Bilingual Secretary

Introduction

Bilingual Secretaries carry out secretarial duties that involve using one or more foreign languages. This can include dealing with letters and other documents, and speaking on the telephone. Some Secretaries travel or work abroad.

Also known as

- Secretary, Bilingual
- Personal Assistant - Bilingual
- Multilingual Secretary

Work Activities

As a Bilingual Secretary, you will be using your extensive knowledge of one or more foreign languages to carry out secretarial work.

You will prepare, read and translate letters and other documents. You also make and receive telephone calls and deal with email enquirers and visitors.

Taking notes or interpreting at meetings and conferences is also something you might be involved with. Also dealing with a wide range of other secretarial duties, for example, organising meetings and making travel arrangements for a Manager or Director.

The amount of time that you will spend using a foreign language depends on the type of company you work for and your position within the company. Assistant Secretaries might spend much of their time working in their own language.

General Bilingual Secretarial duties include dealing with routine enquiries, taking messages, word processing, filing, photocopying and keeping an appointments diary.

If international clients or colleagues visit the company, you will greet them and handle arrangements for their stay, including hotel bookings and travel details.

You might act as an Interpreter during their visit. You may also look after members of the client’s family during visits to the UK, perhaps accompanying them to events.

Depending on the type of organisation you work for, you might deal with suppliers across Europe or beyond, working closely with factories, transport and recorded despatch companies, to monitor deliveries and confirm orders.

Being able to read, write and speak Welsh may be an advantage when you’re looking for work in Wales.

Personal Qualities and Skills

To become a Bilingual Secretary, you’ll need:

- excellent verbal and written communication skills, both in English and your foreign language(s)
- good listening skills
- IT and keyboard skills, and possibly audio transcription or shorthand skills
- a friendly and professional telephone manner
- the ability to compose letters on your own initiative
- close attention to detail when you translate documents
- confidence
- an understanding of the culture and business practices of the country whose language you speak
- strong organisational skills, to plan and prioritise your workload
- a thorough and methodical approach to your work
- the ability to decide which letters and phone calls your Manager should deal with personally
- an understanding of how your organisation works, for example, the functions of different departments and the company's relationship with its clients or customers

The most common languages that bilingual secretaries use are French, German and Spanish. There are also opportunities for speakers of many other languages, including Italian, Dutch, Arabic, Russian, Welsh, Chinese and Japanese.

**Pay and Opportunities**

**Pay**

The pay rates given below are approximate:

- Starting: £20,500 - £22,500
- With experience: £25,000 - £30,000
- Senior Bilingual Secretaries earn £32,500 - £36,000

**Hours of work**

Secretaries usually work 35-39 hours, Monday to Friday. Full-time, part-time, temporary and flexible working arrangements might be available.

**Where could I work?**

Employment is in some sectors of industry and commerce, especially with companies operating internationally, such as import/export firms and foreign-owned companies.

Opportunities also occur with university/college language departments, and in public service, for example, with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Casual and short-term contract work can be gained from specialist Multi/Bilingual Secretarial and office employment agencies.

Opportunities for Bilingual Secretaries occur with employers in other countries, for example, the United Nations and European Union organisations.

**Where are vacancies advertised?**

Vacancies are advertised on specialist language recruitment websites, in local/national newspapers, on Universal Jobmatch and at Jobcentre Plus.

**Entry Routes and Training**

**Entry routes**

Many entrants have A levels or a degree in languages, although there are no fixed entry requirements apart from fluency in your specialist language coupled with secretarial skills.

Various colleges and training companies offer courses in secretarial studies and also in languages, to prepare students for a career as a Bilingual Secretary.

Some courses teach people a modern foreign language from scratch; others are diplomas for graduates with a modern foreign language. It might also be possible to gain employment as a secretary and learn a language on a part-time basis.

An Advanced Level Apprenticeship is also a great place to start! Take a look at our information article 'Apprenticeships – How do I apply', for more details about applying for apprenticeship positions.
Training

It might be possible to take the Chartered Institute of Linguists' (IoL) certificate in bilingual skills, depending on the language offered. This is aimed mainly at people working in the public sector or for voluntary organisations. There are courses for Bilingual Secretaries to gain more experience. IoL Educational Trust offers a level 2 certificate in languages for business.

This certificate will help you focus on covering six topic areas:

- companies and organisations
- business communication and correspondence
- international travel
- sales and marketing
- customer service
- rules and regulations

Once you have finished studying these topic areas there will be three controlled assessments and one exam for each topic. If you pass all of these assessments, you will receive your certificate of languages for business.

Work Experience

Some entrants have a relevant background, for example in office and administrative work.

Progression

As a Bilingual Secretary you can progress to Bilingual Personal Assistant and Administrator posts. There could be opportunities for graduates to progress into Interpreter and Translator posts. Some colleges offer part-time courses leading to the IoL postgraduate diploma in translation.

Qualifications

There is no formal academic entry requirement, although many Bilingual Secretaries have A levels or a higher education (HE) qualification such as a degree in languages.

To get onto an Advanced Level Apprenticeship, you'll usually need 5 GCSEs at grade C/4 or above, including English and maths, or to have completed an Intermediate Level Apprenticeship.

Entry qualifications for courses vary considerably. Some GCSEs are usually preferred, and GCSE English at grade C/4 or above might be essential. Some courses require a GCSE at grade C/4 or above or an A level in a foreign language.

A good command of the English language and some basic understanding of a modern foreign language could be sufficient to get on to a relevant introductory course. Secretarial skills might be requested for some courses.

In general, employers want to see evidence of fast, accurate typing skills (at about 40 to 50 words per minute). Where an employer wants shorthand skills, they usually ask for speeds of 90 to 100 words per minute.

For entry to a degree course in a modern foreign language, the usual requirement is:

- 2/3 A levels (at least one of these in a modern foreign language)
- GCSEs at grade C/4 or above in 2/3 other subjects
- English at either level

Alternatives to A levels include:

- BTEC level 3 qualification together with an A level in a relevant modern language
- the International Baccalaureate Diploma
The languages that you need at A level are usually those that you are going to study at degree level. However, course requirements vary, so please check college/university websites very carefully. Some universities accept the Welsh Baccalaureate as equivalent to 1 A level.

**Adult Opportunities**

**Age limits**

It is illegal for any organisation to set age limits for entry to employment, education or training, unless they can show there is a real need to have these limits.

**Entry**

Some entrants have a relevant background, for example, in office and administrative work.

**Courses**

Some college courses are aimed specifically at people wanting to gain or update their general keyboard, secretarial or language skills. These can be organised on a one- or two-term full-time intensive basis or taken part-time.

Colleges will usually consider applications from adults who do not meet their usual entry requirements. You should check the admissions policy of individual colleges.

**Access courses**

If you don't have the usual qualifications needed to enter your chosen degree or HND course, a college or university Access course could be the way in.

These courses are designed for people who have not followed the usual routes into higher education (HE). No formal qualifications are usually needed, but you should check this with individual colleges.

**Distance learning**

A large number of centres offer courses in word processing by distance learning. The Open University offers a degree in Modern Language Studies that includes one or two out of French, German and/or Spanish.

**Statistics**

- 5% of secretaries are self-employed.
- 33% work part-time.
- 22% have flexible hours.
- 3% of employees work on a temporary basis.

**Further Information**

**Professional institutes**

Professional institutes have the following roles:

- To support their members.
- To protect the public by keeping standards high in their professions.

For more information on the institute(s) relevant to this career, check out the contacts below.

**Contacts**

- **Institute of Administrative Management (IAM)**
  Tel: 020 7091 2600  
  Email: info@instam.org  
  Website: [www.instam.org](http://www.instam.org)

- **City & Guilds**
• Skills CFA
  Tel: 020 7091 9620
  Email: info@skillscfa.org
  Website: www.skillscfa.org

• Open University (OU)
  Tel: 0845 3006090
  Website: www.open.ac.uk

• Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIOL)
  Tel: 0207 940 3100
  Email: info@iol.org.uk
  Website: www.iol.org.uk

• Languages Work
  Website: www.languageswork.org.uk

• Careers Wales - Welsh Apprenticeships
  Tel: 0800 028 4844
  Website: ams.careerswales.com/

• People Exchange Cymru (PEC)
  Public sector recruitment portal for Wales
  Email: peopleexchangecymru@gov.wales
  Website: www.peopleexchangecymru.org.uk/home

Related Careers

• Office Receptionist
• Post Room Assistant
• Telephonist
• Warehouse Clerk
• School Secretary
• Agricultural Administrator
• Legal Secretary
• Medical Secretary
• Personal Assistant
• Payroll Administrator
• Secretary
• Administrative Assistant
• Receptionist
• Transcriptionist