

Brief: Ambulance Victoria Administrative Officers - undervalued skills

Portfolio	Public Sector- Ambulance Victoria
Brief	Analysis of the value & skills of Administrative Officers
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Key Takeaways

- Due to bureaucratisation and the feminisation of administrative work, administrative jobs are assumed to be routinised and simple, and administration workers are consequently deemed easily replaceable.¹ This misconception and oversimplification needs to be challenged through a variety of ways which this brief will discuss.
- Administrative officers and clerical staff are generally responsible for a broad range of important tasks, without which an organisation would cease to function effectively or efficiently. They often interact with customers, monitor the flow of information, balance the requirements of one demand with another, and influence internal and external people, without the advantage of authority or position.²
- To manage their duties effectively, administrative officers need a diverse balance of skills.³ Yet, their pay is generally low, and their skills are often inadequately valued or utilised.
- Institutionalised undervaluation of administrative work is prevalent among highly feminised jobs and occupations worldwide.⁴ The undervaluation of women’s work has been identified as one of the main causes of the gender pay gap.⁵ Despite this, it continues to escape many of the policy measures on gender pay equity that focus on establishing wage discrimination.⁶
- The following are key considerations for challenging gender bias in the job review process:
 - Firstly, even though administrative officers may have little formal authority, they often **bear considerable responsibility for the overall productivity and efficiency of their workplace.**⁷ For example, it is necessary to highlight that administrative officers frequently prepare **reports and data analysis** which are escalated to **managers who then take responsibility for presenting the data** as their own. This lack of recognition perpetuates the view that their tasks are just transactional rather than requiring analysis and evaluation.

- Secondly, when relational or interpersonal skills are not recognised as skills because they are considered 'innate' 'feminised' characteristics, it becomes easier for employers to limit the value of administrative workers to the functional work assignments they are given.⁸ For example, workers should **challenge 'feminised' job descriptions such as 'interpersonal skills'** with more 'masculine' and 'objective' descriptions such as **'excellent communicator' or 'leadership skills'** so that important transferable skills are more readily recognised.⁹ It may be necessary to argue that these terms can and should be used interchangeably.
- Thirdly, **tease out important core tasks that are subsumed under** the oversimplified and dismissive characterisation of **'routine paperwork'**. The word 'routine' implies that the work is easy or even boring.¹⁰ However, what it may really mean is that the worker does all the processing and evaluation on their own and/or are handling a wide range of different tasks.¹¹ As such, the use of the word may hide significant activities.¹² If a job description uses this term then workers should challenge it by listing all the tasks that are actually undertaken, and the skills required to undertake those tasks.

Underestimating administrative work

Administrative officers and/or clerical staff are on the **front line in terms of gathering information**; they are required to process an extraordinary amount of data and to then mobilise that data in a variety of different forms.¹³ Even though most have little formal authority, they sometimes **bear considerable responsibility for the overall productivity of their workplace environment**.¹⁴

Arguably, it is the role of administrative officers to **make their supervisors and managers look good** while they themselves **remain invisible in the background**.¹⁵ This is often coupled with a managerial view that administrative work is less complex or less demanding than it is because of not appreciating the number of tasks that are performed for the manager.¹⁶ It can be harmful to job evaluation and grading processes if an employee avoids mentioning these added responsibilities.¹⁷

Secondly, the feminisation of administration work (that occurred in the 20th Century) **reduced the overall respect, perceived value and esteem** which the occupations had in the past when held by men.¹⁸ For example, it was very rare for traditional (male) clerks to have to repeatedly justify their integral role in the workplace.¹⁹ However, as women became more and more associated with clerical and administrative work, the status of the occupation declined.²⁰

As a result, many of the first jobs that are earmarked to be cut in organisations, (because they are considered unnecessary "fat") are clerical or administrative in nature and typically dominated by women.²¹ A lot of this trivialisation comes from

the perception that the work utilises 'soft skills' such as 'interpersonal and interactional capabilities', deemed inherent in women and therefore not really skills at all.²² These are grave misconceptions that needs to be challenged and changed.

A practical way to do this would be to highlight all the responsibilities, data collection and reporting that a role requires, which may not be reflected in the job description, particularly noting to whom any reports and/or data are sent to. It is then important to highlight who relies on that data and who has responsibility for presenting it, perhaps as their own work.

Feminine coded language leads to undervaluation

Many administrative jobs place considerable value in feminine coded 'people skills' or 'interpersonal skills'.²³ For example, some of the position descriptions from Ambulance Victoria (AV) state that they require 'effective interpersonal skills', 'effective interactions', 'customer service orientation' and 'judgement and maturity to ensure matters of a confidential or sensitive nature are handled and dealt with appropriately and diplomatically'.²⁴

Firstly, 'interpersonal skills' have been historically associated with female orientated roles and can be contrasted with more masculine equivalent terms such as, '**excellent communicator**', '**negotiation skills**', '**liaising coordination/liaison coordinator**', '**leadership skills**' and '**agency**'.²⁵

Secondly, the use of the word 'maturity' speaks to emotional intelligence or sensitivity which are arguably typically feminine ascribed characteristics. In this instance AV could have chosen to ascribe the role with more masculine associated job terms such as '**tactful**', '**principled**', '**decisive**', '**confident**' or '**competent at decision making or sound judgement**'.²⁶

A third example is that some AV roles are described as 'Administrative Support Officer', rather than just 'Administrative Officer'. The use of the word 'support' is not only unnecessary (when Administrative Officer is perfectly adequate) but it is diminutive, feminised and carries gender stereotypes.²⁷ It gives rise to the perception that the role is unskilled or semi-skilled and thereby more likely to be a 'female job'.²⁸

The use of such feminised terms in position descriptions can result in **inequality maintenance and an undervaluation of vital transferrable skills**.²⁹ To remedy this, AV administration officers should substitute the 'feminised' terms for more 'masculine' terms and argue that such terms can and should be used interchangeably.

Lastly, the use of the phrase 'process routine paperwork' in an AV position description is problematic, because the word 'routine' clearly suggests that the work is easy or even boring.³⁰ However, what it may really means is that the worker does

all the processing and evaluation on their own and/or are handling a wide range of different tasks.³¹ As such, the use of the word may hide significant activities.³² It is therefore important to document and highlight the range of tasks that are being performed rather than letting such tasks be subsumed as 'routine'.

¹ England, Kim, and Kate Boyer, 'Women's work: The Feminization and Shifting Meanings Of Clerical Work', *Journal of Social History*; Oxford (Vol 42, Iss 2)(Winter 2009), page 25.

² De Wolff, Alice, 'Clerical Training: Responding To A Workplace Revolution', *Canadian Woman Studies* (Vol 18 Issue 1), page 2.

³ WGEA Guide to Australian Standards on Gender-Inclusive Job Evaluation and Grading, May 2012, page 24, available at:

<https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Guide%20to%20Australian%20Standards%20on%20gender-inclusive%20job%20evaluation%20and%20grading.pdf>

⁴ Acker J (1989) *Doing Comparable Worth: Gender, Class, and Pay Equity*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

⁵ Acker J (1989) *Doing Comparable Worth: Gender, Class, and Pay Equity*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

⁶ Acker J (1989) *Doing Comparable Worth: Gender, Class, and Pay Equity*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

⁷ England, Kim, and Kate Boyer, 'Women's work: The Feminization and Shifting Meanings Of Clerical Work', *Journal of Social History*; Oxford (Vol 42, Iss 2)(Winter 2009), page 25

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ WGEA Guide to Australian Standards on Gender-Inclusive Job Evaluation and Grading, May 2012, page 23, available at:

<https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Guide%20to%20Australian%20Standards%20on%20gender-inclusive%20job%20evaluation%20and%20grading.pdf>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ De Wolff, Alice, 'Clerical Training: Responding To A Workplace Revolution', *Canadian Woman Studies* (Vol 18 Issue 1), page 2.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ WGEA Guide to Australian Standards on Gender-Inclusive Job Evaluation and Grading, May 2012, page 23, available at:

<https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Guide%20to%20Australian%20Standards%20on%20gender-inclusive%20job%20evaluation%20and%20grading.pdf>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ England, Kim, and Kate Boyer, 'Women's work: The Feminization and Shifting Meanings Of Clerical Work', *Journal of Social History*; Oxford (Vol 42, Iss 2)(Winter 2009), page 25.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²⁰ De Wolff, Alice, 'Clerical Training: Responding to A Workplace Revolution', *Canadian Woman Studies* (Vol 18 Issue 1), page 1-2.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ England, Kim, and Kate Boyer, 'Women's work: The Feminization and Shifting Meanings Of Clerical Work', *Journal of Social History*; Oxford (Vol 42, Iss 2)(Winter 2009), page 24.

²⁴ *Regional Administrative Officer Form 191, Ambulance Victoria and Ambulance Victoria Position Description for Administrative Support Officer.*

²⁵ Gaucher, Danielle, Justin Friesen and Aaron C, 'Evidence That Gendered Wording In Job Advertisements Exists and Sustains Gender Inequality', Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (July 2011, Vol 101, 1, p109-129), page 110 and 127, available at: <https://gender-decoder.katmatfield.com/static/documents/Gaucher-Friesen-Kay-JPSP-Gendered-Wording-in-Job-ads.pdf>

²⁶ Ibid, pages 125 & 127.

²⁷ Ibid, page 109.

²⁸ WGEA Guide to Australian Standards on Gender-Inclusive Job Evaluation and Grading, May 2012, page 25, available at:

<https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Guide%20to%20Australian%20Standards%20on%20gender-inclusive%20job%20evaluation%20and%20grading.pdf>

²⁹ Gaucher, Danielle, Justin Friesen and Aaron C, 'Evidence That Gendered Wording In Job Advertisements Exists and Sustains Gender Inequality', Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (July 2011, Vol 101, 1, p109-129), page 111, available at: <https://gender-decoder.katmatfield.com/static/documents/Gaucher-Friesen-Kay-JPSP-Gendered-Wording-in-Job-ads.pdf>

³⁰ WGEA Guide to Australian Standards on Gender-Inclusive Job Evaluation and Grading, May 2012, page 23, available at:

<https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Guide%20to%20Australian%20Standards%20on%20gender-inclusive%20job%20evaluation%20and%20grading.pdf>

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.