

Case Study: Chartered Secretary - Madeleine

What do you do?

I am a senior manager in the company secretarial group of a large consultancy company. I manage a team of people. We do company secretarial compliance work for a large number of private companies, and I provide consultancy advice, mainly for listed public companies.

Because I worked in industry for about 15 years, I've got experience of working with large, listed public companies. I have brought that experience to my current role and am developing the business along these lines.



What is your background?

I left technical college after doing a couple of A levels and a secretarial course, because I wasn't sure I wanted to go to university at that time.

I worked as a personal assistant in an oil company, and then became interested in company secretarial work. My boss at that time, the legal director, suggested that this might be something I could do to further my career.

So I went through the Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators (ICSA) exams part-time, studying in different ways, (evening classes, day-release and distance learning) and as soon as I could, I got a job in company secretarial work to get some experience as well as doing the exams.

So I worked for a small property company looking after about 75 private companies and also acting as the PA to the managing director.

As soon as I had some experience under my belt, I wanted to get some listed experience, and so I moved to a large investment bank.

I then moved to a large insurance company which had some overseas interests. I was assistant company secretary and in-house legal adviser dealing with legal issues that management brought to me.

The next job I had was with a national carpet retailer with about 250 stores throughout the UK. The company floated on the stock exchange so I helped with that process, which took about six months.

I had a very broad role, which included being the company secretary, as well as compliance work, looking after company cars, employee benefits, health care, property and legal work and health and safety.

I then worked for a small consultancy and then started in my present role about 18 months ago.

What characteristics do you need to be successful in your job?

The ability to get on with people at all levels has got to be a key skill and quality that's required. Because the job of chartered secretary is so varied in most cases, you come across very many different types of people in your work, so you need to be adaptable to be able to cope with that, and also to be able to influence people to achieve what you want to in the job.

It's very important to be able to juggle priorities as well as meeting a lot of people. Because the job does tend to be quite varied, you have a number of tasks on your desk at any one time, so you need to be able to keep the balls in the air all at the same time. But you also need to communicate well so that the people you're working with understand what you have got on your plate and that they let you know what's most important to get done first.

What other jobs could you do using the skills from this job?

Because the qualification of chartered secretary and the sort of experience that you tend to gain is very varied and broad, I think you could do a lot of other jobs. You could be a general manager in a lot of different organisations from industry to local government.

You also have to be a good administrator and good at organising and project-managing, and these are skills that I think you can transfer to a lot of general management-type jobs.

What changes will there be in the future?

It's very much a changing environment at the moment, for a number of reasons.

One is that organisations that employ chartered secretaries are having a tendency to become more global and having overseas interests. So to get a job in the UK as a chartered secretary, you could very easily find that you're dealing with overseas offices, perhaps having to speak a foreign language.

Also, you will be transferring information to different places and receiving it in from different cultures more.

Company law is changing rapidly at the moment, so as a chartered secretary, it's important to keep on top of that. For example, the Companies Act affects the work of the chartered secretary quite a bit.

What are the biggest challenges in your job?

The conflicting priorities can be a bit of a challenge at times. If you get it as right as you can in terms of telling people what you've got on your plate and understanding what the priorities are for your particular organisation, at times there do seem to be too many things to do, so you have to be able to keep your nerve.

Another important aspect is that, as a chartered secretary, you're working with quite senior managers and directors, and there can be politics involved, so it's not always easy to achieve the objectives that you've been given, and that's when it's important to have a tactful manner and diplomatic skills.

Lastly, some of our work is quite routine - you might have to file a form at Companies House appointing a director, for instance - and although this work might seem routine, if it's not done on time it can be a real problem. It can become very high profile because there are fines for not doing some of these routine types of work.

Are there many opportunities to enter this career?

Yes, I think there are a number of opportunities. Sometimes it's difficult to get that first job on the chartered secretarial ladder, because employers look for experience. I think I'd advise people looking at this career to get some similar experience, perhaps administrative, organisational experience, which will be valued by an employer taking on somebody who's very new to the profession.

I think that to work in a job like mine in consultancy requires quite a bit of hard work and determination. You need to be self-motivated, and it requires a breadth of experience which can only really be gained through time and working for a number of different types of organisation.

What do you like about your job?

I like the variety, both in terms of the type of work I do and the type of people I come across in my day-to-day work. I could be doing anything from buying a car for the chief executive to going to Paris and running a meeting about printing an important set of accounts.

What do you dislike about your job?

I don't have any real dislikes, I really enjoy my job. But going back to the priorities, I guess there's sometimes a lot of stress and pressure in the job. I do sometimes come away at the end of the day thinking that because I had so much to do, I didn't achieve as much as I would have liked.

What are your ambitions?

I'd like to continue learning, and my employer has a very good learning environment. We're always encouraged to learn more - nobody ever says they know everything about our job.

There are a few opportunities available to me in the future if I want to pursue them, one of which is possibly to become a partner here. That would involve moving away slightly from company secretarial work to becoming more of a trusted business adviser to clients.

Alternatively, I would look to getting a top job as the company secretary of one of the biggest companies in the UK.

What advice would you give to someone interested in your career?

I think I would say try it out, get some experience. My company takes on a number of summer vacation students in the company secretarial department.

Or get some experience in an administrative office to see if you like the environment.

A day in the life

I usually arrive at about 9 am.

On a typical day, I might spend the morning with my team on a particular project we're working on, preparing for a meeting in a couple of days' time. We would have to decide which roles different members of the team will have, and prepare paperwork.

Prepare and run a lunchtime presentation on a hot topic of interest to our clients, for example, on directors' remuneration [salaries and other payments], introduce a speaker and lead the discussion after the talk. Host a lunch afterwards.

After lunch, prepare bills for clients for work done.

Spend an hour counselling staff, coaching them in different areas of their work and finding out how they're feeling about their job.

Catch up with other managers in my group at the end of the day, to find out what's happening in other areas of the business.

I normally finish about 6 pm or 6:30 pm.