Bilingual secretary

Job description

Bilingual secretaries and personal assistants (PAs) deal with administrative work in more than one language. They play an important role in international communication amongst businesses. Some bilingual secretaries are required to use their foreign languages more regularly than others; positions could involve working consistently in English and foreign languages or only using language skills occasionally.

While a university degree is not a prerequisite for this position, an increasing number of language graduates take up administrative roles in large international companies in the form of personal assistant or senior secretary to corporate management.

Work activities

- Translating and writing reports, letters and emails in foreign languages.
- Acting as interpreter in meetings when required.
- Answering phone calls in a foreign language.
- Booking transport and accommodation for overseas visits/international visitors.
- Typing, word processing, managing databases and filing.
- Arranging appointments.

Work conditions

Travel: work is generally office-based. Some roles may involve accompanying senior colleagues on international business trips.

Working hours: usually the normal office schedule, however some unsociable hours may need to be worked from time to time if foreign visitors are being entertained and an interpreter is required.

Location: vacancies are available in cities throughout the world.

Career development

Some graduates may start out in a trainee or junior position. Junior secretaries work mainly in English and, as experience is gained, further responsibility and promotion should be offered. In order to gain experience, some graduates start out by getting temporary positions through recruitment agencies or work in call centres to practice their languages.

Graduates find that opportunities for promotion and increased responsibility are very accessible – graduates bring a range of skills with them that will give them an advantage over their colleagues. A bilingual secretarial qualification is an excellent foundation for anyone wishing to move into administrative management.
Entry requirements and training

Bilingual secretaries must have extremely high proficiency in their chosen languages, both oral and written. Most employers will only consider a candidate if they have spent at least one year abroad. Skills required include shorthand, audio typing and text processing in foreign languages. Some employers also seek understanding of the culture, politics and economics in the relevant country.

Specific degree subjects required

A primary degree in languages is necessary for bilingual secretaries. Bilingual secretarial or PA qualifications are advantageous, such as the internationally recognised LCCI diploma.

Tips for applications

When applying for work as a bilingual secretary, you need to emphasise your linguistic proficiency and personal qualities in your CV.

In this role, a positive attitude is vitally important. The job may involve a lot of multitasking and ‘changing hats’ from secretary to interpreter. Aside from examining your hard skills in the interview, the employer will really want to know if you will fit into their organisation and cope with the demands of the job. Research the company fully and examine all of the desired attributes; be ready with examples of using and developing them in previous work experience.

Skills and qualities

- Highly developed administrative and organisational skills
- Ability to be flexible, adaptable and co-operative.
- Excellent social communication skills
- Initiative
- Ability to work well under pressure.

Bilingual secretary (continued)