

## The UK EA/PA Profession – Where do we go from here?

It's been an interesting and informative first ten months for EPAA and I have learned so much more about the inner workings of our profession from both sides.

Please note my thoughts and opinions are solely related to the UK and not international in any way - although I am sure some countries around the world may well relate to below.

It is my belief that 70% of the profession if not more in the UK are not or do not consider themselves to be career EAs/PA vs 30% of those who are. We do not have any factual statistics to back this up but given my position in the industry over the last decade I do feel confident in saying this. Although many of our board members believe it could be higher.

Within the 70% I believe we have a variety of EAs/PAs – firstly those that haven't chosen the profession as an active career choice, rather fell into it in the absence of not being able to get roles in their chosen field or whatever they completed a degree in. *(It's important to note here that some of these people will have come over to the career side upon finding they enjoy the role immensely).*

Secondly, there will be others who came into the role after school and being told they are “not academically bright enough” to go to university or further education, so “go and be a Secretary”. I remember this well and find it a little shocking that many schools still follow this line.

Thirdly there are others who like the PA role, do a very good job of it too but they want to go home and shut the computer down at 5pm. Whilst they enjoy the role, it's not a career for them and simply pays the bills.

Fourthly, there are a group within this 70% who do want to be a career EA/PA but don't have that sense of belonging and have had no exposure to the EA industry and all the events/training and resources that are on offer.

This is what the business world has needed and wanted for some time - a combination of non-career PAs and career PAs. Will this be the case in the future? thought leaders and now employers across the UK have predicted not for much longer.....

Expert and popular trainer Adam Fidler talked about this at the EPAA conference just a few weeks ago and why we are not business partners but business managers. It made complete sense to all gauging from the strong reaction in the room and via social media. He also talked through what he deemed 'red box vs black box' duties and how you define traditional against strategic roles and outlined the vision for the future. A vision which many employers have already put into place or certainly have on the agenda for the future.

Technology is indeed able to manage certain elements of the role, which frees up more time for getting involved in day to day business strategy and many EAs have embraced this fully.

As for being in the 30%, I always was and always will be proud to be in the 30%. I picked this as a conscious career choice at a very young age and fulfilled my ambitions (not without some heart ache, bad bosses and employers long the way). However, when I first bought into the PA role at the age of 12 I bought into the traditional aspects of the role, as that is what it was at this time. I moved into the 30% as time moved on and the role changed for me and many others.

The 30% is full of people like me who take pride in their work but also place importance on networking. In addition, they undertake a commitment to lifelong learning to keep up to date

with the vast variety of skills needed to undertake the EA role successfully. A wonderful PA said to me just the other week she enjoyed her role but was not a 'high flying career EA like you and I don't want to go to CEO level either'. I just want to clarify you don't have to be an EA that reaches CEO support level to be a career EA – utter nonsense. Indeed, it can be said that many of the roles full of 'variety' can be found out in the operations side of the business. If you feel like a career EA then you are one - regardless of what level of Director you are supporting!

However, the problem with being in the 30% as I was not so long ago, is that I found virtually all my employers were trying to benchmark me against what I deemed to be very traditional PA roles when it came to appraisal and pay rise time. They knew I was delivering more strategic work and adding further to the 'bottom line' but would not acknowledge this in any official capacity. Why? Because when employers do this it means they should pay more and they know it.

I remember clearly preparing and delivering a business case for a pay rise many years ago, after a high performing year. I was told no on account that I could not be paid more than the Chairman's PA (this was when I was made aware of her pay!). I was told it was not appropriate to do so because of the hierarchy, despite the fact my offering was as much as 40% more to the company, in comparison to her very traditional role. Her role consisted of diary management, travel, general admin and a few board meetings which suited the firm perfectly and worked. To me this is a traditional role and not uncommon for Chairman's PAs depending on the structure of the organisation of course. However, to be personally benchmarked against this type of role was wholly unacceptable to me given my deliverables and I did fight this numerous times and won.

It was not a personal attack on her or her work. It was the firm acknowledging the difference between our roles and what was being delivered. I had a watertight case with this and could prove it at every level. I had never raised the issue of the Chairman's PA and what she was delivering against me, that was never my intention - rather the firm used it as a tool to not give me a pay rise and in this case, it backfired.

I would say to any career EA to keep building those business cases and pushing against the norm. There are plenty of case studies and job advertisements out there now, which will allow you to be benchmarked properly. We also hope for UK EA/PA professionals our 'Profession Pathway Map' which will be released during 2017, will serve as a guide to employers and HR departments in shaping the way their administrative functions work internally.

The roles most certainly needs clearer definitions in the UK and for us to move forward and provide a real and sustainable benchmark for EAs and employers at large.

### **General Findings:**

One of the overwhelming things I did find with UK EAs and PAs this year, is that so many are deeply unsatisfied with their roles and this is for a multitude of reasons. The major reason is wrong boss and/or wrong company – I am so sorry so many of you feel this way. Many more consider themselves to be career EAs, who want to get involved within the nitty gritty of the business and have the talent to do so. However, they feel they are languishing in traditional PA roles that offer little in the way of variety for them and their skills and there is zero chance of learning and development either.

As I said above, I absolutely acknowledge those traditional PA roles and know that many do indeed enjoy them, but if you are one of those people that needs to be more deeply involved this can be a tedious and as one PA described to me just recently "soul destroying" role to undertake.

I have also seen an increase of double-barrelled job titles such as Administrator/Executive Assistant in a lot of job adverts very recently. These do serve a purpose in some companies but sadly in the world of work more widely this is essentially telling you it is more EA work with a few bullet points on general admin and the word 'Administrator' chucked in for good measure. What does this all equal – an Administrator salary. Not great if you are a career EA, right?! I would most certainly challenge a role description that is presented in this manner.

If people want a strategic career EA then they must pay for it and if the thought leaders and employers so far are to be believed, soon it will largely be strategic EA roles on offer as opposed to the traditional duties that were once a big part of many of our roles.

Believe me when I say we have lost some incredibly talented EAs already from the profession this year, for reasons listed above. They have all retrained and gone into other professions within the office environment. My prediction is that this will rise unless things change for many.

However, change will not come overnight and Rome wasn't built in a day. It does start with more conversations and opening our community up to the business world a little more than we currently do – people are a lot more receptive to it than you might think. Just the other week with the EPAA conference we ensured that over half our speaker line up was Executives/Directors and HR Directors. This has never been done before and it made a huge difference 100% to the debate and our conversations. I really felt we were starting to get somewhere and it is a theme I intend to continue as much as I can...

We also need to think very carefully about how we position ourselves as a profession to the outside world. I have been concerned at some of the imagery and quotes to describe this profession and have been dumbfounded as to why this has happened and what purpose it serves – this is coming directly from PAs and industry officials. For example, the continued use of describing EAs and PAs as superhero's and rock stars has done little to help career EAs get to where they need to be – this is for a separate blog all together...

If you are a 30% EA and unhappy in your role, then make 2017 the year to do something about it. No time like the present to start to think about the change you need to make you feel happy and excited for your role. EAs also must start asking deeper questions at interview stage too. The reason for this is so that you know what you are really walking into. It's very easy for employers to 'talk up' a role at interview, only for you to discover that it's little more than diary appointments and travel.

For the 70% let's continue to reach those that do want the sense of belonging and encourage them to come out to the various events or via social media to network.

My biggest tip to career EAs is to start going to non-PA events too! It was something I cottoned onto in the last few years in my career as an EA and brought a wealth of information and contacts, but not only this it allowed me to be fully integrated as a profession into events typically attended by others in your office. As a profession, it is so fantastic a good number of us enjoy networking but broaden those horizons and network with others outside the normal sphere.

Essentially it is up to you where you sit – are you in the 70% or the 30%? Or are you forcibly in the 70% and want to get over to the strategic EA role? Those are the questions a lot of Assistants will likely be facing now or in the not too distant future....

