BY JIM CARROLL



A guy thing

THEY CALL IT KEYBOARDING, BUT THE TRUTH IS, MALE EXECUTIVES HAVE HAD TO LEARN TO TYPE

Have you ever thought about your special role in history? Every time you peck away at your computer keyboard – working on your e-mail, typing a document or updating a spreadsheet – you solidify your position as a member of a generation that the world has never seen before and will never see again: the two-fingered executive.

(Unless you're a female executive, of course, in which case – for reasons we'll come to in a moment – you touch type with ease. To my female readers, I can only say: I know, it's a guy thing.) ▸

ILLUSTRATION: TRACEY WOOD

Previous generations of business executives never had to cope with keyboards, hunting and pecking their way around the letters in abject frustration. Future generations will have no problem: kids today seem to be mastering the mysteries of computer technology, including keyboards, right from birth.

In other words, for this one thing at least, our generation is unique. Doesn't that somehow make you feel better about your love/hate relationship with this technology?

YESTERDAY

The last few years have seen a remarkable change in the office, as more and more executives have come to use computers and in the process have taken on more responsibility for the clerical aspects of their own job.

This is truly a revolution. Executives never had to do their own typing, maintain their calendars or plan their own travel. Secretaries did all that. The role of the secretary in the workplace has a long and honourable history, dating back to ancient Rome at least, when scribes took dictation. Talk about frustrating jobs! They were using chisels and styluses to carve important messages, letter by painstaking letter, onto tablets of clay, wood or wax.

The introduction of paper to Europe in the 14th century made things a lot easier, but it was the invention of the typewriter in the late 19th century that really changed everything. The modern office was born, and the secretary – the person who could handle this new technology and deliver its benefits – became a critical member of the workforce. As women entered that workforce during the 20th century, the job of secretary became theirs. By 1996, there were some 3.4 million secretaries in the US and about 400,000 in Canada.

By mid-century, executives knew that they had a reliable and trustworthy office partner. Secretaries did their correspondence, managed their filing, took care of their day-to-day activities, controlled the flow of people demanding access to their precious time and generally kept things on an even keel. Professional Secretaries Week was established in 1952 to celebrate their role.

TODAY

Then came computer technology.

In the 1990s, executives suddenly found PCs on their desks and laptops in their briefcases. As part of the same constellation of change, they were also faced with voice mail, e-mail, personal organizers, the Internet and productivity software. Clerical functions were now integral to devices that executives themselves wanted, and needed, to use. This reorganization of technology began reorganizing office roles as well. Increasingly, executives were expected to handle their own typing and office logistics.

That's when Mavis Beacon invaded our offices. She's the fictitious star of the Mavis Beacon Teaches Typing program, which has been a consistent best-seller

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over its entire 12-year history. (Version 10 is now out, and Mavis Beacon, as concocted by the marketing whizzes, looks younger than ever.)

Male executives needed her. We didn't know how to type. To date, some six million people have bought either her program or one of its competitors, with good results. The change in our collective behaviour has been swift. As recently as 1993, 66 per cent of the North American corporate workforce did not use e-mail, voice mail or the Internet. Today we send and receive millions of e-mail messages every year, invest some 302 hours per year listening to voice mail and spend endless dollars on office productivity software.

Some of us have taken to the tools with a vengeance: witness the popularity of such devices as the Palm Pilot. But millions more are still struggling to get past the two-finger stage. If you're one of them, persevere. A 1999 survey by the *Times of London* found that 71 per cent of women thought men who could touch type were more attractive than those who could not.

TOMORROW

Certain secretarial skills have become irrelevant. One personnel agency in the United States, for example, reports that they now receive only one or two requests a year for someone who knows shorthand or can handle a Dictaphone.

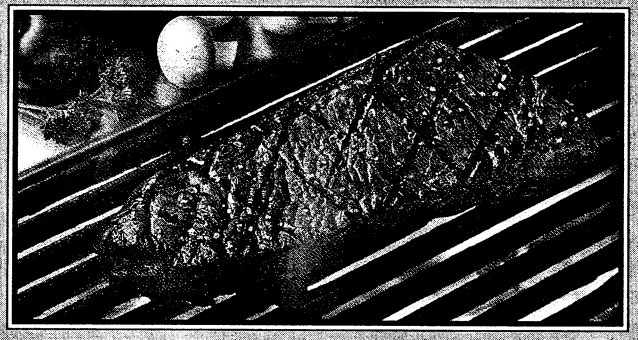
Does this mean that the concept of the secretary is doomed? Not at all – as in other cases, the role is simply changing. The evolution of titles is one good clue to the process now underway. We have seen a huge increase in the number of executive assistants, plus the emergence of the administrative assistant, the office manager, the business coordinator and information manager. Collectively, these positions demonstrate that there is still a crying need for assistance in the office.

Business executives themselves believe that they continue to need help. A survey of 150 executives with 1,000 of the largest companies in the US indicates that by 2005, administrative assistants will be relied upon for such diverse activities as project management, research, Web page development, presentation preparation, database access and desktop publishing.

So while the old-fashioned secretary will disappear, a new breed is emerging, with new skills and a new role. As the International Association of Administration Professionals notes, "The future is bright for computer-literate, well-educated, customer-service-savvy administrative professionals." Mavis Beacon would be proud. ■

Having learned to type in Grade 9, Jim Carroll can now churn out some 80 words per minute, and figures he is the Pierce Brosnan of the male typing world.

They say chewing helps relieve changes in air pressure.
We say don't waste it on air.



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