



An Exploration into the World of Secretaries and Administrative Assistants

ท่องไปในโลกกว้างแห่งอาชีพเลขานุการและผู้ช่วยฝ่ายธุรการ

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Abstract

Secretaries and Administrative Assistants play significant roles in each and every organization. Despite the general stereotype of their professions, one can never fully understand the extent of their work, particularly so when technology and time have transformed their roles over the past decades. This explorative qualitative study, attempted to dig a little deeper into the professional lives of ten secretaries and administrative assistants through in-depth interviews from different industries. Out of the ten participants, up to 90% were female, with only 10% represented by the male gender. Services were rendered to top management, and contacts were made both internally and externally to accomplish task assignments. The majority performed secretarial duties while 20% were involved in other non-secretarial duties as well. Most secretaries enjoyed their work and expressed three areas in which they enjoyed and least enjoyed in their careers, as well as challenges encountered on the job. The enjoyment included working with nice bosses, the contacts made, and being entrusted decision-making. They were however, unhappy with the negative perceptions people had of them, working with jerks, and work pressures. Although the majority were satisfied with their jobs, up to 40% stated that they would like to move to other professions if given the opportunity.

Keywords: Administrative Assistant, Executive Assistant, Personal Assistant, Secretary



บทคัดย่อ

รายงานการศึกษาจากการสำรวจเชิงคุณภาพฉบับนี้ มุ่งที่จะค้นหาคำตอบเจาะลึกลงไปในเรื่องรายละเอียดเกี่ยวกับวิชาชีพเลขานุการและผู้ช่วยฝ่ายธุรการซึ่งมีบทบาทสำคัญในทุกองค์กร แม้ว่าโดยทั่วไป วิชาชีพนี้จะมีลักษณะงานที่คล้ายคลึงกัน แต่ไม่ใช่เรื่องง่ายที่คนใดคนหนึ่งจะเข้าใจถึงขอบเขตของงานในอาชีพนี้อย่างครบถ้วน โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งในช่วงหลายสิบปีที่ผ่านมาลักษณะหน้าที่และขอบเขตของงานได้ถูกเปลี่ยนแปลงไปตามกาลเวลาและเทคโนโลยีที่เจริญก้าวหน้ามากขึ้น วิธีการเก็บข้อมูลใช้การสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกกับกลุ่มเลขานุการและผู้ช่วยฝ่ายธุรการ จำนวน 10 คน จากหลากหลายสาขาอุตสาหกรรม แบ่งเป็นเพศหญิง ร้อยละ 90 และเพศชาย ร้อยละ 10 พบข้อมูลว่า ในด้านหน้าที่หลักของการปฏิบัติงานนั้น เป็นการทำงานให้กับผู้บริหารระดับสูง ต้องมีการติดต่อกับบุคคลต่างๆ ทั้งภายในและภายนอกองค์กร กลุ่มผู้ให้ข้อมูลส่วนใหญ่ร้อยละ 80 ทำหน้าที่เกี่ยวกับงานเลขานุการ มีเพียงร้อยละ 20 ที่ต้องปฏิบัติงานในส่วนอื่นนอกเหนือจากงานเลขานุการด้วย ผู้ปฏิบัติหน้าที่ในตำแหน่งเลขานุการส่วนใหญ่มีความพึงพอใจในภาระงานที่ตนทำ โดยให้ความเห็นเกี่ยวกับเนื้องาน 3 ประเด็นที่รู้สึกพึงพอใจมากที่สุดและ 3 สิ่ง que รู้สึกพึงพอใจน้อยที่สุด รวมทั้งความท้าทายในหน้าที่การงานที่พวกเขาได้ประสบมา ดังนี้คือ 1) พวกเขาชอบทำงานกับเจ้านายที่ใจดี 2) ได้พบเจอกับผู้คนหลากหลายที่ต้องติดต่อด้วย และ 3) การได้รับมอบหมายงานให้ทำและให้สามารถตัดสินใจได้เอง ในอีกด้านหนึ่ง คือ 1) พวกเขาไม่มีความสุขกับมุมมองด้านลบที่คนบางคนมีต่อพวกเขา 2) การต้องทำงานร่วมกับคนที่ชอบสร้างปัญหาอุปสรรค และ 3) แรงกดดันที่มาจากเนื้องาน แม้ว่ากลุ่มผู้ให้ข้อมูลส่วนใหญ่จะรู้สึกพึงพอใจกับงานที่ทำอยู่ แต่มีจำนวนมากถึงร้อยละ 40 ที่แสดงความคิดเห็นว่าถ้าเป็นไปได้พวกเขาอยากเปลี่ยนอาชีพไปทำงานด้านอื่น

คำสำคัญ: ผู้ช่วยฝ่ายธุรการ ผู้ช่วยผู้บริหาร ผู้ช่วยฝ่ายบุคคล เลขานุการ



Introduction

Secretaries have always been an intriguing profession but perhaps one in which not much attention had been given to. As things evolve with time, so has the secretarial profession. In fact, the number of secretaries has dwindled over the past decade (Duncan, 2011; Kolhatkar, 2013), and the term ‘secretary’ is hardly heard of in today’s professional business world as the title has being replaced by ‘Administrative Assistant’ instead. The dwindling number of secretaries in the organization and its gradual resurgence (“Surveys Find More Asked of Administrative Assistants”, 2014) as a significant come back serves as a basis to explore the world of secretaries and administrative assistants (AAs); the responsibilities, challenges, and satisfaction they receive on the job in the form of this qualitative study. It serves as a communicative channel through which the participants were capable of making their professions better known to the ‘outside world’ so readers would have a better and more accurate understanding of their roles. The results of the study would enhance the working relationships of those in the same secretarial and/or administrative assistant position(s) with their bosses, colleagues, and other stakeholders in organizations. It would also add to the minimal literature available on secretaries and administrative assistants. The positions, secretary, AA, and other similar positions such as Executive Assistant (EA), and Personal Assistant (PA) will be used interchangeable throughout this paper and would basically reflect the same position.

Literature Review

Administrative Assistants

The job title ‘secretary’ hardly exists in today’s organization (Duncan, 2011) but there has been a resurgence of late (“Surveys Find More Asked of Administrative Assistants”, 2014). The secretarial title is commonly replaced by ‘administrative assistant’ (AA), personal assistant (PA), office manager, project coordinator, or ‘executive assistant’ (EA), who report to senior management (“Administrative Professionals Events Can Add Up to Big Business”, 2008; Duncan, 2011; “Surveys Find More Asked of Administrative Assistants”, 2014).



Today's modern technologies have given executives the tools to be more self-sufficient as they have access to "e-mail, voice mail, mobile devices, and online calendars" ("Administrative Professionals Events Can Add Up to Big Business", 2008; Duncan, 2011, p. 89), thus transforming the roles of AAs ("Administrative Professionals Events Can Add Up to Big Business", 2008; "Surveys Find More Asked of Administrative Assistants", 2014). Despite technology availability for executives, it may be a fit for younger executives but still a challenger for the older generation. Younger executives may prefer managing things on their own since they are more tech savvy and accustomed to self-sufficiency. They need to bear in mind, however, that AAs should be treated as strategic assets (Duncan, 2011).

Enormous corporate pressure to cut costs, downsize, and flatten organizations have resulted in the dwindling number of AAs reporting to lower corporate levels (Duncan, 2011; Kolhatkar, 2013; "Licence to Strategise", 2012; "Surveys Find More Asked of Administrative Assistants", 2014) with AAs disappearing altogether (Kolhatkar, 2013). This is most unfortunate as AAs could have made greater contributions to the overall organization by increasing the productivity of executives, as lower level executives are misusing their time as they attend to administrative work. Moreover, the access to a few AAs, if available, burdens AAs with excessive heavy workloads (Duncan, 2011; Kolhatkar, 2013). According to Duncan (2011), "granting middle executives access to an assistant – or shared resources – can give a quick boost to productivity even at lean, well-run companies" (p. 89) and a necessity for every senior professional who wants to be successful ("Licence to Strategise", 2012).

In terms of work popularity, secretaries and AAs rank as the ninth most common U.S. job, comprising 16% of the country's employment (Dill, 2015) with approximately 4 million American secretaries and administrative assistants ("Administrative Professionals Events Can Add Up to Big Business", 2008; Mari, 2015; Reingold, 2009). The AA job is female-dominated (Truss, Alfes, Shantz, & Rosewarne, 2013; Kolhatkar, 2013) and Kolhatkar (2013) reported that approximately 96% are female while the U.S. Department of Labor stated that approximately 1% is male ("Administrative Professionals Events Can Add Up to Big Business", 2008).



Job Description. An AA's job role varies and it has been the greater tendency to combine its position with another position over the years thus resulting in increased responsibilities ("Elevating the Role of the company secretary", 2012; "Surveys Find More Asked of Administrative Assistants", 2014). In fact, the job description has evolved from a "behind-the-scenes" function (Hosking, 2010; "Licence to Strategise", 2012; Wilkening, 2008) into something to that of "holding a key strategic role in the business" ("Licence to Strategise", 2012, p.125) and good assistants not only contribute to, but provide worthy savings to their organizations. They ensure that prep material is delivered prior to meetings, ensuring that meetings start on time, optimize travel plans, , filter distractions, and make remote decision making possible (Duncan, 2011; "Today's EAs do a lot more than type", 2015). The job of today's AA has evolved to being increasingly diverse (Wilkening, 2008) and assuming "more-supervisory roles: They're managing information flow, dealing with basic financial management, attending meetings, and doing more planning and organizing" (Duncan, 2011, p. 90; "Surveys Find More Asked of Administrative Assistants", 2014; "Today's EAs Do a Lot More Than Type", 2015). Their duties are currently more active and at a much higher level than the traditional secretary's work, thus requiring them to time manage, prioritize their tasks, work with budgets, and work on larger projects that require advanced training (Kolhatkar, 2013; "Today's EAs do a lot more than type", 2015). Moreover, they are assuming tasks once assigned to managers such as human resources and managerial responsibilities (Wilkening, 2008). AAs in the United States are treated as part of the management team as their executives delegate important work to them while things are much different outside the United States where they are treated more as personal assistants with less educational requirements and lower salaries (Duncan, 2011).

Qualifications of an Administrative Assistant. As executives and AAs have an extremely close working relationship, hiring the right AA is a big challenge. Finding someone with the right personal chemistry may be more significant than skills and experience. Some desirable AA characteristics include having a high level of emotional intelligence, reacting with situational appropriateness (Duncan, 2011), as well as possessing a working knowledge of the needs, emotions, and thoughts of the executive (Duncan, 2011; Stevens, 2009). They also need to



have the desire and willingness to work for executives as this commitment is compulsory to a partnership, thus leading to compatibility (Stevens, 2009).

A psychological UK study revealed that there were vast differences between the “abilities, experiences and personalities of PAs and their colleagues in the office” (“Proof that it takes someone very special To Be a PA”, 2015, p. 8). PAs generally worked more with no overtime pay, had to complete assigned work without prior training, and were working in HR, marketing, and IT tasks. Despite the fact that their jobs look overwhelming and challenging, PAs have been reported to have high job satisfaction, are happier, and are less stressed out when compared to their other colleagues. They have also been described as “more agreeable, more emotionally stable, more conscientious, more self-disciplined and achievement-striving, ... slightly more extrovert ... showed lowered levels of neuroticism ... making them less likely to be pessimistic or irritable ... being calm, positive and hard-working” (“Proof that It Takes Someone Very Special To Be A PA”, 2015, p. 8). They also have a tendency to have excellent people skills, strategic understanding of their organizations, and are capable of working with everyone in the organization (“Licence to Strategise”, 2012; “Surveys Find More Asked of Administrative Assistants”, 2014).

The Significance of Administrative Assistances

Administrative assistants play a significant role in the operations of any organization; they possess coordination abilities and can make a difference between the success or failure of the company (Kumar, as cited in “How to use assistants more effectively”, 2016). Executive assistants are said to be indispensable, are “troubleshooters, translators, help desk attendants, diplomats, human databases, travel consultants, amateur psychologists, and ambassadors to the inside and outside world” (Duncan, 2011, p. 91). More than 50% of senior management face distractions in the form of interruptions every 30 minutes, thus reducing their work productivity. Skilled EAs highly benefit executives as they can be trusted with delegated higher-level work thus creating a win-win scenario as the companies ultimately reap benefits leaving executives to more important tasks and the ability to lead a more enjoyable lifestyle (Duncan, 2011; Stevens, 2009). Executives



with AAs are usually more productive and better prepared, whereas new managerial hires gain highly from experienced AAs who serve as reverse mentors as they help and teach new executives to settle in their new roles (Duncan, 2011). They have also been said to be ‘awesome’ and can be an executive’s right hand (Barmak, 2013). EAs exercise delegated authority, thus reducing costly executives’ distractions and successfully act as gatekeepers for their executives (“Help Your Execs by Decreasing Distractions”, 2009). A UK study indicated that executives with PAs were 32% more productive and hiring PAs was a very cost-effective methodology (“Licence to Strategise”, 2012). Ghostwriting executives’ e-mail by administrative professionals has also been increasing thus demonstrating the trust that executives have in their AAs (“Admins Trusted to Ghostwrite E-mail”, 2009).

The Future for Administrative Assistants

In a study that had been conducted with 2,000 personnel, participants gave their opinions concerning how they viewed the future office of 2020:

Every secretarial desk will have a personal computer or terminal (98%); Secretaries will be able to network with other secretaries both nationally and internationally through computer networks (92%); Companies will pay membership dues and provide release time to secretaries for involvement in professional associations (88%); Dictation and transcription will be obsolete; voice-activated machines will have replaced equipment presently in use (82%); Secretaries will be among those workers staffing space stations (71%); and Robots will function as assistants to secretaries (30%). (“In The Year 2020”, 2008, p. 7)

Executives are seeing the significant role of AAs and feel that their importance would increase over the next five years. In fact, executives stated that company secretaries should hold higher positions so that they can be a better interface between the board and management (“Elevating the Role of the company secretary”, 2012). Companies are currently hiring more AAs after years of cutback, but they expect AAs to be able to manage more responsibilities with greater skills (“Surveys Find More Asked of Administrative Assistants”, 2014).



Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of the world of secretaries and AAs. In order to accomplish this, the study was aided by the following four research questions:

1. To learn more about the nature of Administrative Assistants' job responsibilities.
2. To explore the challenges encountered by Administrative Assistants in their profession.
3. To find out if Administrative Assistants were satisfied in their profession.
4. To find out what Administrative Assistants enjoyed and disliked in their work.

Methodology

The nature of this study was exploratory in nature with the qualitative research design as the selected tool through the use of the structured individual depth interview (IDI). Ten participants were selected from different industries and each interview lasted for approximately one hour. Most interviewees chose to have offsite interviews during non-office hours and the ten interviews spanned over approximately seven months. The research questions were answered through the IDI that consisted of a total of 15 questions and four parts: (1) Personal Profile - five questions; (2) Secretarial Responsibilities – three questions; (3) Most Enjoyable and Disliked List of an Administrative Assistant's job – two questions; (4) Secretarial Challenges – two questions; and (5) Job Satisfaction – three questions. The 10-item Likert Scale was used to quantitatively access with '1' being the lowest and '10' as the highest.

Results

Participants' Profile

Nine out of the ten participants were female with only one male representing the secretarial position in this study. The participants came from various industrial backgrounds: (a) Auditing; (b) Banking; (c) Church; (d) Importing and Distribution; (e) Information Technology; (f) Manufacturing; (g) Non-profit Organization; (h) School; (i) Securities Company; and



(j) University. Aside from the one female who was Filipino, the other nine were Thais. Two (20%) secretaries held either a High School or Vocational degree while five (50%) had a Bachelor's degree, and three others (30%), a Master's degree. The fields in which they had graduated from were extremely varied: Business Administration, Business Communication, Business English, Humanities, Library and Research, Political Science, and Secretarial studies. The age range of participants is: (a) 25 – 29 years at 20%; (b) 30-39 at 30%; (c) 40-49 years old at 30%; (d) 50-59 years old at 10%; and (e) 60 years old or higher at 10%.

Administrative Assistant Responsibilities

The AAs ratings in the enjoyment they received in their secretarial responsibilities are as follows: (a) '7' – 10%; (b) '8' – 50%; (c) '9' – 20%; and (d) '10' – 20%. The majority reported directly to immediate executives and had many contacts within and outside the organization. Main external contacts included clients, government officials, suppliers, and company partners while internal contacts comprised of the Board of Directors, the management team, and organizational staff.

The responsibilities of the ten participants varied as they worked in different industries. For the most part, responsibilities were on a professional level, with only one AA required to attend to the executive's personal needs. Although the overall executives' needs were different, basic responsibilities included administrative tasks of filing, screening calls, emails, organizing, scheduling meetings and appointments, make travel arrangements, accompany superiors on meetings, follow-up on discussed materials, continuously problem-solving unexpected matters, coordinating work, managing schedules and meeting deadlines, working within and outside the organization to get the work done, managing expenditures, correspondence, preparing the agenda, and taking minutes of the meetings. A few jobs were partially secretarial in nature; one as a Marketing coordinator, while another worked on short term projects as assigned by the executive.

The perception of their importance as secretary was: (a) '7' - 10%; (b) '8' - 40%; (c) '9' - 20%; and (d) '10' - 30%. For the most part, participants felt that they were important as they considered themselves, the coordinator, backbone, and nucleus of the organization, and a valuable contributor to its success. Without them, they felt that executives would encounter functional



difficulties, suffer headaches, and things would get chaotic. This invaluable service makes the work of executives easier, as everything is ready and plans are made ahead of time. One secretary mentioned that she felt powerful as the executive was dependent on her and that she was trusted and relied upon in getting things accomplished.

Most Enjoyed and Least Liked Things on the Secretary's Job

Tables 1 and 2 provide a list of items most enjoyed and least liked on the job as a secretary.

Table 1: Top Three Most Enjoyed Things as a Secretary

1.	I enjoy working with my current boss the most because of her personality; she is understanding, agreeable, reasonable, protective of me whenever I was blamed, and keeps her emotions well under control. I am very happy to work with her as she is very encouraging, and I bring my problems to her, knowing that she would be supportive and helpful.
2.	I enjoy my atmosphere at work because I get to work with knowledgeable people and I am very satisfied at my workplace.
3.	I have the freedom to think, make decisions, am treated as a professional, and gain the trust of my superiors to get the job done.
4.	I enjoy organizing events, organizing schedules, and contacting outsiders and internal co-workers.
5.	As I work very closely to the MD, I have learnt how he thinks, discusses, and communicates with others. This is a great opportunity for me to learn.
6.	I have the right to make the right final decision, as the MD delegates a lot of power to me; thus demonstrating his trust and judgment in me.
7.	I have made many contacts by knowing many people through hotels and suppliers in many countries.
8.	I feel good that I am able to resolve problems and have cultivated the skills and experiences without causing any conflicts.



9.	I like my boss who is open and easy to talk to. I can talk freely with my coworkers and enjoy doing research to prepare presentations.
10.	I enjoy everything assigned to me and love learning new things through new assignments.
11.	Socialization: Meeting with volunteers, exchanging information, and drinking coffee with them.
12.	I get to meet nice people who are sincere, and do not put on a mask.
13.	I enjoy dealing with many people and find my work challenging as I learn new things.
14.	I am capable of completing work on time, provide documents needed when asked for, and compose English correspondence of different kinds.

Table 2: Top Three Least Enjoyed Things as a Secretary

1.	It's difficult and unpleasant to work with egoistic people who think that they are always right, biased, judgmental, and never listen to my explanations.
2.	I do not like the fact that I have never had the chance to attend any training or workshops to upgrade myself. That is because I am not allowed to leave my office and taking leave for training is not something that my organization promotes or allows for secretarial staff.
3.	I dislike filing (especially in a dark and stuffy room), routine jobs (e.g. daily, weekly, and monthly reminders to the others in the organization), and hate to block unwanted telephone calls.
4.	When people have the perception that I have special privileges; that is not true at all.
5.	I don't like to receive gifts because I feel that the givers are insincere and have a hidden agenda. I don't like the way others perceive me as a secretary.
6.	Some people think that I have the power over my boss in the sense that I can influence her to think positively or negatively towards them.
7.	The only thing I dislike is the pressure I receive from the management team as each member thinks that his or her assignment is more urgent. I have had to explain that I had a lot of things to do, and that I prioritize my work. Now, I inform them how long it would take for me to hand the completed task over to them.



8.	The difficulties of dealing with other companies when they are reluctant to allow our customers to get to see their performance, and see their annual reports. These companies usually are more favorable to analysts gaining access to their information.
9.	My friends look at me from their own negative perceptions, receiving harsh words from board members, and I was always informed by executives to complete forgotten tasks at the last minute.
10.	Very demanding and stubborn boss who wants to get what is desired or needed.
11.	The boss sometimes provides unclear explanations and tasks that required more clarifications.

Challenges as a Secretary and Administrative Assistant

As with any other job, there are challenges for AAs. These were the ratings of the participants' challenges encountered in the workplace: (a) 10% rated a '4'; (b) 10% rated a '7'; (c) 10% rated an '8'; (d) 40% rated a '9'; and (e) 30% rated a '10'. Problem solving was considered one of the biggest challenges, while others included dealing with clients, handling people of different styles and levels professionally; particularly those who are higher in position and seniority, and staying ahead of deadlines. Another big challenge was the necessity of thinking two steps ahead, being thorough, knowing what the executive needs, trying to deliver perfect work, continuous updating IT skills, dealing with a challenging boss, and preparing needed documents. When working internally, getting full cooperation and collaboration from other departments, and knowing how to approach and follow-up are some things that were truly challenging. Aside from dealing with new assignments, fulfilling requests on short notices, and responding to the executives fluctuating moods, PAs also needed to maintain motivation and enthusiasm in their profession. Despite the significance of secretarial jobs, some people dislike as secretaries, as they interpret secretaries as picking on them when the secretaries were just trying to do their jobs.

Job Satisfaction

Secretaries and AAs rated their job satisfaction as follows: (a) 10% rated a '4'; (b) 70% rated an '8'; and (c) 20% rated a '10'. Satisfaction comments were varied -with most happy and enjoyed their work, particularly so, when working with a good executive. Taking pride in their



work, working in a great working environment, and being capable of communicating smoothly both internally and externally also contributed to this job satisfaction. Satisfaction was also gained through personal contentment, professional development, and being being entrusted to get the job done. A few participants cited work overload and stress as factors that reduced their satisfaction. AAs who worked on other tasks aside from the secretarial duties stated that they preferred the other non-secretarial work.

Curious as to whether secretaries and AAs would remain in their jobs if given the choice, it was interesting to note that 60% were content to stay while the other 40% would venture elsewhere. For those who wanted to stay, their reasons were: (a) personality-job fit; (b) the executive kept the participant happy; (c) okay with the job; (d) taking pride in the significance of the job; (e) learning new things; and (f) enjoying new challenges and working for a kind and trusting executive. Others who would opt out wanted to: (a) become a lecturer if given the further education opportunity; (b) own a business; (c) move further into the marketing pathway where there is more growth and development; and (d) just retire from the workplace.

Discussion

It was of no big surprise that the female gender dominated the secretarial position, as that is the norm in the secretarial industry. For the most part, secretaries and administrative assistants enjoyed their jobs. Job responsibilities of all the participants were to an extent, relatively similar and basic while 20% of the participants were given non-secretarial roles. AAs possessed a wide range of abilities to cope and excel in their jobs, recognized their significant role in the organization which was truly fulfilling and job satisfying. The secretarial and AA profession is no doubt a truly challenging one that involves multitasking, constantly interacting with many people within and outside the organization to get the job accomplished, aside from meeting executive needs. However, these challenges for the most part, did not contribute to job dissatisfaction. Only 10% was less satisfied compared to the others who were relatively happy with their professions and gained satisfaction with the tasks they had at work although stress and work overload were cited as reasons that made their job dissatisfactory. Despite the job satisfaction received, 40% did not truly seem satisfied with what they were doing as they would choose to leave their profession



if given the chance while the other 60% would stay on, thus reflecting that they truly liked their secretarial/AA career. Perhaps the most interesting portion of this study evolved around the most enjoyed and least enjoyed tasks as a secretary as the lists provided invaluable insights into the feelings of secretaries and it would be most helpful to executives to make their jobs more enjoyable in the workplace and increase job retention.

Conclusion

It is always interesting to learn more in depth about a profession that is so near to all of us, as it helps us to better understand them. The findings from the study not only confirmed what we already learnt from the literature review, but also provided new insights that were unavailable in the literature such as the challenges, and the likes and dislikes of their jobs. This new knowledge would help readers gain a newer understanding of AAs and hopefully, enable to better work with them to reach a win-win situation.





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