

I have been holding off on releasing this blog for a while, as I know I am deemed to be controversial at times. Although I personally like to look at things as calling it as I and many others have seen it too. Indeed, there was a fantastic article by a global thought leader on this subject earlier this year (Shelagh Donnelly of Exceptional EA - [Call me a Professional, not a superhero](#) via Executive Secretary Magazine).

In much of what I have written and said about the EA/PA profession this year in the UK and years gone by (please note I only ever comment on UK matters and not international in any way), I have talked about my concern with respect to the perception of our roles. I am sorry to say but I feel we have considerable issues here, which are down to ourselves and not people external to the industry.

In the past few years I have been bombarded with e shots and marketing from PA industry officials with superhero photos and even a few e-shots addressed to me as 'Dear Superhero'. I even saw a banner used at events with it on too just the other day. It is everywhere and so remote from what I understood to be as a profession (most of it in the wrong context completely), I am beginning to wonder if I was in another profession entirely for 16 years of my life?

If an EA or PA out there reading this has used the term 'superhero' in your CV, job specification or in a business case for pay rises or promotions, then I will happily climb back in my box.... Please do send over your examples as I would be delighted to see them?! For industry officials – do any of you run courses or qualifications in 'How to be a Superhero PA' or 'Diploma in Superhero Personal Assistance'?

If you like so many others, want this profession to be recognised as such, then we simply need to raise the game. All the amazing and incredible things we do for businesses and organisations across the UK and the best we can come up with to describe ourselves is that we are superhero's?! I prefer terms such as professionals or experts but hey I know I cut a lonely figure at times but then I had a very successful career as an EA too... I say lonely figure as actually I am not, there are a LOT of people who feel this way but are too afraid to speak up. The irony here of course....

In the wider business world, this would be little more than gimmicky I am afraid. I cannot imagine using this term at all in my last EA role in a FTSE 250 company and even in the Third Sector (charity) where we were changing lives for thousands of disabled people across the UK. In fact, my last CEO I can see right now hysterically laughing if I had used this terminology with him.

The problem with the term 'superhero' is that it gives off the impression that every time something goes wrong in the workplace you will whip out that red cape and

correct it. I am sorry to point out the obvious but EAs/PAs are not perfectionists and are only human not super human. This means on a good many occasion you are not going to be able to 'fly to the rescue' and 'save the day'. I can personally testify to getting caught out with this mentality on numerous occasions early on in my career and learned some very harsh lessons with this.

Furthermore, virtually all the images used by the industry are of super girl or wonder woman, who are dressed in scantily clad leotards, with breasts popping out. I fully appreciate we are a largely female profession (97% to 3% male) and most images are and should be of women (at this point and not for much longer I might add) but why do we feel the need to use the photos of sexy women?

I went to work in smart, business attire and one job I undertook was dress down all the time, but we wore jeans and trainers. I don't remember wearing a leotard although I am sure some of the men and women in my previous offices would have loved me to have worn one for the entertainment factor!

Back to the pressing point around Male EAs and PAs though - I cannot imagine how they feel with being continually confronted with this to describe something that is also their profession. They may currently be in a minority but they also have a voice too.

It's very easy to say well the 'majority are women and our imagery should reflect this' but then this doesn't tackle the gender/diversity issue, does it?

There are few female CEO and leaders in the FTSE or major public sector organisations, which we all know but do you see all the imagery used of men? No it isn't all of men. The reason being is to create change you must present an inclusive vision and perception and show women working in those positions as leaders. The Male Assistants I have spoken to have resisted 100% photos of any superhero man or woman to be used to front the profession.

How do people think we are going to drive more men into the profession with continually using images of women who are dressed in this attire? and is it going to help you as a woman get a promotion or pay rise?

I have been informed that the reason this is used is because we do pull off amazing work and save the day and are hero's. I counteract this and say what about all the other professions within the office environment who also 'save the day'? I have witnessed members of staff from the Accounts, HR, IT, Production, Marketing departments etc save the day too and these staff levels are also on little more than what an administrative professional might be on.

You might be surprised to know that some other back-office functions are not really considered a profession either - although most are a lot further in front than the PA profession with their aim to be seen as such. Most starting or second jobber salaries in back office functions are pretty rubbish in comparison to the work pulled off. My point is that a lot of people can 'save the day' depending on what the issue is. It is most certainly not unique to EAs and PAs.

I don't want to take away the fun from the profession at all and sense of community but when so many EAs and PAs are crying out for their work and role to be recognised as a profession then really, I just cannot see how we justify this to describe the industry at large. I think the odd image is possibly fine depending on what context it is used - perhaps workplace bullying where you do have to show an enormous amount of bravery to tackle this.

I also appreciate that some firms run internal competitions or rewards and use the term superhero but frankly what a firm gets up to internally with its staff is not part of this and the wider picture and is their business.

I do not have the power to stop various industry officials from using this imagery, that is up to them but on my watch with EPAA you will never, ever see a red cape and tight leotard to describe this profession.

There is some partial fault with me too. Some years ago, I light-heartedly started using a hashtag called #PAPOWER. It was just supposed to be a twitter high five to some international PAs as a way of communication. I even created a what is now a blog entitled 'PA POWER' but unfortunately the hashtag took on a life of its own (away from me) and is now essentially used in respect of superhero's. Huge apologies as it makes me cringe now, as this is not what it was supposed to be and I never used images of wonder woman or super girl either. As soon as WordPress give me back access to this blog, it will be deleted in its entirety.

I will say as a CEO it's hard for me or my job is being made ten times harder by the industry sometimes. I spend considerable time with Executives and HR Directors and I am trying to sell a profession to them. It's impossible at times with the imagery and perception we present as our profession and most Executives and HR Directors I have spoken to have not bought into it either...

It is all about credibility and perception for me and so many others and I am fully focussed on this for EPAA members. I get many, many employers contacting me to advertise their EA/PA roles and only want career EAs in these positions. Career EAs/PAs are not superhero's and they know it, as I did and still do now. We are professionals and experts at what we do, not superhero's.

I talked at the EPAA launch earlier this year about 'taking a seat at the table' with other professions. That is what my work is about through EPAA and when you do get that seat at the table (because you will eventually) you will NOT be wearing a leotard and red cape I can absolutely assure you of that...

If I was ever going to use the term superhero for any profession or industry it would be for none other than the British NHS and our amazing Doctors and Nurses who work in exceptionally challenging conditions day in and day out. They also really do save lives too!

I look forward to continuing the debate into 2017.....