

## CHAPTER 4

### THE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

The data obtained through triangulation will be analyzed based on the model discussed in Chapter 2. The model, with three broad parameters and corresponding details, generates '*social action*'. The data concerning the

- (i) social structure
- (ii) sociolinguistic factors
- (iii) sociocognitive factors

are derived from the theories and models discussed in Chapter 2.

The researcher has created the model relevant to this study, to permit a holistic interpretation of genre of the variety of speech events. Inherent in the analysis is an inevitable overlap of the components. The overlap depicts the interrelatedness between language and the social sciences (See 2.9).

The data on the '*social structure*' will be discussed first to provide the '*thick*' descriptions in which genres are embedded. They form the backdrop for the genre analysis of speech events made up of the sociolinguistic and sociocognitive factors to be dealt with in Chapter 5.

### **4.1.1 Social Structure**

The social structure deals with the macro descriptions of the four companies. They involve the social context, the social organization, and the context of culture within which the executive secretary functions.

#### **4.1.1.1 Social Context**

The social context deals with two features namely, the organizational structure and the task environment of the respective companies. The companies are labelled A, B, C, and D.

##### **4.1.1.1.1 Organizational Structure**

The twelve companies identified in the pilot study are either product or service oriented. Of the six product oriented companies, two are multinational companies and one local company with a foreign partnership. Similarly, of the six service oriented companies, one is a multinational company.

Most of them are established companies except for two which were set up in 1992. (See Appendix 3). These two young companies operate with a small management team and draw on consultancy services when the need arises.

In terms of employees, the big companies have more than 10,000 employees. The medium sized ones have about 5,000 and the small companies range from twenty and above and these include consultancy services as well. In each of these companies there would be either a chief executive officer (CEO) or a

managing director (MD) or a director who is the organizational Head. The senior managers or heads of department (HODs) are accountable to the CEO. The middle management would report to the HODs. Next in the hierarchy are the supervisory staff and the employees. But this is open to variations amongst the companies depending on their organizational policy, their goals and their culture.

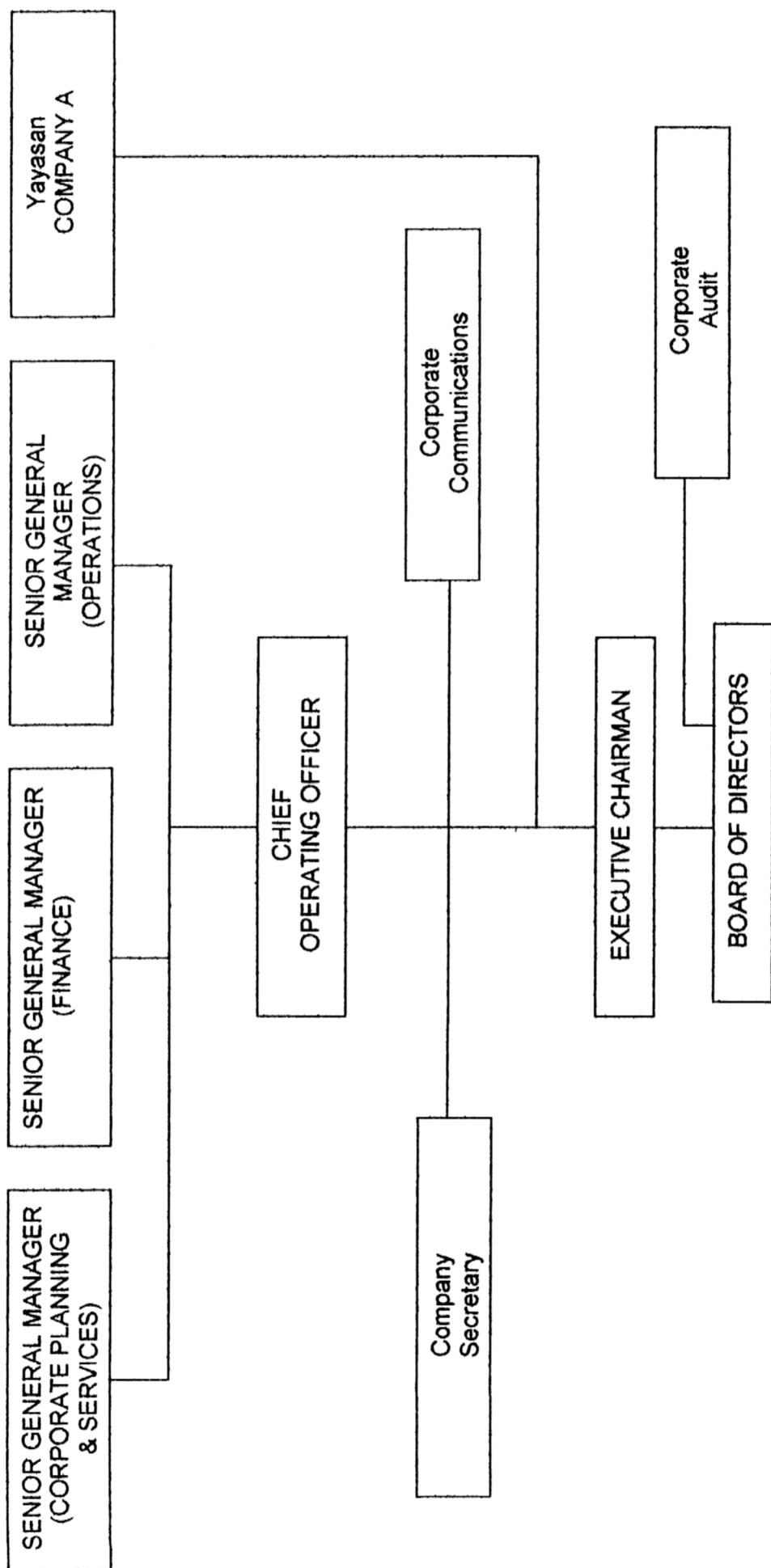
The data collection for this study is drawn from four companies A, B, C, D. They have been identified based on the criteria for selection mentioned in Chapter 3.

Company A is a national organization providing public utility services. There are 22,000 employees and a chief executive officer (CEO) who heads the organization. The organizational structure of the company is shown in the company's organization chart. (See Fig 2) This is the top of the hierarchy. They comprise the board of directors, the CEO, senior managers and heads of departments.

The CEO holds the top position in management and is therefore the key person in decision making. Each division with its area of responsibility runs its own department under the direction of the appropriate senior general manager who is accountable to the CEO.

There are two clear directions that represent the organizational goals. The first is essentially the need to meet the customers' requirement of the public utility. The

# ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE



(Fig 2)

(Yayasan means Foundation)

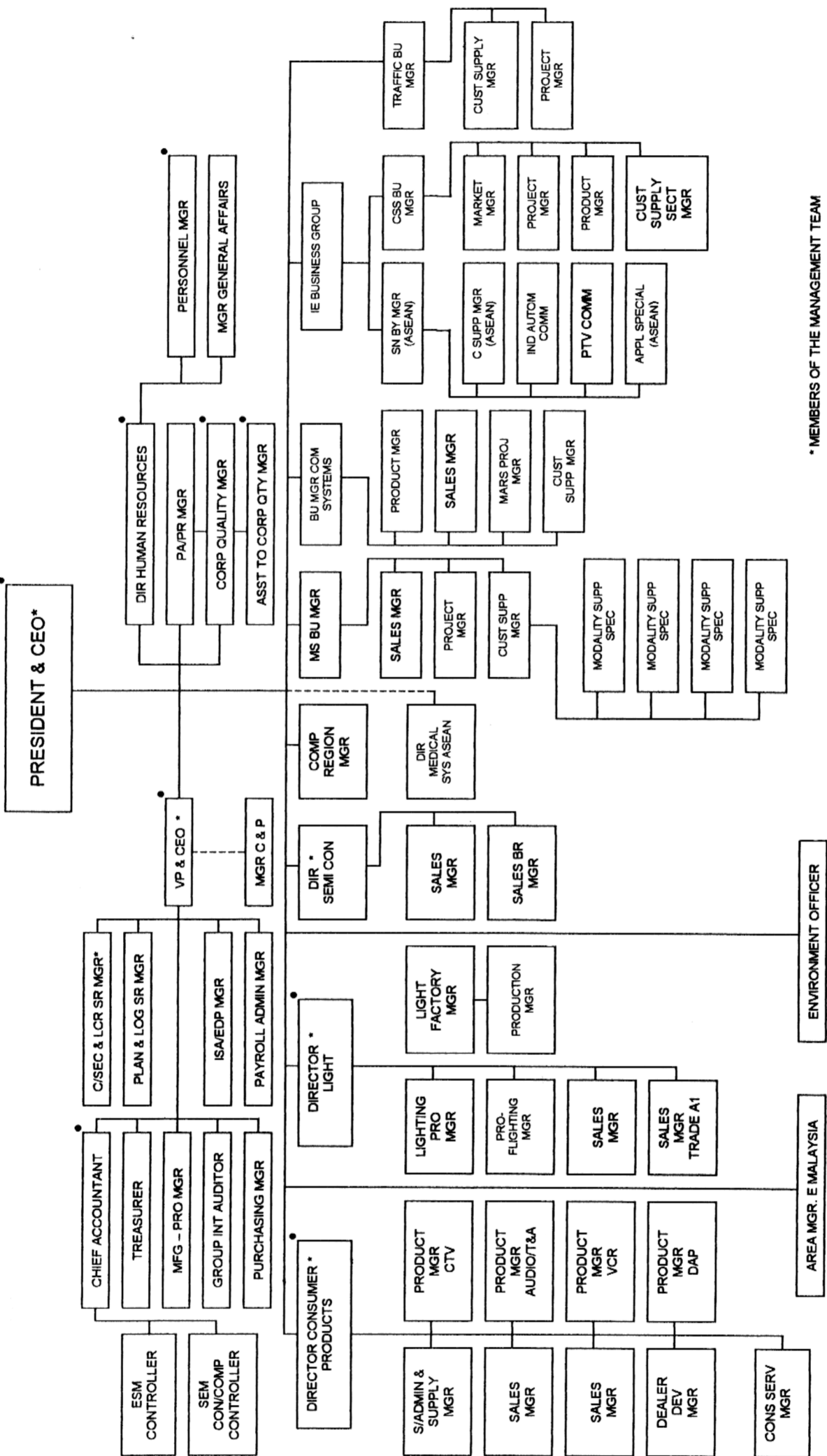


second is to meet community goals through a national foundation to cultivate and enhance the standard of education in the country. To meet the goals, the company thrives on a network of individual and institutional contacts within the company and outside.

Company B produces and markets electrical and electronic products. It is an international organization with the parent company in the Netherlands. The company has 4,000 employees nationwide and is headed by a CEO who is also the president of the company. The CEO is always an expatriate and serves the company for a term of four years.

The organizational structure of Company B (See Fig 3) differs from that found in Company A, especially with regard to the levels of hierarchy. In fact, the concept of a lateral style of management is more pronounced in Company B as seen in the organizational chart. The CEO heads the organization. At the second level are the senior managers, the chief accountant and the director of human resource. The third level of management functions with directors and business unit managers of the various departments. Unlike Company A, there is no board of directors. Instead, there is a management team comprising the CEO, and those at the second and third levels of management.

The organizational goal, as in Company A, has two directions. The first is to create a future where the products of the company are the '*customer's first choice*'. The second is to expand the '*customer's choice*' to the very young. Up to



\* MEMBERS OF THE MANAGEMENT TEAM  
 • MEMBERS OF QUALITY STEERING COMMITTEE  
 (ABBREVIATIONS – Refer to Appendix 7)

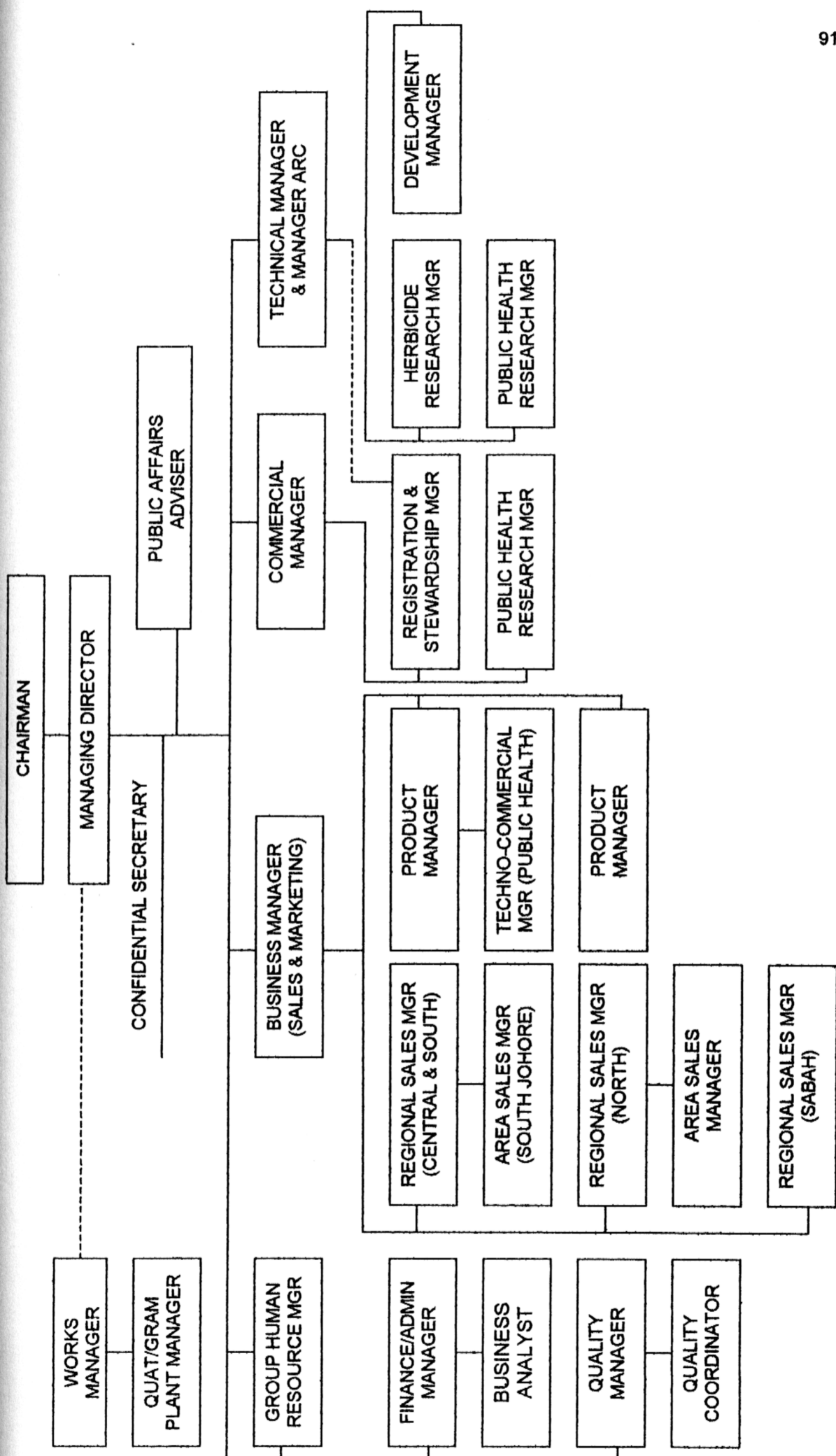
(Fig 3)

now the company products seem to appeal only to the older generation and the goal is to remedy that trend. This is to ensure a lifelong preference for the products by starting with the young.

Company C is one of the subsidiaries of a parent company in Malaysia. It deals with agrochemicals. It is the leading agrochemical company in the country. It commands a current market share of 25 per cent in the agricultural business and it aimed to capture 30 per cent of the market by the year 2000. Its success can be attributed to the strong partnership established by the business with its British-based agrochemical counterpart.

The organizational structure of Company C has as the head, the managing director (MD). (See Fig 4). In this subsidiary company, employees serve in the administrative centre or are at the outposts in the technical station in Malacca or as sales and marketing personnel throughout the country where the concentration of farmers are.

The MD heads the subsidiary and functions independently. He and the MDs in the other subsidiaries deal with fertilizers and chemicals. All of them come under the overall chairman of the parent company. However, decision making and control of the subsidiary company lie with the MD. There are, therefore, four chains of command, namely the MD, the senior managers, the managers and their subordinates. The strength of employees in this agrochemicals subsidiary



(Fig 4)

approximates fifty and makes up only part of the overall employment figure of the parent company.

The organizational goals are, first, to improve its financial performance without compromising on the social responsibility in the area of safety, health and environment. Secondly, the goal of the company is to pursue new areas of opportunities for growth, and thirdly, the commitment of the business in ensuring the quality of its products and services.

Company D is a newly established consultancy set up in 1994 to offer training to top level executives of various companies in the areas of organizational change management, human resource strategy, and management development. Being a consultancy, it relies on a network of associates both local and international to conduct training programmes.

The organizational structure is unlike a hierarchical structure or a chain of command as found in Company A, B, or C. Rather it consists of a network of organizations or individuals who contribute to the development of change management and to the definitions of a clear vision to build and reinforce change capability within the client organization. These include, for example, independent internationally recognized consultants or professors of leading business schools in Europe or the United States (organizational structure not available).

The organizational goal is therefore to become a leading human resource consulting firm in Malaysia and South-East-Asia with a focus on the three areas of organizational change, management development and human resource strategy.

#### **4.1.1.1.2 Task Environment – The Executive Secretary's Office**

The task environment has been completely revolutionized by two main factors, the layout of the offices and technology. Both these factors affect the job functions of the executive secretary.

All the companies in the study have adopted an 'open plan' in the office layout. Employees are not behind closed doors and private rooms. In every case the local area network (LAN) of employees is separated only by screens which enable free access and discussion. The only LAN that is apart from this open plan is the office of the CEO or the MD and the heads of department. In the case of the large companies A & B, the CEO's office is a separate section. In C, the office is enclosed but with a built up area of glass or with an open door giving a view of 'what is going on' in the 'open plan' offices. In D, it is a small one floor office apartment comprising the office of the MD and the executive secretary.

The office of the executive secretary is always adjacent to that of the CEO or the MD. In fact together they make up a unit which is separate from the general task environment of the rest of the company staff. This is a particularly significant feature concerning the executive secretaries. Her LAN being next to the top of the executive of the company has an influence on how her role is perceived.

In Company A, the executive secretary, as indicated, has to handle most matters that concerns her boss. All her interactions with her boss and others are from within her office. She rarely leaves her office. Adjacent to her office on one end is the office of her boss and on the other end is the office of her personal assistant. Her position in the middle is an advantage as both her boss and her assistant have direct access to her through separate doors.

No one can enter the executive chairman's office block except through the security door. The executive secretary controls the security door. Upon hearing the buzzer she presses a button which is by her table. There is a closed circuit monitor by her table for her to take note of whoever enters the lobby. The office is on the first floor in the main block of the company and just above the reception area.

On entering, there is a wide corridor leading to the visitor's lobby. On the left of the lobby is her office. On the right is the conference room, adjacent to it is the kitchenet. There is a table in the kitchenet for the office boy who is usually around to act on the instructions of the executive secretary.

She sits behind a large L-shaped table. By the side of her table against the window is a low book case where all her documents are piled. Behind her is a typewriter linked to a monitor. On her right is a word processor next to which are two telephones. At one corner of the room near the entrance is a filing cabinet where all the confidential documents are kept. She is the only person who has

access to this cabinet. Near the cabinet are two chairs placed against the wall for visitors. But most of the time visitors stand by her table facing her.

The researcher's observations were made from this end of the room at a corner. It was convenient to observe the ongoing activities and to do the audio recordings.

The executive secretary in Company B occupies a very large, spacious room on the top floor of the building. Adjacent to her room is the CEO's room on one side and a small kitchenet on the other. Ahead of it is the conference room and adjacent to that is her assistant's room. The door leading to the boss's room is never shut allowing for free access between the two rooms. But the entrance to her room is closed. So anyone who wishes to see her or the boss has to get her approval first. There is no separate lobby as such. But her room and her boss's room have enough space to seat visitors.

She works at a comfortably large L-shaped table. Behind her seating area is the sliding glass door leading to a balcony which gives her a view of the outside. On her table on one side are two telephones and a personal computer. At one end of the room is a large cabinet where her files and documents are stored. As in the case of Company A, she is the only person who has access to these documents.

Unlike Company A and Company B, in Company C, the entire organization operates on one floor. It is one of four subsidiaries. Entrance into the company is



only possible via an electronic card. This means only staff who are card holders can enter. Visitors have to be notified by the reception on the ground floor.

The office of the MD is at the far end of the floor. Adjacent to his room is a wide corridor and half of the space is partitioned as office space for the executive secretary. The layout of the whole organization is based on an open plan concept with low screens used as dividers.

The business unit managers have their rooms on either side of the floor with their secretary's office adjacent to theirs and by the entrance to the managers' rooms. At the opposite end of the MD's room is the coffee corner and the storage room where files and documents are kept. In the middle of the room are the office clerks and administrative officers.

The executive secretary works within a very compact area. She has a rectangular shaped work space which combines the open trays, cupboards and cabinets. She therefore works within a very limited area with room only for her one chair. But from where she is seated she has a view of everything that goes on in the office. On her table is a personal computer and a telephone. The fax machine is at the corner, at one end of the floor. The table is stacked with papers, files and documents leaving just a little room to work on word-processing.

In Company D, the organizational structure differs from others in this study. It functions on the principle of networking and also through associates. As such, the

company operates from a small two room office space located in a block of offices. One room is for the MD of the company and the adjacent room is for the executive secretary.

In her office she has a L-shaped work table which has a personal computer and a telephone. The room is utilized in a very practical way. At one end is the fax machine. Next to that is a coffee table and the photocopying machine. At the opposite end of the room, next to the entrance of the office, is a large cabinet where documents are stored. Just at the entrance to the boss's office is a carefully organized seating area for visitors.

#### **4.1.1.1.3 General Features of the Physical Setting**

A common feature in the location of the executive secretary's office is that they are all adjacent to the boss's office. Both the boss's office and the secretary's make up a complete unit in the sense that the entrance door to the boss's is usually never shut. This suggests that both the executive secretary and the boss have access to each other's office without the formality of having to knock on the door.

The exception is in the case of Company C where the organization operates on one floor. Here the entrance to the boss's office is always closed. Being a glass door, the boss has his privacy while at the same time is able to see his employees at work. The only member of staff who has free access to his office is the executive secretary.

In general, however, access to the boss is only possible via the executive secretary. She decides who can or cannot see the head of the organization. So, when one says "no problem, you can see the boss", the latent meaning is that one has to talk to the executive secretary first to fix an appointment. In almost all cases, appointments are usually made except when the executive secretary finds reason to protect the boss's interest. This confirms the trend to a more lateral form of management with fewer layers of command.

In the design and layout of the office, there is therefore, an inherent need for security. This explains why there are security devices placed at the general entrance to the "boss-executive secretary" total office unit. Anyone who wishes to enter the CEO's office can only do so by passing the 'security check'. In this case, it is the office of the executive secretary.

In all cases, it was noted that work stations of the executive secretary had an L-shaped design with telephones and personal computers. Fax machines were either in her office or in the boss's office. The exception is in Company C where the fax machine is placed close to the executive secretary but at one end of the floor to make it available for other staff to use. To ensure that company documents remain confidential, the executive secretary in Company C retrieves the faxes by deploying a code. She is the only person who knows the code.

In big national and international companies like Company A and Company B, the office of the CEO is large and spacious. The additional facilities are the

conference room, lounge and kitchenet, all of which occupy one floor. In the medium size or smaller companies like Company C and D, the organizational activities and routines do not account for these needs.

These descriptions of the setting have a bearing on the interpretation of a speech event and on the genres. For instance, in professional or specialized interactions in a given setting, such as a courtroom, classroom, clinic and hospital, and the news room, the setting may have some bearing on the way the speech event or communicative practices and procedures are organized. The interactions within the variety of settings which are formal exhibit varying details and differences in the genre which differ from ordinary conversation.

#### **4.1.1.1.4 Impact of Technology**

Technology has virtually revolutionized the role of the executive secretary. From what used to be the routine tasks of taking shorthand and dictation, typing, fixing appointments, and acting only on instructions, the executive secretary has to manage a wide variety of company matters. These include preparing certain budget proposals, organizing exhibitions, seminars and conferences, publishing in-house newsletters, writing press releases, conducting consumer surveys, providing advisory services, managing quality control and several other matters depending on the kind of company she is working for. (See Appendix 3)

All the executive secretaries decide on the boss's schedules and appointments and handle his office and personal matters. However, when it comes to

professional support the boss also relies on the management staff of the other departments as he feels, *"To expect her to know all the details is asking for too much"*, although he admits it is *"Nice to have the situation but it is not critical for the job"*. But over a period of time, if she has been in the same job, he recognizes the possibility of such professional support.

The special qualities of honesty, integrity, and loyalty rank high in the business practice of an executive secretary. This is partly because they handle all confidential materials and they are the only people who have all the information. The high degree of confidence and esteem emplaced on her reflects the confidentiality subsumed in her job functions. The boss emphasizes that he does not have a direct line. Any matter for the CEO must first go through her and she decides what to tell or not to tell the boss, and to screen appointments with the boss.

The next section on 'Social Organization' drawn on the data will confirm the multiplicity of roles of the executive secretary.

#### **4.1.1.2 The Social Organization**

The social context concerning the organizational structure and the task environment illustrates the data on the social organization of the companies. Social organization, according to the model focuses on the details and role dynamics of the executive secretary. The data from the pilot study illustrates that the executive secretary has to be concerned with all matters concerning the

company. Social organization considers three factors the participant, that is, the executive secretary, her role and her status and power.

#### **4.1.1.2.1 Participant – The Executive Secretary**

All the executive secretaries in the pilot study have undergone some secretarial training. Those with more than 20 years of work experience began their career with only a diploma in stenography either from the Institute of Technology, MARA or other private institutions. They started off as junior secretaries or stenographers and over the years through promotions rose to the position of executive secretary holding a wide range of responsibilities by taking on more management type of work.

Amongst those with less than 10 years working experience there are variations in the level of responsibility although all hold a Diploma in Executive Secretaryship from the Institute of Technology, MARA (Majlis Amanah Rakyat). Much depends on their degree of involvement in managing the affairs of the company and the extent of support to their bosses. The smaller companies and the newly established companies rely heavily on the executive secretaries to manage most of the affairs of the company. The more established medium size companies also rely on the executive secretaries but their functions and roles are more clearly defined.

Most of them are married with the exception of one and all feel that being an executive secretary means having to sacrifice their time for office work beyond office hours.

The personal details of the four subjects for study provide the following information. Firstly, all of them have received professional training in executive secretaryship. Secondly, all of them are women. Thirdly, the years of service and experience vary from 2 years to 24 years suggesting that sometimes executive secretaries are placed in a company to work for the CEO or the MD immediately after training. This is to meet the current needs of a buoyant business environment. According to the boss in Company D, the expectation is that an executive secretary works for top management right from the start. He says, *"There is really no time to gain that many years of experience before you start giving people responsibility. Trained executive secretaries are expected to be 'knowledge-workers' that is to apply their knowledge and skills early in their career."* As knowledge-workers, they are expected *'to learn and explore and find unexpected relationship between things.'* (Bill Gates 1999:117).

#### **4.1.1.2.1.1 Experience**

The executive secretary in Companies A, B and C have many years of experience in the company and have worked for different bosses. In the case of the executive secretary (Respondent 10) in Company A, her 22 years out of 24 years of experience have been with the same boss in the different companies he has headed. The executive secretary (Respondent 6) in Company B has 20 years of

service not with the same boss as in Company A, but with different bosses in the same company.

In Company C, the executive secretary (Respondent 11) has 15 years of experience in the same company but with different bosses. The executive secretary (Respondent 12) in Company D, being a young company, has two years of experience. She started work in the company after her professional training and had to get on to several responsibilities right from the start. (See Appendix 3)

#### **4.1.1.2.1.2 Designation**

Although they all carry out the functions of the executive secretary, they seem to be known by various designations because of the nature of their work. A, for example, is regarded as the personal assistant as well as the public relations manager. C holds two clear functions which are as confidential secretary and as the quality coordinator. B and D are known as executive secretaries but from the data obtained, they too seem to have multiple roles and functions. The claim that only the very experienced secretaries can become executive secretaries does not seem to hold true as the data shows a range of years of service from 2 to 24. Much depends on the organizational structure and on the needs of individual companies. Those with more than 10 years of service, however, reached the position of executive secretaries by means of promotions.



#### 4.1.1.2.2 Role

The executive secretary has a complexity of roles and interactions (See 2.9.1.2). This is reflected in the wide range of job functions concerning first, her boss, then the company, the clients, business contacts, visitors and government officials.

To accomplish the demands of her role, the data shows that she has to be multi-skilled and well informed. The executive secretaries say that *'I have to know a lot'* (A); *'there is nothing that I cannot handle now'* (B); *'I am in the know of everything that is going on'* (C). Their bosses share that view as in *'the executive secretary is worth her weight in gold'*; *'she is supposed to know everything about the whole business'* (A); *'she knows everything about her company'* (B); *'the policy in the organization is to make people multi-skilled'* (C); *'executive secretaries are expected to be knowledge workers to be able to perform a very important support function to her boss'* (D).

The shared norms and expectations of the executive secretaries and the bosses suggest that *'she has to handle 99.9% of the problems and only pass 1% to me'* (A). In relation to that expectation, the bosses feel that *'she has to make her own judgement. She must know what she can handle and what she feels she has to tell me'* (A); *'she is a very important person. I do not have a secretary. I have a manager who is assisting me and she needs the freedom to express herself. 90% of the time I agree with her'* (B). It is generally felt that *"the executive secretary has to be multi-skilled."* She cannot say that *'I am only the executive secretary and therefore I do not know'* (A). *'The executive secretary who works for me has a*

*second designation as a 'quality assistant' to the 'quality coordinator' of the company. In other words, she has to double up on two jobs' (C); 'there is a need to empower the secretary to do a lot more things nowadays' (D).*

There are very high expectations of the executive secretaries. She has to take on a multiplicity of roles to provide professional support to the boss, and to the company and to manage all his personal matters. Her job is therefore demanding. In the big companies as in cases A and B, the executive secretaries have assistants. They handle the routine functions of filing, screening telephone calls, typing and word processing. The executive secretary is then able to function in the several roles as manager, advisor, decision maker, public relations officer or press officer. In the case of A, she prepares the salary and increment schedules of senior managers. In the case of B, she is a conference coordinator, editor of the in-house magazine, campaign organizer and is in charge of advertising for the company.

In case C, she also handles all the performance appraisals of the staff. She is also the quality assistant to the quality coordinator. She has to manage the affairs of the MD and of the quality coordinator. In case D, there is a high degree of sharing of responsibilities between the boss and the executive secretary. She is the coordinator of all seminars and training workshops and is empowered to completely run the programme in-house or in hotels. The boss says, '*I rarely interfere*' (D).

In general the executive secretary has multiple roles and wears more than one hat as organizer, coordinator, advisor, manager, public relations officer or editor.

In all cases, A, B, C and D, they are responsible for maintaining the bosses' diary, fixing appointments and making travel arrangements. They all arrive at the office half an hour or one hour before the boss and leave only after the boss has left. As the boss points out, *'She comes before me and she leaves after me. I have to go home to make sure she goes home because to her customer number one is the boss'* (B). They work longer than the regular working hours.

All the executive secretaries express the element of 'sacrifices' to accomplish several roles in a day. There is no fixed routine about lunch break or a tea break. *'I never leave the office for lunch. I usually just have a snack'* (A). In some cases, they come to the office even if it is not a working day. The boss says, *'She goes to the office on a Saturday although it is not a working day'* (C). The extra time at work is a sacrifice in relation to her own personal and family matters.

An important aspect of her role is the need to be perfect in her job. According to the boss, *'The executive secretary has to know a lot and has to be meticulous in her work.'* (A). They have to be bothered about details without involving the CEO. The bosses are thankful for such support as indicated in a comment like, *'I'm glad I'm not an executive secretary'* (A).

Aiming to be a perfectionist also involves having to know the boss's mind. *'She must know what he wants and nine out of ten times she must have it right'* (A). *'She has to know his likes and dislikes, his preferences and to know how the boss reacts'* (B). This is to enable her to decide on the appropriate course of action on company matters and on personal and family matters of her boss. There is clearly a demand for a perfectionist approach to work as the boss recounts that, *'Nothing frustrates me more if I give a piece of work, for example, dictation, and find mistakes in it.'* (C).

In all cases, the executive secretaries claim that they are doing managerial type of work although they do not by designation hold a management position. As noted, *'It is a management position but I do not have that name'* (B). There is a clear division between management and non-management staff and the secretarial function is considered as non-management. The executive secretary claims that, *'She is jack of all trades but master of none'*. (A, C). In the case of C, she is considered part of management only in her role as quality assistant.

#### **4.1.1.2.3 Status**

The nature of her role as seen in the data illustrates her status in the company. She has extraordinary power. This is because she is the one employee who knows everything about the company. *'I am in the know of everything that is going on'* (C). Every matter has to go through her before it gets to the boss. She is therefore held in high esteem and is well respected because as the boss points out, *'To get to me, you have to be friendly with her'* (B). One boss emphasizes

that he does not have a direct line because *'everything goes to her first'*. (A). She decides what matters will or will not be brought to the boss's attention.

The executive secretary is aware of her privilege knowing that *'my boss gives me the freedom to decide, and I direct him'* (A). She has to be very well informed to give him that direction. Her position of power stems from the fact *'that she knows everything about the company and she is very close to the boss'* (B). Consequently, her job function demands a high degree of confidentiality. She has to handle all confidential matters like performance appraisals, budget proposals and personnel matters. As she holds a unique position of knowing everything, she is not keen to give up this privilege even if it means a promotion. She evidently subscribes to the view that knowledge is power as she expresses a felt need *'to want to be in the know and to be informed'* (C). If she gives up her position even for a promotion, she would lose this privilege.

Based on the data above, the executive secretary, by virtue of her circumstances, wields respect and power. No one can bypass the executive secretary to see the boss of the company. While she commands this privilege, there is yet a sense of caution that all the bosses share in terms of ensuring that the executive secretary does not overstep her limits (See 2.9.1.2) as in

- (A) *'she is not a kingmaker because once she plays the role of kingmaker, then you are having problems. She must know where to draw the line'.*
- (B) *'she has to be kept on line or she will take over as manager'.*

(D) *'her role will still be that of one who performs a support function to the job but she cannot get into the boss's job'.*

It is therefore revealing to note that while she does have power and control on matters concerning her boss, she cannot have a free reign. She takes decisions on routine and approved matters. Beyond that, she has to consult her boss.

#### **4.1.1.3 The Context of Culture**

The context of culture refers to the values and beliefs, routines and rituals of the *'way things are done around here'*. (See 2.9.1.3). These have implications on the business practices and the business environment and how they influence speech events.

##### **4.1.1.3.1 Values and Beliefs**

Although the organizational structure implies a chain of command and a line of power and authority in the companies the values and beliefs in general depict an 'open policy' which permits direct interactional encounters between superiors and subordinates. In company A, the culture in relation to its management style is evident in the belief held by the CEO. He says the *'autocratic commanding style of leadership is over ... such forms of management are obsolete'*. Instead, it is necessary to adopt a management style where the flat network structure creates a need for purposeful interactions between individuals and institutions. In the wake of this paradigm shift, the CEO maintains that *'corporations should be exposed to*

*a management style where managers need to give more attention to lateral as opposed to vertical relationships'.*

It means that in relation to positions within a company, employees at all levels become more accessible. The culture of the company has its origin in the belief that a greater sense of shared responsibility and a more diverse range of lateral relationships would make it easier for the organization to meet its goals.

The values and beliefs of company B depend very much on two specific features. The first, is that it is an international company. Consequently, the culture upholds the need for a single international identity that is reflected in its slogans and campaigns. This means that at any time, anywhere, worldwide the company is recognizable. The second, is the *'passion for people, both employees and customers.'* The management style, according to the CEO, does not come from a book but from the 'school of life' where it is important to *'respect everyone from the cleaning lady to the boss'*. As an organization, the employees come first because *'it is the team that makes it happen'*. That means much more than how good the company is or how much money it makes.

A key aspect of the culture is the emphasis on motivating employees in the belief that success will follow from such motivations : that employees should enjoy their work; that employees should be encouraged to ask questions if they are doing something which does not contribute to efficiency. The passion for people is

embedded in the company values which are to value people as the greatest asset; to delight the customers; and to deliver quality and excellence to all customers.

As in company A, company B also practices an open policy which is clearly reflected by the way in which those at the top management level are easily accessible. The pattern of interaction is not just by way of the subordinates going to meet the superior but the other way round as well. This is exemplified by the CEO himself who "goes on his rounds" at 9.00 a.m. like a medical doctor would, to meet his employees and to talk to them. He says, *'I walk around a lot. Everyone talks to me ...'* and the gardener, for example, calls him "Uncle". He invests 60 percent of his work time in the people *'so that they will be with you, otherwise you will be a General without an army'*.

The values and beliefs of company C thrive on the strong commitment towards being a leading agrochemical company by facing up to intense competitive pressure. Stemming from that commitment is the belief in the need for quality which is evident in the setting up of a division to deal only with quality. Part of the management team is solely responsible for quality.

The values and beliefs are seen in the concern for people who are at the user end, namely the consumer, to continuously promote the safe use of agrochemicals. In addition, there is also the concern to make employees multi-skilled so that their job functions involve a wider range of responsibilities. This means there will be more than one person who has the knowledge and skills of specific job functions.



Company C is clearly a performance driven company where the focus on people has more to do with skills and performance leading to positive results in the growth of the company.

The values and beliefs of company C facilitate human resource development and help to realize the potential of clients. The culture depicts this trend by a network of interactional encounters that have nothing to do with a line of authority or chain of command. In fact, the interactions represent an exchange of knowledge skills or services for specific clients, at specific times, at specific places. The belief is that such networking would contribute towards a clear vision to build and reinforce change capability within a client organization.

While all these reveal the values and beliefs of the companies, one single common factor of importance in all companies is the customer or the client. The customer or the client has to be satisfied and that has to be the ultimate goal of the organization (See 2.9.1.3). The companies uphold the belief that the 'consumer is sovereign'.

#### **4.1.1.3.2 Routines and Rituals**

There appears a similar pattern in the routine tasks and those based on instructions from the boss. What does seem to vary are the responsibilities emplaced in their capacity as part of the team concerned with affairs related to management, administration and finance.

In all cases, the routine tasks of executive secretaries are basically the same (See Appendix 3). These include maintaining a diary of appointments for their bosses, checking and sorting out the mail and faxes, making travel arrangements and hotel reservations, scheduling meetings and handling the personal matters of the bosses and in some cases, family matters as well. Some work is based on instructions from the boss.

The morning of a working day begins with the boss on a routine basis. In every case, the executive secretary meets with the boss as soon as he enters the office. The purpose is to brief the boss about appointments of the day, provide an update on company matters, deal with correspondence, and deliver messages received. The boss in turn, gives instructions on what to do for that day. Being a person who knows the details of what is going on in the company, the boss in every case, takes into consideration, the opinions of the executive secretary.

Other routine face-to-face interactions include meeting business clients, sales representatives, consumers, consultants, company employees (usually the managerial staff), visitors, the press, and officers from the advertising agency. Most matters are handled by the executive secretary. Where there is a request to meet with the CEO or the MD, she would take a decision based on discretion, except in the case of management staff who have more ready access, both to her and to the boss. This is to incorporate some order to enable the executive secretary to manage the rest of the duties and responsibilities.

#### 4.1.1.3.3 Business Practices

The business practices of the executive secretary in all companies, are very similar. In all cases, she is the person to give and receive information and to give and receive instructions to the boss, her personal assistant, other employees and business contacts. This could be by way of e-mails, faxes, the internet or the telephone. These facilities have speeded up her work releasing her to assume more responsibilities as is evident in the nature of the activities (See Appendix 3 and 4).

The executive secretary in company B travels to hold meetings or campaigns or to work on company projects. Dates for these activities are chosen carefully and she schedules them only when her boss is away from the office. She also visits staff in the various departments in the company to discuss company matters. In-house meetings are usually held in the conference room adjacent to her room. Some of these meetings are for the production of the company publication since she is the editor.

In the case of company C, she gets out of the office when she has to have meetings or discussions in the conference room in a different block. She also organizes seminars, workshops or conventions. This is to do with her role as a quality coordinator, which is the second designation that she has. She is the quality assistant to the quality coordinator. This seems to be company policy as pointed out by the boss who says, *'the policy in the organization is to make people multi-skilled. In other words, each of us double up to do two jobs. She is my secretary but in addition, she is also part time quality assistant to the quality*

*manager*'. The executive secretary manages both the affairs of the MD and of the quality assistant.

In company D, the executive secretary organizes activities of training and consulting. Meetings or seminars are held in-house in the company premises of the client or in function rooms in major hotels. The nature of the work of the executive secretary therefore includes work within the office as well as outside. Sometimes there is travel involved when she has to hold meetings or discussions relating to a particular event. When there is a seminar or training session, she has to remain at the venue for the duration of the training. She has to, at times, key in the documents straight away on the word processor at the end of each session. She also has to attend to arrangements for meals, accommodation and seminar rooms for the participants and for the trainers.

An unusual phenomenon in this company operations is that communication with clients continue in absentia. This is when the executive secretary is not able to be in the office as she has to manage duties and responsibilities elsewhere. In those circumstances, the telephone calls that come to the office are attended to via a communication 'link' service that takes the messages and transmits the information to the executive secretary via an alpha-numeric display pager. When there is a beep in the pager, she would know that a message has come through. The message conveyed can take up as many as 12 words. This is viewed by a scroll. The executive secretary responds to the message according to the urgency.

The size of the company seems to have an influence on the business practice. For instance, unlike company B, C and D, in company A, the executive secretary does not involve herself directly in the organizing of seminars or conferences or being an editor. Her role is only to provide the information and advice that they need. Being a very big company, there are other units or departments that handle these matters. In a sense, the medium sized and smaller companies have a greater dependence on the executive secretary to organize conferences, seminars, workshops and also to be in charge of publications and advertising.

The business practices in each of the companies suggest that the executive secretary is expected to be an organizer, a public relations officer, a manager, an administrator and a personal assistant. The range of responsibilities demand that they have to be multi-skilled to take on multiple roles.

#### **4.1.2 Communication**

An 'open policy' arising out of lateral relationships has implications for the communicative events. The paradigm shift is realized in the communication flows, the roles and the role relationships within the organization. As mentioned by the CEO who believes that, *"For fast and effective decisions, corporations need to be more open, flexible with a lot of communication flowing laterally between units and other supporting divisions within the organization"*. (A)

These expectations are evident in the variety of communicative events the executive secretary is engaged in. Communication skills are therefore central to her work. This is particularly important where as an executive secretary, she has to uphold the image of the company as the "frontline" of management. Her interactions are primarily with anyone who has dealings with her boss, or with matters concerning his company or his personal matters.

Interactions are similar and include business contacts locally and overseas. In general, executive secretaries are required to interact with anyone who has business with the company, personal matters with the boss and with employees within the company. This gives her the privilege of being the one person in the company who knows everything that is going on in the company. There is a need for her to know what is going on, to enable her to brief the boss and to give the necessary opinions and support.

Telephone interactions feature predominantly in the work of the executive secretary. Of an average eight-hour work day, she spends at least two to three hours on the telephone on business matters and on screening the telephone calls for her boss.

The executive secretary is in total control of the telephone conversations. With regard to incoming telephone calls, she decides whose calls should or should not be directed to the boss. This is particularly evident in the big companies where the

span of jurisdiction of the CEO is much wider and therefore accessibility depends on the priority of issues.

Face-to-face interactions are comparatively fewer in number. This is with the boss and others which include clients, visitors and overseas and local company officials and staff. Communication is mainly in English (See 2.9.3.1), except when dealing with government officials in informal situations.

In most cases, written communication, mainly letters, memos and faxes are based on instruction from the boss. The executive secretaries draft the letters and memos for the boss's approval and for their signature. The correspondence which they handle on their own are usually related to travel and hotel arrangements, fixing appointments, settling invoices, scheduling meetings, or routine correspondence to clients regarding product or service details.

Communication skills are therefore central to the work of the executive secretary because as a 'frontliner', she has to uphold the image of the company. Within her areas of responsibility there appears a need for her to be accurate, clear and precise in spoken and written communication.

#### **4.1.3 Patterns**

All the four companies A, B, C, D, represent a special type of social system in that they are business organizations. Being business organizations, they are interactive and functional so as to realize their goals. This is evident in the wide

range of business contacts both in intra-organizational and inter-organizational networks. They form an essential link to the society as whole through systems and procedures suggested by the interactions between executive secretaries and everyone else. The form, structure, design and their corresponding functions determine the company goals.

#### **4.1.3.1 Hierarchy**

All the organizations have a hierarchy or a line of authority. However, there is a paradigm shift towards flatter, less hierarchical boundaryless companies. They have fewer chains of command. Employees have a wider range of responsibilities with multiple roles. The reduced span of control highlights the move towards 'shared responsibility' where more and more employees play a role in the decision making process. Instead of a strict authoritarian control by the CEO or the MD, there is now a 'team' comprising heads of department or a board of directors who manage company operations. The accessibility and interaction between the bosses and employers, has blurred boundaries between superiors and subordinates.

#### **4.1.3.2 Position**

Her role in the company showing this relationship between position and power is the result of her particular job function as an executive secretary of the company where she has to deal with the highest level of authority. Access to the CEO or the MD is only through her. She has the power to decide who can or cannot see the head of the organization.



Her position demands the need to link with “an entire collection of actors and positions throughout the network”. This includes individuals in the company and a network of business relations outside of the company. As a ‘frontliner’, she upholds the image of the company by being courteous and tactful. She has to use discretion in all her interactions.

However, this sense of power does not apply to the nature of her unique relationship with her boss. Although they function as a unit where the bosses acknowledge a great degree of dependence on the executive secretary for all matters, she has, at all times, to perceive her role as a subordinate to the boss. The bosses emphasize the need to ensure that regardless of how competent she is, she cannot stand in for the boss and is always a subordinate.

In the overall organization structure, she is out of the chain of command. This is because she and her boss are perceived as a unit.

#### **4.1.3.3 Empowerment**

In keeping with the paradigm shift, companies subscribe to the principle of empowerment. There is an active interest in the training and development of employees to upgrade and update their knowledge and skills to empower them to take on more responsibilities. The company policy is to ensure that employees are multi-skilled enabling them to participate in decision making processes.

The expectations of the executive secretary illustrate empowerment by the multiple roles she has to assume, to provide the support function for her boss.

She has to make decisions on routine matters and other matters concerning her boss. She is expected to suggest, recommend, or to give an opinion when she is in consultation with the boss. This is because the boss places a high degree of trust in her judgement.

Much of the trust and confidence in her possibly stems from the long years of service in one company or with one boss. The continuity of service gives her the added privilege of being the one person who is well informed and is therefore a point of reference for her boss. To be effective, she has to be ahead of the boss in terms of information in his decision making process.

#### **4.1.3.4 Office Environment**

There is a particularity in the office layout of the boss and secretary which is generally perceived as a unit with a freedom of access at anytime. This is a facility uniquely available to the executive secretary by nature of her role and position in relation to the CEO and to the organization. As a consequence between the offices of the boss and the executive secretary, there is an atmosphere of familiarity, comfort and informality which seems to have an influence on the relationship. Metaphorically, the office of the executive secretary designates the role of a 'caretaker' for there is no access to the boss without the approval of the executive secretary.

The next chapter analyses the evolving genres set in the ethnographic descriptions of the organizations in this chapter.