

'Can I put you on hold?'

Secretarial staff are in the front line when it comes to shielding their bosses from unwanted calls. **Andrew Don** looks at the daily battle waged by vigilant corporate gatekeepers

Callers besiege secretaries and PAs every day in the quest for a piece of their boss: the salesman wanting to sell "the best accountancy software package you have ever seen", the supplier who has not been paid for six months, the public relations company who wants to pitch, and Joe Public who wants to make a personal complaint to the top honcho. In a survey conducted by Select Appointments for the Guardian between October 6 and 9, 62% of those questioned said they had to act as a filter to at least 80% of calls and 15% of those surveyed screened between 50% and 79% of calls.

As honed as secretaries are in their diversionary tactics, the callers are getting increasingly cunning. Koach, a Cambridge and Leeds-based firm, trains people in "getting past the gatekeeper to talk to decision makers". Lee Ford, head of corporate development business, estimates only two out of three sales calls manage to get through to their target. But, if a rapport is struck, the rewards are high with eight out of 10 going on to achieve a sale.

Some of the most common fob-offs go like this: "He's in a meeting at the moment" (Great, when does the meeting finish? I'll call him back then); "He's on the other line" (I'll hold, if you don't mind); "He's out of the country" (When's he back? Does he have a mobile? Is he contactable?); "He's not interested" (Really? How do you know that, then? A secretary with telepathy skills, brilliant); "He's not available" (Right, is he in a meeting, on the phone, in the bathroom, dead, what?) "He's away from his desk"

(Why? Are you too lazy to make the coffee?).

Being cheeky can work wonders if the person a caller is trying to communicate with has a sense of humour. One delegate at a Koach seminar described how he got past the secretary by saying the call was personal. The boss was not initially impressed. "My secretary told me this was personal so I don't appreciate being duped into answering a sales call," he said. "That's nothing; your secretary told me you were in a meeting," he replied. When the boss finished laughing he allowed the caller to continue and a sale was clinched.

However, deflective tactics can prove embarrassing when they go wrong. Ford says secretaries who mistakenly think they have pressed the mute button and whisper to the chief executive: "Some persistent tosser wants to speak to you, Charlie," is a scenario that is more common than you might think.

Julia Philipson, general administrator at the Institute of Qualified Professional Secretaries, says the most successful secretaries use their experience of working with a particular individual to put through only the callers they know their employer wants, or needs, to speak to.

Louise Porter, an executive assistant at the Reading-based IT solutions firm Xansa, says it is the knowledge of her boss's key contacts and customers that help her spot the "real" callers from the cold callers: "This is, in the main, easy because cold callers often will not give you information and generally put the phone down if you won't put



Screen test... It can take more than persistence to get through to the boss

PHOTO: NIKOS CHRISIKAKIS/GETTY IMAGES

them through." Gloria Mundy, PA to the chairman and managing director of UKinternet names registry Nominet UK, describes one of the more unusual ruses she hears: "So-and-so gave me his business card last week but unfortunately I've mislaid it and cannot remember his direct number." She tries to be polite, yet forthright, in getting rid of pests by keeping the same tone in her voice and staying calm.

"One tip I have found that works," says Mundy, is that if you ask the caller for their telephone number and say the person will phone back when they are free, they will either put the receiver down, or say they will try again. Inevitably, they don't but if they do, you can usually remember the person's voice and you repeat the process all over again."

One of the tactics commonly used is to keep the most annoying callers

waiting longer than normal so they get fed up, says Mundy. Secretaries need to probe before deciding whether or not to put a call through. Angela Baron, adviser at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), suggests they should also establish from their employer if there is anyone specifically they do not want to talk to. If so, politely offer to take a message. She says permanent secretaries are better at screening than temps because they

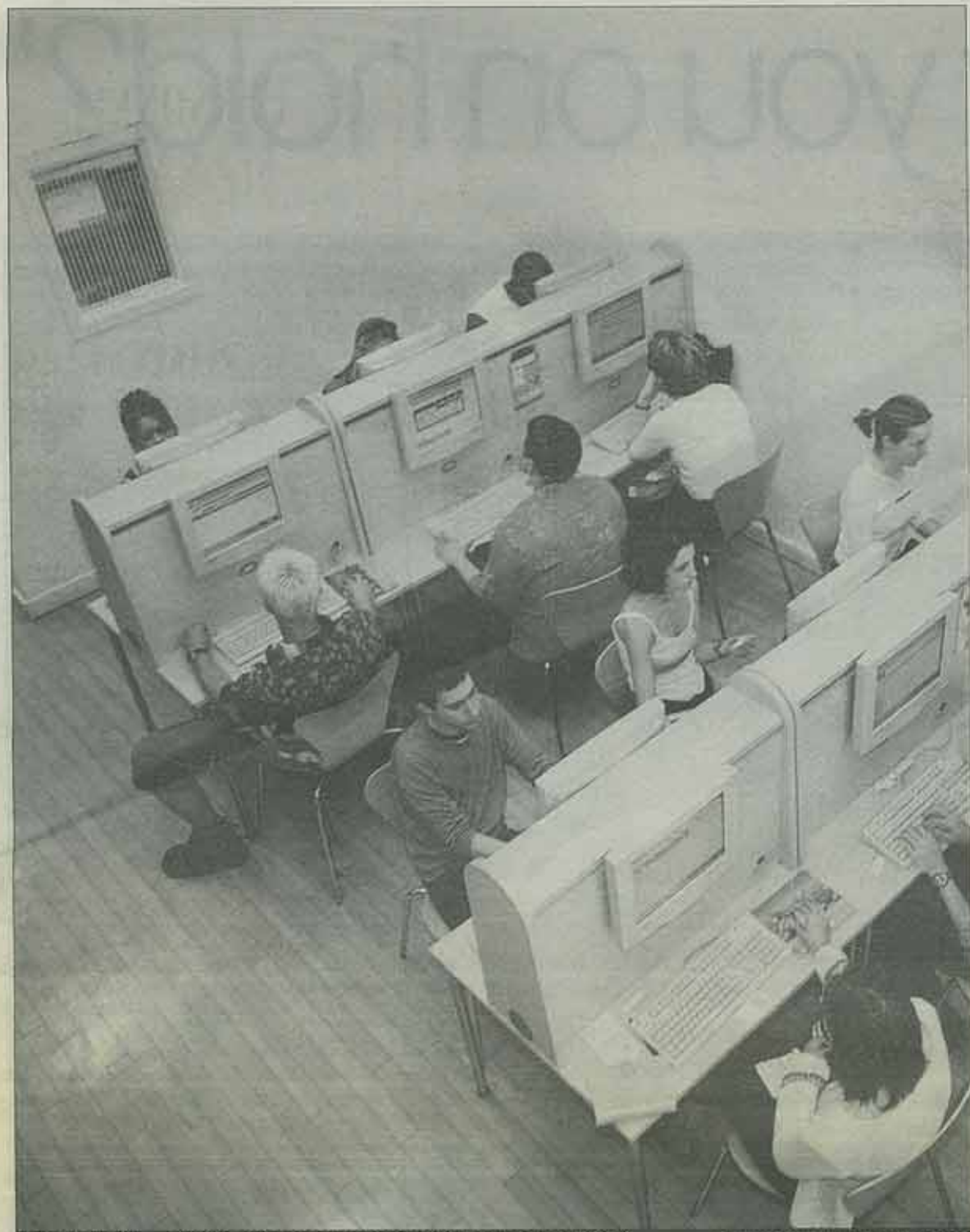
are better acquainted with the firm and its staff.

Sarah Thomas, regional manager of London-based specialist administrative recruiter OfficeTeam, gets annoyed with those people who take the attitude that their reasons for wanting to speak to the person in charge is none of the secretary's business. "Today, callers who don't realise that bosses and their PA or secretary are a closely knit team are making a big mistake," says Thomas. Upset the secretary and you upset the boss, so callers beware."

Even expert callers can fall victim to the most elaborate put-offs. When the CIPD's Angela Baron phoned a funeral director and asked if she could speak to an undertaker, she was fobbed off in no uncertain terms.

"He's out admiring his new hearse," said the secretary.

'Upset the secretary and you upset the boss, so callers beware'



Then and now... a 1940s job interview and (right) a London internet cafe

PHOTOGRAPHS: HULTON, LINA AINOFF

available to you. I've also found that websites invest too much in your past experience. In my case, I've done a lot of work in law, but it's an area I no longer want to work in. Despite pointing this out, computers can't seem to process this information and therefore scan my CV only to bung it in the 'law jobs' pile. If I had a face-to-face consultant, I could explain. It's so frustrating."

Louise Sears, a jobseeker from Buckinghamshire, has found herself similarly perplexed: "I have applied for several jobs online with recruitment agencies, for which I've had the skills, qualifications and character. But all I got - generally one or two days later - was a message via email, saying, "Thank you for your application. We have been unable to find you work on this occasion. Please do not reply to this email." It is deflating in its lack of individual attention and makes a process that is supposed to be about people feel very impersonal. I can't help wondering that if I'm doing all the job searching and applying, what exactly is the agency doing?"

Irrelevant applications are a further potential pitfall of recruitment agencies moving online, something that many agencies are quick to admit to. Because applications often require no more than the click of a mouse,

some candidates apply without checking if they meet the criteria. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) shares concerns that, in some cases, recruitment lacks the human touch that is so crucial to its raison d'être and that in other cases, job applicants who do not have easy access to the internet may be excluded from consideration. "That said, we have found that online applications for jobs through agencies have grown in number this year and that people are increasingly satisfied with the services offered," says Angela Baron, the CIPD's adviser on organisation and resourcing. "I don't think it's any coincidence that there are now few cases where the entire application process occurs online."

Anna Durbridge of Kelly Services claims this is a key aspect of its website's success. "We never place anyone in a job without meeting them first and we make it quite clear that job applicants are still as welcome to use branches as the website. Alternatively, they can use both methods - perhaps search for a job online and apply in person."

Edward Burt, commercial manager for e-commerce at Adecco, claims technology is helping them improve online services. "Making our system work well is a constantly

evolving process. We want to hear users' feedback so that we can continue this process."

Adecco is so confident that it is creating an impressive service that it now carries out core testing online for those who want it, as an extension of its online recruitment service. And at Manpower, online training is becoming increasingly available. "Through our Global Learning Centre, which was launched in 2000, we now provide over 1,000 courses, which are free to everyone registered with Manpower and cover subjects as diverse as leadership, communication and customer service, as well as a wide range of IT skills," explains a spokesperson. However, both companies insist that they will remain people, as well as internet, oriented.

Among the most common mistakes of online applications is the tendency to be too informal, recruitment agencies report. Because the internet invites an informal tone of writing, people sometimes ignore conventional rules for application forms.

The fact that technology has created a culture of immediacy means applicants can also be too brief, whereas the volume of job applications online makes it more important than ever to spend time perfecting your submission.

WPM

● "That's it, I quit. You can stick your poxy job, I'm off." Then the alarm goes off, I rub my bleary eyes, and within an hour I'm on the train to work.

Fantasies of quitting my job still fill my slumber, despite the fact that I know all too well that I'm too spineless to ever go through with it. And, anyway, how will I pay the bills? Will another firm actually want me? What will my mum think?

At least I know I'm not alone. Three-quarters of us, according to a survey by Office Angels, claim the act of resignation is more stressful than the job interview itself. Part of the problem, it seems, is that we just don't know how to go about resigning. For example, two-thirds (65%) of respondents said they would opt to tell their immediate manager, whereas a quarter (25%) would inform a senior director. But only one in 10 (10%) think of knocking on the door of their HR manager first.

Of course, we're also fearful of how our bosses will take the news. A fifth (19%) of those surveyed who admitted to fearing the moment of truth said that a previous employer has displayed anger on hearing their decision to leave. A quarter (26%) said that matters were muddled when their bosses offered them more money or a promotion to stay.

But what excuses do you use in your big resignation speech? Do you let everything off your chest and show them the true definition of brutal honesty? Or do you use some lily-livered cliché aimed at avoiding upsetting anyone's feelings. The latter certainly seems to be our favoured course, as the top five resignation excuses given to Office Angels illustrate:

- "I'm looking for a new challenge." (60% of those surveyed)
- "I'm looking for a career change and to branch out into new fields." (17%)
- "I'm taking time off to go travelling." (11%)
- "I'm taking a career break to study and broaden my skills base." (9%)
- "I've inherited a sum of money so don't need to work for a while." (3%)

Where is "I hate you and I can't stand the sight of your grease-stained nylon tie a second longer, you ineffectual little wretch"? Oh, I'm letting my fantasies creep in again, aren't I? Sorry.

Just before we leave the survey, though, I enjoyed this little detail: a third of office workers (34%) feel guilty about leaving their job, with two-thirds (67%) putting off telling their boss for up to four days. In fact, so nervous are we of telling the boss that more than a third of us (35%) spend up to three hours crafting the exact words of our resignation letter.

● One of my favourite emails doing the rounds at the moment is one called the "sushi memo". It contains everything you need to know about why its demeaning to suck up to the boss. The sushi memo is, in fact, a fax leaked from a prestigious New York law firm in which a junior paralegal called "Kimberley" conscientiously details all the "sushi options" available in Manhattan to a senior partner for an upcoming important client meeting. What makes the three-page document (with eight footnotes!) so extraordinary is the zeal and efficiency with which Kimberley sets about her rather mundane task. It is also written, seemingly without any hint of irony, as if a legal document. Here's just a taster, so to speak, of the "sushi options":

"As requested, please find below the selected alternatives for ordering sushi in mid-town New York City. The alternatives have been categorised into two distinct groups: (i) those available on [web-based mobile phones] and (ii) other sushi restaurants from which delivery to the office is available. Most restaurants in the area claim to receive fresh fish deliveries daily. However, I have learned that Mondays should be avoided, as fresh fish is generally delivered on Tuesdays."

The note then goes on to explain how, through "conducting independent research" with "attorneys and support staff", it has been established that the "Hakata Grill is the best selection for sushi and sashimi". Then comes my favourite bit: "For your convenience, I have attached each of the aforementioned menus as Exhibit 1... I would hope you find the attached helpful in choosing the restaurant from which your dinner will be ordered on a going-forward basis. Please feel free to call me with any questions or comments at x2564."

I just hope the snivelling little creep got the promotion she so obviously craved.

Rosie Chouff



Sushi... top sycophantic email

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