

A Tale of Two Secretaries

by Kathy Sekioka

One of the most wonderful things about being successful is growing to the point where you can afford to hire staff. My school was still really small the first time I hired a secretary. I agonized for two or three months about whether I was ready to make such a big decision, but my work load as accountant, planner, teacher, teacher-trainer, secretary and so on was tremendous with little help or support from my Japanese husband.

A member of my family, J, needed a job desperately three years ago. At the time, I had a part-time teacher, and I needed a very part-time, all-around secretary type person. Because J is trustworthy and seemed to be good at most things including taking care of her family's finances, I thought she would suit my needs.

I hired her without conducting a job interview, but I did get her work history submitted as is usual in hiring in Japan. I figured (erroneously) that, if I as a foreign person could answer phones and do book-keeping in Japanese, it would be great to have a Japanese person with all that perfect Japanese language and knowledge of how things work here doing it for me.

Unfortunately, she hadn't worked in an office position for more than ten years. It worked well for a while, and I even paid for her to take a basic course in using word processors. In the course of things, I learned what she is not good at—simple accounting/bookkeeping, going to the bank (it took an hour where it would have taken me fifteen to twenty minutes), or anything to do with computers, copy machines or new-fangled things.

For a while, I could handle that, but what really caused problems for me was her lack of work ethic.

J doesn't think about whether her taking time off affects the office (now that I really have one) or not. For a while, she got "sick" regularly

on Thursdays. The sick leave was usually extended into Mondays, and with no phone call from me, sometimes a week or two. She still works for me, but there are limitations to what she can do.

I started J out at 700 yen per hour and raised her wage per hour every three months at the rate of 30 yen per raise, which I understand is standard procedure here. I am currently paying her 850-yen an hour (as high as I am willing to go).

She is an asset in dealing with customers and good at writing advertising copy, letters going out to customers and so forth. It would be hard to let her go what with being family and all... so I hired another part-time secretary to cover the deficiencies of the first one as well as cover the hours we are open better. I approached hiring another person with care after thinking deeply about what I wanted from my secretary.

We live in a fairly rural area with about 100,000 people in the immediate area. I advertised one day only in the local newspaper. And, I paid extra to have it listed on the page where obituaries are, as everybody reads that page even if they read nothing else. I listed the starting wage as 750 yen per hour (a little higher than the 700 yen many people in this area start out at) and stated that skills in computer usage and simple, basic English were necessary.

I had five people respond. One was overqualified and willing to work only one year. Three more were fresh out of high school with no skills at all.

The other person, M had gotten tired of the rat race in the big city working in a temp job company for 10 years and had gotten sick from working too many hours a day for months on end.

M didn't wear a lot of makeup and

Interview Questions

(translated from Japanese)

1. Why are you interested in this job?
2. Can you tell me about your personality?
3. Can you tell me your strong points and your weak points?
4. The kind of work we do in our office is wide-ranging, so do you think you will be able to do several kinds of tasks at one time?
5. As your boss, sometimes my explanation of work that needs to be done will be hard to understand (because of my Japanese level or cultural differences). What will you do when you don't understand what you are supposed to do?
6. If our school gets busier, we might have to increase your work hours by one or two hours a week. Would this be possible for you? Would you mind working on Saturdays or Sundays?
7. What are your future goals?
8. Using English is an integral part of our school, so could you give a simple introduction of yourself in English?

was not a fashion plate, but she had considerable experience in many kinds of work and seemed like she would be a self-starter. She also didn't mind if I increased her work hours from time to time or had irregular hours. She also thought she would be willing to work for me more than a year and had no marriage plans in the immediate future. She also has no problem working with me in Japanese or English. I carried out the interview myself in Japanese followed by a simplified English version. I created a worksheet to use to evaluate the applicants (see previous page) that served its purpose quite well.

Upon hiring M, I gave her clear instructions about what I expected of her in terms of kinds of work, responsibility, how to treat customers, answering the phone and so forth.

I made a list of about 40 items I needed done to streamline and systematize my office procedures as well as odds and ends kinds of jobs. For example, she didn't know how to make a homepage, but I had her come in extra hours in the week to learn how to do it.

The relationship between J and M was a problem I worried about. With a division of who does what and a schedule of overlapping work times, it ended up not being an issue. Also, establishing that I am the boss and have the final say in anything has prevented confusion.

M is a bargain at the price, and she can handle any kind of work I have given her so far. I learned the hard way not to raise wages indiscriminately. Instead, I increase the number of hours she works.

I gave her first raise at the end of six months; a modest 30 yen per hour. At the end of the year I will give her a modest bonus based on her efforts and my cash reserves.

There are good people out there who are happy to get the work in this recession.

BIO

Kathy Sekioka owns and operates schools in Wakayama. She has almost 20 years experience in teaching EFL and ESL. Her school's name is English Village International.

In the Spotlight

Factual Information

Name: Elin Melchior
Years in EFL: 13 years
Name of school: KETC (Komaki English Teaching Center)
<http://www.ketv.ne.jp/~kete>
Location: Komaki, Aichi (where the Nagoya airport is)
Year started: 1991
No. of staff: 2 part-time administrative assistants, 2 teachers, 1 teacher/director
Ratio of kids - adult students: one week a year we teach jr. high; all other times 100% adults
Summary of EFL market in past year: a big increase in non-Japanese students—mostly Brazilian and low level



Lifestyle and work

Most hated routine task: cleaning my desk
Last training seminar attended: Teaching pronunciation through drama
Attitude to staff meetings: do we really need meetings when we sit within 3 meters of each other?
Local networking: JALT/ETJ owners list/other Ohio program at Chubu University
Mac or Windows: Mac
On Sunday afternoon you'll find me: in the office or watching Star Trek

General Advice

Current coursebooks: *Side By Side, Everyday Situations for Communication in English, English Channel One, Pride & Prejudice, First Impact, Impact Topics, Stories We Brought with Us, Good News Bad News, Windows on Britain, Z for Zachariah, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*

EFL in year 2005: More goal-oriented. I think that there will be more specific things that people want to use English for because of the internet. People's hobbies will become more extreme (in depth) and people will use English to discuss these hobbies on the internet.

My school in year 2005: I hope that it will be more focused on teacher education and better linked to the Gakkokyoikuka.

If I could do it all again: I would try to get the people who control our funding to write some type of mission statement. We make school goals every year, but I'm never really sure exactly what the city wants us to be doing.

Internet and teaching: We've taught our first online (email) classes this year. They have a slightly higher attrition rate than normal classes do; however the freedom that they allow students is wonderful. Two of our students who moved away have continued to take classes through the Internet. However it is important to recognize that some students just don't like computers and others have no wish to use them with English at this time.

Tricks of the trade: Always set goals and objectives for courses and classes. Make them as transparent as possible.

In a nutshell: Remind students that their goal is communicating in English—which is completely different from speaking flawless English on a TV news program. (If the latter is their goal, they're at the wrong school.)

BIO INFO

In 1990 Komaki City and Ohio University started negotiations to build a branch campus of Ohio University in Komaki City. KETC was opened in 1991 as a demonstration of intent on both sides. Around 1993 it was decided that a branch campus should not be built at this time; however, Komaki City was happy with KETC and we remained. Ohio University's OPIE (Ohio Program of Intensive English) oversees KETC, hiring faculty and providing materials and expertise.

I am the Director of KETC, but I still teach half time. I am also a Lecturer at Ohio University.