time employment were considered to result from the sampling frame. Since respondents were members of professional secretarial associations they were more likely to be full-time employees.

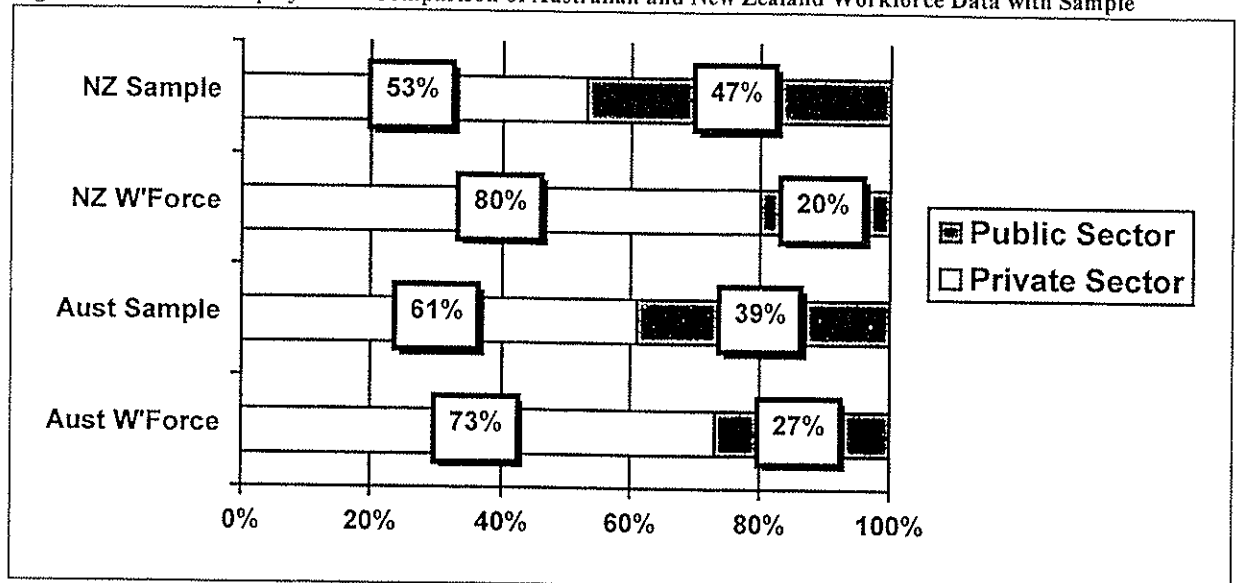
Figure 5: Status of Employment - Comparison of Australian and New Zealand Workforce Data with Sample



(ABS, 1994 (a), *September Quarter Employed Wage and Salary Earners Australia*, Cat No 6248.0  
 Statistics New Zealand, 1994 (a), *Household Labour Force Survey*, Data received by facsimile, 22.09.95)

The data also revealed an under representation of the private sector (Figure 6). It was considered that this would be typical of the distribution of *secretarial* staff across sectors because of the high degree of administrative work performed in public sector industries such as education, health and public administration.

Figure 6: Sector of Employment - Comparison of Australian and New Zealand Workforce Data with Sample



(ABS, 1994, *September Quarter 1994 Employed Wage and Salary Earners Australia*, Cat No 6248.0  
 Statistics New Zealand, 1994, *Quarterly Employment Survey*, data received by facsimile 22.09.95)

Full details of sample distribution across industry groups is provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Sample and Workforce Distribution across Industry Groups

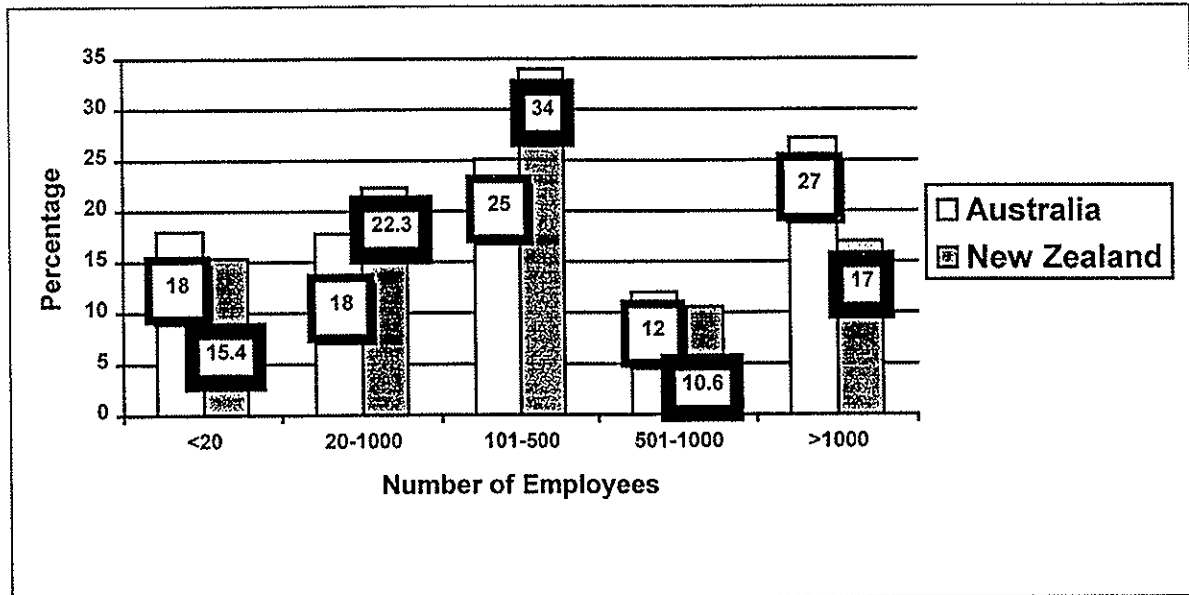
	AUSTRALIA		NEW ZEALAND	
	Workforce e %	Sample %	Workforce %	Sample %
Mining - (NZ - Forestry and Mining)	1.1	4.9	1.0	0
Manufacturing (including Electricity, Gas and Water and Construction)	20.9	13.7	25.0	17.5
Wholesale and Retail Trade (NZ - including Restaurants and Hotels)	20.2	3.6	25.8	3.2
Transport, Storage and Communications	6.5	3.6	6.2	7.4
Finance, Property and Business Services	12.8	21.7	12.5	22.2
Public Administration and Defence	5.8	16.3	4.9	15.3
Community Services (NZ including social and personal services)	24.7	29.7	24.6	25.4
Recreation, personal and other services	7.9	3.9	N/A	4.8

(ABS, 1994, *September Quarter 1994 Employed Wage and Salary Earners Australia*, Cat No 6148.0  
 Statistics New Zealand, 1994, *Household Labour Force Survey*, Data received by facsimile, 22.09.95  
 Statistics New Zealand, 1994, *Quarterly Employment Survey*, Data received by facsimile, 22.09.95)

Chi-square analysis and cross tabulations revealed a significant difference between the size of employing organisation in Australia and New Zealand (Pearson 13.175,  $df = 5$ ,  $P = .022$ ). A comparison of organisational size is provided in Figure 7. Figure 7 reveals that Australia had a slightly greater percentage of small organisations (under 20 staff) and of organisations

employing between 500 and 1000 staff and had 10% more organisations employing over 1000 employees.

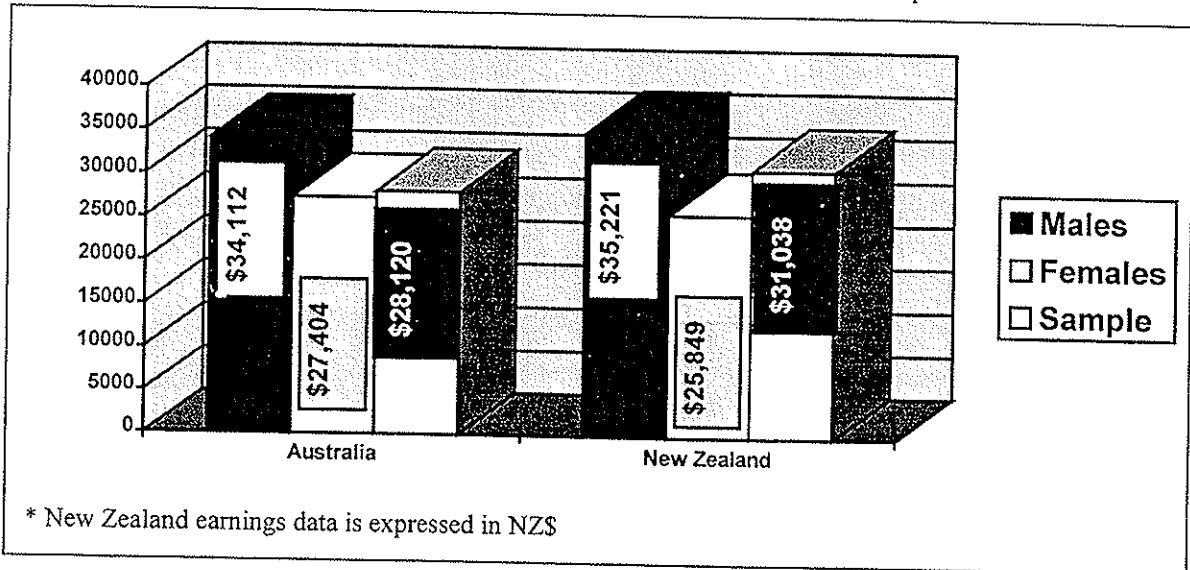
Figure 7: Size of Employing Organisation



The difference in size of employing organisation resulted from the relatively larger size of public sector organisations in Australia. 42.5% of Australian public sector organisations employed over 1000 staff while in New Zealand only 20.9% of public sector organisations were in this size category.

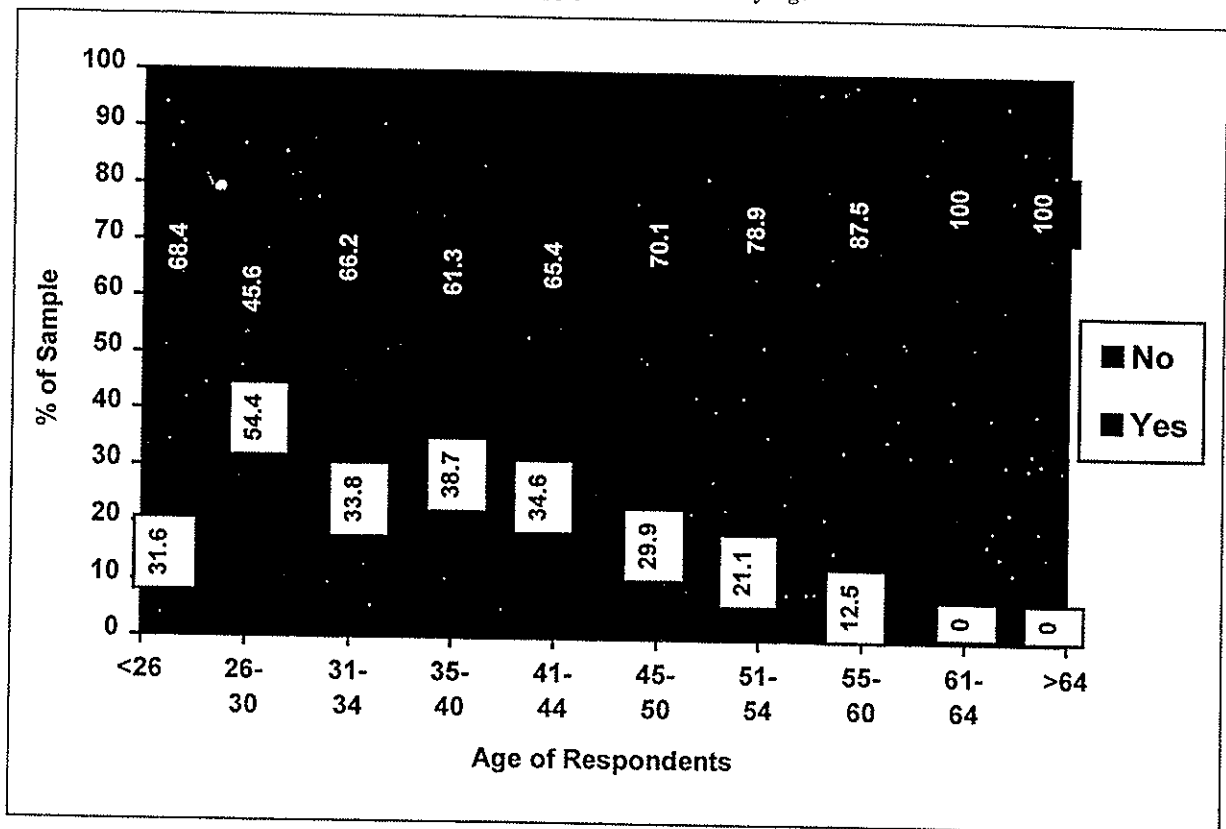
Respondents were found to be somewhat better paid than predicted by the literature review. Secretaries responding to the survey were found to earn above average female full-time earnings in both countries. Full details of annual earnings as compared to workforce data are set out in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Comparison of Average Annual Full-time Earnings - Male, Female and Sample



Less than one-third of respondents indicated that they planned to apply for promotion in the near future. A disturbing pattern emerged in respect to intention to apply for promotion as illustrated in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Percentage of Respondents Intending to Apply for Promotion by Age



The percentage seeking promotion after the age of 30 fell steadily even though the over 30's accounted for 84% of the sample. Promotion was also reported as the least valued work reward (7.03) while the work rewards most valued were sense of achievement (mean = 3.26) and job security (mean = 4.25). In contrast to the low value reported for promotion as a work reward, lack of promotional opportunities was rated as the factor which most reduced job satisfaction. This fact, combined with the finding outlined above which indicated very few respondents intended to apply for promotion, would suggest the presence of a 'ghetto' effect. Few secretaries apply for promotion because few opportunities are available.

The question in respect to tasks involved in current job revealed a diverse range of tasks undertaken by secretarial workers (Table 3).

Table 3: Tasks Performed in Current Job

Task	Australia %	New Zealand %	Combined Sample %
Word Processing	97.2	97.4	97.2
Using facsimile	96.1	93.7	95.3
Composing correspondence	94.3	92.6	93.8
Filing	88.1	90.5	88.9
Making appointments	87.3	90.5	88.4
Travel arrangements	74.1	77.2	75.1
Keyboarding - typewriter	69.8	65.6	68.4
Arranging conferences/functions	64.8	61.4	63.7
Ordering office supplies	61.7	64.0	62.4
Office housekeeping	62.0	59.8	61.3
Preparing reports	63.0	53.4	69.8
Designing in-house forms	61.0	50.8	57.6
Shorthand	56.7	57.1	56.9
Reception (including screening calls)	56.3	58.2	56.9
Selecting equipment	57.0	54.0	56.0
Taking minutes	53.3	60.3	55.7
Designing filing systems	53.7	49.7	52.4
Conducting research	54.1	47.1	51.8
Spreadsheets	52.6	49.2	51.5
Audio-typing	47.7	56.5	50.6
Control of office supplies	50.3	50.8	50.5
Electronic mail	47.8	48.7	48.1
Supervision of other staff	46.6	47.6	47.0
Database	46.9	36.5	43.5
Office design and layout	39.1	33.3	37.2
Desktop publishing	33.7	31.7	32.7
Preparing press releases/newsletters	21.8	16.9	20.2
Accounting/financial tasks	4.9	6.9	5.6
Client/customer service including sales	3.9	4.8	4.2
Using micro-imaging	4.4	1.6	3.5

Administration/management (including network administration)	2.1	5.3	3.1
Training/Teaching	2.9	3.2	3.0
Human relations (including dispute resolution, negotiation, problem solving and co-ordination)	1.6	2.6	1.9
Public Relations/Advertising	1.8	2.1	1.9
Personnel function (including recruitment, interviewing etc)	.8	3.7	1.7
Arranging meetings	.5	2.6	1.2
Developing systems and procedures	1.3	.5	1.0
Personal errands	.5	.5	.5

An analysis of tasks performed by each respondent revealed that the average number of tasks performed by respondents was 16 with a number of respondents indicating that they undertook in excess of 25 tasks as part of their current job.

In order to determine task complexity levels National Clerical-Administrative Competence Standards - Private Sector (NOSFAB, 1992) and the Competency Standards for Managers and Clerical/Administrative Staff in the ACE Sector (AAACE, 1995) were used to assign each task a level of complexity. A complexity index was then developed for each respondent. The average complexity level of work carried out by in excess of 98% of respondents was 3 or over on a five-point scale.

In order to establish autonomy levels, a supplementary survey of secretarial staff at the University of Southern Queensland was used to establish a rating for each of the tasks carried out by the original respondents according to the JDS criteria for autonomy (task discretion). The autonomy ratings for each task performed by individual respondents were then collated to establish levels of autonomy for each respondent.

## HYPOTHESIS TESTING

The core hypothesis was stated as follows:

H<sub>(0)</sub>: Secretarial work in Australia and New Zealand does **not** reflect the characteristics of 'ghetto' occupations

The variables to be measured in order to assess the status of secretarial work have already been identified as -

- task variety and complexity
- task discretion (opportunity for autonomy)
- pay levels
- promotional prospects
- standard of working conditions
- lack of stereotyped gender attributes

Low levels of each variable were considered indicative of 'ghetto' status. The results of hypothesis testing in relation to each variable are outlined below.

### Task Variety and Complexity

Data from the task variety and task complexity indices established from the survey data were compared with Oldham, Hackman and Stepina's (1979) Job Diagnostic Survey National Norms in order to determine 'ghetto' status. A mean score lower than the Job diagnostic Survey National Norm for skill variety of 4.7 was considered to indicate 'ghetto' status. Z-values for the observed means were as follows:

Table 4: Means for Skill Variety and Calculated z-values

AUSTRALIA			NEW ZEALAND			COMBINED SAMPLE		
n	mean	z-value	n	mean	z-value	n	mean	z-value
388	4.415	-5.724	189	4.35	-11.232	577	4.39	-7.8155

Since the z-values lay outside the acceptance region ( $z > 1.64$ ), the null hypothesis is rejected, that is it may be concluded at a confidence level of >99% that, **in respect to task variety and complexity, secretarial work does reflect the characteristics of a 'ghetto' occupation.**

### Task Discretion

It was proposed that if secretarial work did not reflect the characteristics of a 'ghetto' occupation the autonomy mean would in each case exceed the JDS mean of 4.9 as defined



by Oldham, Hackman and Stepina's (1979) Job Diagnostic Survey National Norms. Z-values for the observed means were as follows:

Table 5: Means for Task Discretion (Autonomy) and Calculated z-values

AUSTRALIA			NEW ZEALAND			COMBINED SAMPLE		
n	mean	z-value	n	mean	z-value	n	mean	z-value
386	5.081	49.847	188	5.078	35.545	574	5.08	61.258

Since the z-values in each case lie inside the acceptance region ( $z > 1.64$ ) the null hypothesis could not be rejected, that is, it may be concluded at a confidence level of >99% that **in respect to task discretion (opportunity for autonomy) secretarial work does not reflect the characteristics of a 'ghetto' occupation.**

#### Pay Levels

For pay levels to be indicative of a 'ghetto' occupation, it was considered that average earnings for full-time secretarial workers in Australia and New Zealand would fall below average female full-time earnings in either country. Z-values for the observed means were as follows:

Table 6: Means for Pay Level and Calculated z-values

AUSTRALIA			NEW ZEALAND		
n	mean	z-value	n	mean	z-value
342	3.781	4.552	171	4.363	11.562

Since the z-values in each case lie inside the acceptance region ( $z > 1.64$ ) the null hypothesis could not be rejected, that is, it may be concluded at a confidence level of >99% that **in respect to pay levels, secretarial work does not reflect the characteristics of a 'ghetto' occupation.** Satisfaction with wage/effort exchange was also investigated and it was found that, **in respect to satisfaction with pay as a reflection of work load, secretarial work does reflect the characteristics of a 'ghetto' occupation**

#### Prospects of Promotion

For secretarial work not to display the characteristics of a 'ghetto' occupation in respect to prospects of promotion, it was expected that respondents would report -

- that promotional opportunities had reduced their level of job satisfaction to a minor extent or less, that is  $\mu \leq 1$ ;
- that the mean value for promotion as a work reward would be less than 5 on 1-10 scale on which 1 indicated the work reward most valued, that is  $\mu < 5$ ;
- that barriers to promotion were considered to be only minor hindrances to their chances of promotion, that is  $\mu < 1.5$ .

Z-values for the observed means were as follows:

Table 7: Means for Prospects of Promotion as a Factor Reducing Job Satisfaction and Calculated z-values

AUSTRALIA			NEW ZEALAND			COMBINED SAMPLE		
n	mean	z-value	n	mean	z-value	n	mean	z-value
364	1.907	11.406	172	1.593	5.014	536	1.866	13.076

Table 8: Means for Prospects of Promotion as a Valued Work Reward and Calculated z-values

AUSTRALIA			NEW ZEALAND			COMBINED SAMPLE		
n	mean	z-value	n	mean	z-value	n	mean	z-value
368	7.033	14.507	168	7.095	12.483	536	7.052	22.677

Table 9: Means for Perceived Barriers to Promotion and Calculated z-values

AUSTRALIA			NEW ZEALAND			COMBINED SAMPLE		
n	mean	z-value	n	mean	z-value	n	mean	z-value
357	1.687	7.064	172	1.642	3.717	529	1.673	7.021

Since the z-values in each case lie outside the acceptance region ( $z < 1.64$ ), the null hypothesis must be rejected, that is, it can be concluded at a confidence level of  $> 99\%$  that **in respect to each aspect of prospects of promotion, secretarial work does reflect the characteristics of a 'ghetto' occupation.**

#### Working Conditions

If secretarial work were not characteristic of a 'ghetto' occupation it was considered that respondents would report either that working conditions had not reduced their level of job satisfaction or that they had done so to only a minor extent, that is  $\mu < 2$ . Z-values for the observed means were as follows:

Table 10: Means for Working Conditions as a Factor Reducing Job Satisfaction and Calculated z-values

AUSTRALIA			NEW ZEALAND			COMBINED SAMPLE		
n	mean	z-value	n	mean	z-value	n	mean	z-value
359	.5850	-26.674	172	.4593	-23.853	531	.5443	-34.967

Since the z-values lie within the acceptance region ( $z < 1.64$ ) in each case the null hypothesis cannot be rejected, that is, at a confidence level of  $> 99\%$  it can be concluded that **in respect to working conditions secretarial work does not reflect the characteristics of a 'ghetto' occupation.**

#### Stereotyped Gender Attributes

It was proposed that if secretarial work did not reflect the characteristics of a 'ghetto' occupation 50% or less of respondents would report that they carried out tasks such as office housekeeping or personal errands, that is  $p \leq .5$ . Z-values for the observed means were as follows:

Table 11: Proportion of Respondents reporting Stereotyped Gender Attributes and Calculated z-values

AUSTRALIA			NEW ZEALAND			COMBINED SAMPLE		
n	mean	z-value	n	mean	z-value	n	mean	z-value
388	.625	4.924	189	.603	2.832	577	.618	5.570

Since the z-values lie outside the acceptance region ( $z < 1.64$ ) in each case the null hypothesis must be rejected, that is, it can be concluded at a confidence level of  $> 99\%$  that **in respect to stereotyped gender attributes, secretarial work does reflect the characteristics of a ghetto occupation.**

In summary, hypothesis testing revealed that there was sufficient evidence to reject  $H_{(0)}$  which hypothesised that secretarial work in Australia and New Zealand does not reflect the

characteristics of 'ghetto' occupation. That is support can be found for classifying some aspects of the occupation as 'ghetto' in nature. The evidence suggests that, although secretarial work has progressed out of 'ghetto' status in respect to task discretion, comparative pay levels and working conditions, the 'ghetto' status of this occupation is still demonstrated in respect to task variety and complexity, promotional opportunities and stereotyped gender attributes.

## **LIMITATIONS**

The generalisability of the results of this study may be affected by sample bias. The sample was found to be skewed in relation to status of employment, pay levels and age of respondents when compared with the population of female employees in Australia and New Zealand. Such bias was considered to result from the use of membership lists of professional secretarial associations as the sampling frame. The skewness of the sample was not considered to invalidate the findings. It could be expected that any negative aspects of secretarial work established in the sample group would be somewhat more prominent in the general population of secretarial staff in the two countries involved in the survey.

Of greater concern may be the possibility of cohort effect. Because respondents were found to be somewhat older than could be expected and consequently over 50% of respondents had spent more than 20 years in the workforce, consideration may have to be given to the underlying socialisation processes affecting the attitudes of these respondents towards expectations of their working lives. The data revealed, in fact, that younger secretaries both valued promotion as a work reward more highly than older secretaries and held greater expectations of promotion.

## **PRACTICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY**

The invisibility of the link between clerical and administrative work and productivity and the subsequent lack of detailed analysis that has occurred for these occupations (Windsor, 1991) have begun to create problems for organisations in respect to attaining and retaining skilled secretarial staff. This study has identified a number of areas in which the applicability of the 'ghetto' thesis to secretarial work has weakened considerably along with a number areas where 'ghetto' status can still be identified.

While at the organisational level considerable improvement appears to have occurred in the job content of secretarial work, there is little or no evidence of improvement in respect to career pathing for secretarial staff. The fact that promotion as a work reward was least valued by secretaries, personal assistants and executive assistants would suggest that the fierce sense of loyalty often developed by these workers towards the executives to whom they report results in the perception that to seek promotion would constitute disloyalty to one's immediate superior. Examination of the data also showed that those who indicated that lack of promotional opportunities had most strongly affected their level of job satisfaction were those at the bottom of the job hierarchy - clerks, secretaries and administrative assistants. This may indicate considerable confusion as to what is required for career progression. This situation may be overcome by organisational restructuring, that is, as the number of situations where a secretary works for just one executive decreases, a new focus should emerge on individual secretaries' merit, achievement and qualifications which in turn should provide a basis for creating a more realistic career path.

As office technology becomes more sophisticated and organisations restructure, there will be a need for a different type of training for secretarial staff in order for them to acquire the technical and communication competence to assume roles once handled by middle management (Householder, 1991). Participation in such training can cause particular problems for female workers and place additional physical and emotional stress on working women. Should secretarial staff undertake such training, it could be expected that it would be with the expectation of increased pay or promotional opportunities.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH AND POLICY ISSUES**

The limitations outlined previously in this paper suggest the need for a similar study encompassing members *and* non-members of professional secretarial bodies. This would help to identify any sample bias or cohort effect inherent to the current study and enable adjustments to the findings in respect to the status of secretarial work to be made before a policy platform is established to address any inequities in respect to the treatment of secretarial workers. Such a study would also assist in identifying any inequities suffered by those secretaries who did not belong to professional bodies.

Based on the findings of the current study it will be necessary for organisations to quickly address the issues of secretarial job content, promotional opportunities and compensation levels in order to attract suitable applicants for secretarial positions. This can only occur if greater awareness of the skills and abilities required by secretarial staff is created, making them more *visible* employees. For example, detailed job descriptions for secretarial staff would be an effective starting point in creating an awareness of the diverse range of tasks undertaken by this occupational group.

Professional secretarial associations must also play a part in creating awareness of the importance of the organisational role played by secretaries while secretaries themselves must become proactive not reactive in respect to qualifications and perceptions of their own occupation. They need to ensure that the full range of tasks that constitute secretarial work is recognised, compensated and included in their job descriptions.

## SUMMARY

This study has shown that secretarial work has progressed in part out of its traditional 'ghetto' status. However, while promotional opportunities remain limited and the 'invisibility' of much of what secretaries do is perpetuated, workers in this occupational group are likely to remain marginalised/ghettoised within organisations, prevented from making a real contribution to organisational productivity and from being equitably rewarded for doing so.

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