

REAL LIFE TOOLS and advice for every administrative professional by

BONNIE LOW-KRAMEN

Assistant to Olympia Dukakis

*Be the
Ultimate
Assistant*

A celebrity assistant's
secrets to working with
any high-powered
employer

"Bonnie Low-Kramen is, in fact, the
ultimate assistant. If that is what you
aspire to, read this book carefully."

—From the Foreword
by Olympia Dukakis



CHAPTER 3

JOB DESCRIPTION:

THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

*M*y mother had been asked for years by her friends, “*What exactly does Bonnie do?*” Her answer has become very simple – “*Everything.*”

I’ll share with you how my work has evolved over the years because my job description has expanded incredibly in that time. It certainly didn’t start out that complicated. Most celebrity assistants don’t stay in their jobs this long. Most work an average of one to five years before moving on to another assistant position or related career. Also, all celebrity assistants don’t perform exactly the same job functions, but what I will describe will be an overview of the possibilities.

Most celebrities have at least one assistant. Some have more than one. Here’s how it works. There is a number one assistant, the person who bears the main responsibility to assist the employer. He or she delegates tasks to the numbers two and three assistants. In the case of some movie actors, they have an “office” assistant and another “location” assistant who travels with the actor to wherever the film is shooting.

When I first started, my main responsibility was being the keeper of Olympia’s master schedule, which meant everyone (except her family, but sometimes even them) needed to go through me to schedule time with Olympia. I was also her publicist, therefore, I handled all the media requests. I fielded her calls and dealt with

her mail and correspondence including fan mail. Lastly, I handled all travel arrangements. That was pretty much it at first. Time was very precious, so Olympia and I would meet face to face or talk by phone for a few minutes each day to catch each other up. Of course, I still do all of these things and other than being a publicist, these are the everyday kinds of things you could expect to be asked to do.

The first week we had an office in Olympia's home (this was after I had been working with her for four years at the Whole Theatre), I told her we couldn't function without a fax machine, a typewriter and a computer. She agreed and handed me a credit card saying essentially to make it happen and just try to get good prices. I did. After a year of things going pretty smoothly, I began to pay all the bills, create financial reports on Excel for the accountant, handle the medical insurance paperwork, read and give opinions on scripts, and travel with Olympia when she made appearances around the country.

A few years later, in addition to all of the above, the "personal life" responsibilities became a more integral part of my job. We took a field trip to the island of St. Maarten where Olympia bought two vacation homes. I typed term papers for her son. I served as party planner for numerous parties including her son's wedding. I helped buy and sell four homes here and abroad, including the apartment in Manhattan, which is the home office. It was my job to coordinate the renovation of the apartment and manage the move, which pretty much took me the whole six months that Olympia spent in England doing a play. My job included going to appliance stores to take Polaroid photos of refrigerators and stoves and overnighting them to Olympia for approval. Modern technology makes these tasks so much easier now.

One of most important "personal" responsibilities I had was to help select the nursing home for Olympia's mother, Alexandra, and handle the small mountain of paperwork involved with that.

When Olympia was shooting a movie out of the country, I received a call from the nursing home telling me that Alexandra's false teeth were missing. That's a big problem for anyone, but especially for a ninety-year-old woman. I decided to go there and take a look for myself since I had come to know her habits. I found her teeth in the pocket of her bathrobe, and I also found a few other things under the mattress. Everyone involved was relieved, and I only told Olympia about it after the problem was solved. Assistants do *whatever it takes*.

Now all of these things are part of my job. When most people hear this diverse job description, they seem overwhelmed. It may be overwhelming to some, but it suits me and is business as usual for assistants.

My colleagues gave me examples from their job descriptions which range from the no-skill-required to "I'm sure glad I have a college degree" level of responsibility and everything in between. Assistants have fed the homeless with Mother Teresa, filmed the birth of their employer's baby, coordinated the shipping and taxidermy of a deceased giraffe, flown on Air Force One, and given CPR to a dog. They manage multiple houses and work with curators on installing art collections. They take pets to the vet and out for their walks, and they pick up kids from school. They order prescriptions, submit the health insurance papers, arrange for cars to be serviced, turn over summer clothes to winter clothes, change light bulbs, and interview prospective nannies, housekeepers, and personal chefs. I think one of my colleagues summed it up best when she said that one minute you might be meeting Michael Douglas, and the next, you might be cleaning up a broken jar of pickles.

I love that Olympia and Louis put up very few obstacles to my learning process. In fact, they want me to do as much as I can handle. My opinion is welcomed, trusted, and valued. The job is never dull.

Happily, no two days are *ever* the same.

What this job can also be, at times, is stressful. We take this work seriously and thus, all of us need our own strategies for stress management. The stress often comes from being uncertain about how to approach an issue. I have come to affectionately call this uncertainty my “puddles of discomfort.” Some puddles are deeper than others, some I’ve been sitting in longer than others, but I always have a few going at a time.

Sometimes on a day when my head is spinning, I just leave the office and take a walk around the block. I get some fresh air and some perspective at the same time. It helps me, and I feel better. I also run, take guitar lessons, and go to the beach. I remind myself that this is not brain surgery, and Olympia reminds me that nobody is going to “theatre jail.” My colleagues take yoga classes, jog, meditate, go to therapy, volunteer for charities, attend the theatre, and get massages. One has a sailboat and another bought a vacation home in Italy. Whatever your solution, it is important to have a plan to manage the inevitable and unavoidable stress.

One of the things assistants often find challenging is to have a personal life because of the demanding job description. As a result, most celebrity assistants are single. I have one child, as do many of my colleagues. Very few have more than one child. I know of two who do, but their children are adults.

What if you work for an extremely wealthy person (*Forbes* calls them “high net-worth individuals”) whose name is *not* instantly recognizable? Or the employer who is intensely private and does not want his or her assistant to use the name to get things done? The assistant to his billionaire employer comments, “*The doors don’t open as easily or as quickly.*” How do the assistants to these people arrange the best seats to the hottest Broadway show or a prime table at Nobu for Saturday night or arrange for their employers to be one of the first to buy that limited edition car without getting a migraine? The answer is a combination of connections, charm, and

often money in the form of heavy tipping. Personal relationships and connections are extremely important to cultivate especially for the assistant to a not-well-known “celebrity.”

An example: The assistant to a Fortune 500 couple needed to arrange for a very intricate cake to be made and there was only one New York City baker they wanted for the job. Unfortunately, the baker extraordinaire was going to be away on vacation during the week the cake was needed. Charm and persuasion was not going to work. Finally, the assistant said, *“I will pay you double the amount. Name your price.”* The baker agreed to come back for one day from his vacation to make the cake for this regular client. The assistant not only paid double, but included an additional \$200 in cash as added appreciation. It is the smart employer who gives the assistant discretion and latitude in these matters. Another example from the same assistant – *“Want to receive excellent service without uttering a word? Pull up to a store in your employer’s super-luxury car driven by his chauffeur and make sure the staff sees you. Works every time.”*

Another colleague also works for a billionaire employer. He advises, *“Maintain a number of resources for when money and charm cannot obtain the desired result. These include an event ticket broker, a personal concierge service, and a members-only travel agency. These sources are not found in the Yellow Pages; they usually only take clients through referral or paid membership. They can be expensive but worth every penny when you have exhausted all other means of obtaining tickets to a sold-out event or getting seats on a booked flight. Also, don’t forget about the extensive services that come with the American Express Platinum and Black cards.”*

It is not uncommon for people of high wealth to own multiple homes in the United States and abroad, one or more private planes, and many businesses. In addition, it follows that they employ large staffs, and renovation projects seem to always be in progress. And because money is not an issue, life is in constant flux and changes are the norm. The assistant is often needed to travel

to the different homes to organize various projects. With the help of many others, including the household, estate manager, butler, and housekeepers, it takes an extraordinarily organized assistant to manage all of this activity.

One closing note about the job description no matter who you work for. An assistant might work alone in a home office, but he or she does not work *alone*. Every great assistant has an A-team of pros to call upon for various needs who will definitely be remembered at holiday time – housekeeper, pharmacist, travel agent, florist, caterer, plumber, dentist, ticket agent, manicurist, personal shopper, hair stylist, colorist, trainer, chiropractor, masseuse, concierge, electrician, handyman, cardiologist, limo driver, airport greeter, etc. The best assistants know exactly who to call in order to not only get the job done, but get it done to your employer's exact specifications.