



# **THE ROLE OF A SECRETARY**



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# INTRODUCTION

## WHO MAKES A GOOD SECRETARY?

### Key elements:

#### An organized person

- who can keep records
- who can record activities
- who can take action promptly

## HOW

### By being organized

- By having clear system
- By planning and maintaining systems and timetable

- Ask
- Am I an organized person?
  - Am I reliable / punctual?
  - Am I able to keep records and retrieve these quickly?
  - Am I able to take accurate minutes of meetings ?
  - Am I able to respond to requests from the committee?
  - Am I able to cope with demands?
  - Am I able to cope with deadline?
  - Am I able to delegate and still maintain responsibilities?

## WILL I HAVE TIME TO DEVOTE TO THIS JOB?

Busy people often achieve the most but if you are already over committed do not take on another task as you may let people down.

## WHAT ARE SOME OF THE KEY TASKS?

General duties as set out by the group /committee.

- These may require you to clear and open mail.
- Record all incoming and outgoing correspondence.
- Keep comprehensive records
- Maintain membership lists
- Prepare funding applications in consultation with the committee and staff.
- Attend committee meetings.

## DUTIES OF A SECRETARY



**A good secretary is invaluable and ensures that all the paperwork is attended to and the meeting preparation is adequate.**

### RESPONSILITIES:

#### General duties:

- Clearing post office box at least weekly. Any secretary unable to achieve this at any time should delegate their authority to enable someone else to clear the mail.
- Recording all incoming and outgoing correspondence - this is a very useful document. Record this in an exercise book or folder.
- Ensuring all correspondence is actioned promptly. Some matters can be dealt with before the next meeting.
- Keeping comprehensive records of all business.
- Maintaining membership list.
- Preparing newsletters.
- Attending to all phone queries.
- Preparing funding applications in consultation with the Committee and possibly staff.
- Attending Branch and Committee meetings.

### Meetings:

1. Pre arrange meeting agenda in consultation with the President/Chairperson
2. Circulate Minutes of previous meeting and agenda of forthcoming meeting, if possible, or have them available at the next meeting.
3. Taking the Minutes of committee meetings, typing or writing these legibly immediately following the meeting, clearing them with the Chairperson and preferably circulating them to committee members in time for them to be read before the next meeting.
4. Maintaining a Minute book.
5. Actioning correspondence arising from the meeting.
6. Actioning telephone contacts requested by the meeting.

The Secretary's job is often the most demanding. Not only do they have to do all the preparation for the meeting, they need to steer the Chairperson through the meeting as well as record accurately the discussion that takes place at the meeting. After the meeting there is still much to be done.

- For formal meetings write up the minutes and check them over with the Chairperson.
- For informal meetings, make sure that a proper record of decisions is kept so that it can be referred to later if necessary.
- Send out the minutes to all members
- Following up decisions made at the meeting. Telephone calls may have to be made or letters written to remind members what they are required to do.

- If the meeting asked to see particular letters or documents, ensuring that these are circulated to members.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF MINUTES**

Minutes are expected to provide an accurate summary of what went on at a meeting, to transmit information to people unable to attend it, inform members of the next meeting and provide a record of decisions taken, and how those decisions were reached. These functions can be summarised as constitutional, executive and continuous.

Take down minutes and rewrite later. Aim to complete these by the next day, to ensure you have an accurate record of the proceedings.

The chairperson will advise on format and how detailed the minutes need to be. (It is often wise to check with the members of the organisation if the minutes are clear. Minutes are to record the decisions made at that meeting rather than individual contributions. Minutes must be kept on file and in a safe place, as they are the official record.

### **CONSTITUTIONAL**

The minutes, when signed, provide an authentic record of the proceedings. This is the constitutional function of the minutes.

### **EXECUTIVE**

When something has been decided, that decision will have to be carried out, and probably within a given time span. The minute taker must note down the name of the person to whom the task is assigned, who gave the assignment, and what date if any is envisaged for its completion, or perhaps a progress report. The minutes therefore constitute a record of any action to be taken and the authority for doing it. This is the executive function of the minutes.

### **CONTINUOUS**

Policy is discussed and progresses through a meeting or a succession of meetings. The minute should therefore enable the final points of a policy discussion at the last meeting to be continued at the next, without any interruption save the time lag between the respective meetings.

## **CONTENTS OF THE MINUTES**

What should go into the minutes is partly governed by the rules of the organization and the order of business to be dealt with at the meeting i.e. the agenda.

Minutes can include, a list of  
Action points – Action to be taken  
By whom

By what date

Which can then be easily followed up at the next meeting. This helps accountability eg. “Action – Price on new heaters required – Joe to obtain 3 prices by 4<sup>th</sup> May (next meeting)

When writing minutes, do not attribute statements to particular people rather “...the following points were made”

Minutes are not a record of what took place, but of how agreement was reached or disagreement arose; usually agreement is founded on the sense that was talked.

Minutes are strictly functional but must be accurate, brief and clear. They also need to be objective, showing no political or other bias. Their aim is to give an accurate, factual, succinct report of a meeting which took place, and which you are recording for interested readers. In whatever form the minutes are ultimately produced, they should be concise, correct, legible and intelligible.

In order to comply with the Privacy Act minutes containing information about an individual may be viewed by that individual before the information is published.

## **INCOMING MAIL**

All incoming mail must be recorded but keep the system simple eg. the date received, for whom and subject. It is a good idea to add a column stating action taken, eg. passed to chairman, receipted and banked held till next meeting.

## **FILING SYSTEM**

Set up, or familiarize yourself with the filing system  
keep it simple to enable quick access. Easy to follow, explanatory notes are helpful for times when you are unavailable.

## **PHONE CALLS**

You may be the person who takes the calls. If this task is taking too much time, keep a log of all calls, and maybe you will be able to justify having someone help. Keep in mind today’s technology eg. “call diversion” or “call minder” may sound expensive but may prove to be a very efficient cost effective method of having incoming calls answered. The charges for such services are often minimal compared with the increased efficiency.

## **PRIVACY ACT**

Principal 12 – deals with unique identifiers.

There is no restriction on the use of information which was obtained before 1<sup>st</sup> July 1993. If you are disclosing information gathered prior to that date, you should however, receive permission from person involved.

## **MEMBERSHIP LISTS**

If membership lists or directories are distributed to members, a notice should be included, that the information is for society membership only and may not be used for any other purpose such as direct marketing or for soliciting donations to other organisations.

If these are on a computerised database, you may wish to co-opt someone with computer skills to update your mailing list regularly. Lists may be kept manually on file cards but whatever system is used confidentiality is important. An efficient organisation keeps accurate details.

## **CORRESPONDENCE**

### **Incoming correspondence**

- Table correspondence if required by the group
- Decide who should see and action
- Act promptly
- File original
- File reply and action details
- Pass controversial matters on to the chairman and share the process of action.

### **Outgoing correspondence**

- Attend to it as soon as possible after the meeting
- File a copy of all correspondence
- Circulate a copy with the minutes if the matter is of importance
- Use a follow up file so that you are reminded if you have not received a reply and can ask for one.

## **PLANNING IS VITAL**

Sending out a notice of meetings, agenda and other relevant information. If possible, set regular meeting dates and times at the beginning of the year. Committee members should not, but often do require reminders of the meetings.

Prepare for the meetings, room, seating, paper, documents, previous minutes, correspondence etc.. Be ready to commence on time and avoid having to leave the meeting for forgotten items. Latecomers will soon realize that they must be on time too!

There are two main problem areas faced by those organizing meetings.

**Attendance** is often the biggest problem faced by those organizing a meeting. People are frequently reluctant to go to meetings. They may have had a bad experience in the past, feel that they cannot spare the time, or not understand why they should be involved. If the meeting is called at short notice they may have other engagements or be unable to arrange childcare.

When you are planning to hold a meeting, make sure that those who are entitled to attend can do so as easily as possible:

- Choose a time which is convenient to those involved. Check this out with representatives of different groups (eg. Women, shift workers) if you are not sure.
- Think about the venue. It should be accessible and appropriate.
- Let people know well in advance. Tell them what the meeting is about and why they should come. Include all relevant information such as time, date, place, names of guest speakers and other groups who will be there.
- Advertise any facilities you will provide such as childcare, refreshments etc, and if necessary include directions.
- Remind people the day before the meeting.

Once people are there, a democratic, useful and enjoyable meeting will encourage them to come again in the future.

Preparation includes creating a suitable environment and making sure meeting procedures run smoothly. If people are comfortable and not bothered by hunger, thirst or outside noise and distraction they will be able to participate more fully.

When you arrange a venue check that the heating, lighting and furniture are all suitable. Decide in advance whether you will allow smoking and make this very clear to people at the start. Organise services such as childcare facilities. If you are not familiar with the venue, check that there will be no disturbance from high noise levels or unwanted interruptions.

Make sure that speakers are fully briefed and any materials such as information sheets, reports etc, are ready. While the chairperson take responsibility for a formal meeting, things will run better if those attending understand and participate in the procedures.

If tension consistently exists in groups you will find committee members reluctant to attend and it almost impossible to recruit new committee members. Even if you are not intending to take an office bearing position in the near future, the information on the following pages will help you to play a more effective part.

## PREPARING FOR YOUR ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING (AGM)

### WHY HAVE AN AGM

- Rules - say you must
- Accountability
- To elect others - to be effective and successful, you need good people - these people must be elected.

### PREPARATION

Two main problems often faced when planning the AGM

- Recruiting the right people
- Attendance

In the past there may have been a reluctance to attend for a variety of reasons:

- The members/public have been bored
- Time was inconvenient
- Venue was inaccessible/lacked parking facilities
- Venue was uninspiring cold or uncomfortable
- Speaker was uninspiring or uninteresting
- They were not made to feel welcome
- There was no time for discussion

Because of the tradition AGM 's may have always been held on a set date each year, at a set venue, at a set time. The date may often clash with a major community fixture a cold and wet time of the year in a hall without creature comforts

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| Consider | <b>Why</b> would people want to attend your meeting? |
| Consider | <b>What</b> if.....                                  |
| What if  | we held the meeting in a really nice place           |
| What if  | we served interesting food                           |
| What if  | we provided some entertainment                       |
| What if  | we had a dynamic speaker                             |
| What if  | offered child care                                   |
| What if  | provided transport                                   |
| What if  | we changed the time                                  |

So, instead of feeling negative about the next AGM and bemoaning the fact that no-one wants to attend, try turning it around.

Look at the rules or constitution and see if there is flexibility as to when the AGM must be held. If so, set a time and date that you feel would be most popular.

Understand your likely audience their limits, likes, dislikes and interests.

### CONSTITUTIONAL REQUIREMENTS

Most rules will state that an AGM must be advertised, so many days prior to the meeting. These may be 21 days.

Ensure that you:

- Advise all your members within the required time frame
- Place the advertisement in the Public Notices of your newspaper to comply with the constitutional requirements.
- Have your audited accounts ready for presentation
- Fulfill your requirements for nomination of office bearers
- Minutes of last years AGM
- Report from the Chairperson

## **PREPARING THE AGENDA**

This should be either issued with the notice of meeting or be available at the meeting and only that which is shown on the agenda dealt with at the meeting. A suggested agenda would be

- Minutes of previous AGM
- Matters arising from these minutes
- Presentation of the annual reports and accounts
- Discussion following the reports
- Election of officers - (according to the rules /constitution)
- Other business - the incoming chairman and secretary

## **WHO SHOULD BE INVITED?**

As well as your members you should also invite any other stakeholder is your organisation. Examples of these would be:

- Funders
- Sponsors
- Clients
- Contractors
- Landlords
- Service providers
- Friends of the organisation

## **ON THE DAY – BE PREPARED**

Now that all the preparation is done you will need to have with you;

- The Agenda
- A copy of the rules or constitution and deal with any controversy by understanding the relevant rule. Delegate the task to someone who enjoys rules and regulations.
- The annual audited accounts
- Annual reports from the chairman or from any sub committee or branches
- The list of nominations for the various Officers
- Minutes of the previous AGM
- General business

Some AGMs are short, remember it is important in some cases to make the outing worthwhile by allowing time for the members to mix and get to know the committee. Good will engendered by refreshments can make the expense worthwhile.

## **AMENDMENT OF RULES OR CONSTITUTIONS**

From time to time rules need updating and amending and there will be a process to follow. In general, the proposed amendment will be advertised along with the notice of AGM. The rules change will have been discussed fully, so that the reasons for the change are fully understood and can be explained at the meeting.

## **FURTHER RESOURCES**

Chairing meetings – John Milligan  
Meetings made Easy – Malcolm Reid  
Make Meetings Work – Malcolm Reid