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Why today's Executive Assistants need to get more strategic

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The role of the Executive Assistant (EA) continues to evolve and in my capacity as a trainer, educationalist and thought-leader in the industry, I continue to observe and reflect on what the role of the EA will become. Having worked as an 'Assistant' for 20 years, and having transitioned from Secretary, to PA, to EA, the biggest learning I had to do, in all that time, was to operate more 'strategically'.

Today, it's not just the Executives who operate with strategic focus. If the EA role is to survive the long-game, then it's essential that the Assistant who supports an Executive has the ability to operate more *independently*, both in the activities they undertake, but also in the decisions, thoughts and choices they make. This requires strategic focus.

The hundreds of PAs who have attended my two-day Executive PA programme will know that I talk about 'black box' and 'red box' activities that the Assistant carries out, emphasising that if an Assistant is to move forward in their profession, and fulfil their desire for self-development and recognition, then it will be essential that they undertake elements of the 'red box'. This means more managerial activities, more evidence-based input from them, and the ability to straddle between offering 'support' **and** operating as a junior- or middle-manager *in their own right*.

Equally, if leaders are to survive, they too will need to use their Assistants in the right way – and allow their Assistants the autonomy to do their jobs. *When an Executive allows their Assistant to operate in the space of 'management', they free themselves up to operate in the space of 'leadership'*. (Assuming, of course, the Executive know the difference between leadership and management!)

In my view, Assistants need to become more ‘strategic’ and this is not actually as hard a transition for them to make as they may feel. Put simply, being strategic, from the EA’s perspective means:

- Knowing their organisation, the bigger picture and their Executive’s desired outcomes, so they can work towards solutions that get the best end results.
- Working more autonomously, to free up management time, by making informed judgements about what needs doing, when things need doing, and who needs consulting, thereby saving their Executive having to think about these things. In other words, EA-ing is not only about *joining the dots*, but also about *making the dots*.
- Feeling confident to take the lead, offer solutions and challenge their Executive, even if this upsets the status quo.
- Developing neutrality of thought and independence; crucial if the EA is to become a highly-respected, trusted advisor and enabler, *who influences on their own merits, and not merely through the Executive they support*.
- Working ‘*to the position*’, and not just ‘*to the boss*’. There is a subtle difference here. This means acting with delegated authority on certain projects or activities; often with no, or very little, input, from their Executive. Indeed, some of the EA’s responsibilities may not directly involve the Executive they work with at all.

The role of the Executive Assistant is here to stay but it requires some fine-tuning by the EA and the Executive if the role is to add the most value. Moreover, it requires the right attitude and approach from both parties so that everyone knows where the EA function fits in, and how Executive and EA work *strategically* together.

The question, then, for the would-be Strategic Executive Assistant is: ‘You may have the skill, but do you have the will?’ Only the EAs can answer that, but as I learnt, the more I put into developing my strategic focus, the more valuable my contribution became for the boss and the organisation.

About Adam Fidler

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The Business Case for PAs

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Recently, I was asked to talk to a group of Senior Managers about the role of the PA, the rationale behind it, and why, in this day and age, the role is still as important as ever. My audience would be a group of newly promoted Senior Managers, some of whom had never had their own PA before, and due to their promotions now warranted one. Some of those managers, whilst having used the services of a PA previously, in my view, could also benefit by knowing what the PA role was about and how, more specifically, it could contribute to *their* success and productivity.

The PA role, as I am sure we will all agree, is one of the hardest roles to define. Much of the work of the PA depends, to a large extent, on the organisation where they work, the boss they work for, the industry and indeed the amount of responsibility delegated by the PA's immediate supervisor. Moreover, there are now a plethora of roles that, in my view, are actually 'secretarial roles', albeit those employed may be called something other than PA, such as Administrative Officer ('Admins'), Executive Project Administrator, Executive Secretary etc. This only adds to the confusion of employers, and with so many job titles being used interchangeably, and not necessarily reflecting the grade, salary or seniority of those roles, there is little wonder why anyone who is not a PA finds it hard to comprehend what the job is really about, despite so many people being employed in those roles. Interestingly, 10 per cent of the whole UK labour market are now employed in secretarial or administrative positions¹. So, far from the job of PA being extinct, it's very much part and parcel of business life. And, I have no doubt, there are many more people in the UK labour force who perform the duties of a PA or Executive Assistant, yet may not confess to being an 'admin' or really consider themselves 'secretaries'.

Having thought broadly about what the role of PA encompasses, and trying to avoid the increasing tendency to speak about actual duties of the PA, I came up with the following which I think makes an interesting case in support of the PA role and the value they add – and I would encourage you to share these thoughts with your employers, or anyone else that asks that same-old question, “What does a PA do?” My list certainly isn’t definitive, but it makes a very good starting point!

Firstly, the PA **communicates**. Speedy communications such as minute-taking, document production, and e-mailing, are the operational foundation of every business, and the PA spends much of their time in social intercourse.

The flow of information and actions that are necessary in business cannot be entrusted to memory as there are so many people, facts and items involved, it would be very easy to confuse things. This information very often has to be written down and recorded correctly not only as a reminder of what was agreed, but also for audit and legal purposes. In the production of this written communication, the PA is responsible for accuracy, appearance and completeness; and ensures that all the ‘I’s are dotted, and the ‘t’s are crossed. As ‘completer-finishers’ the PA ensures that actions are carried out, letters are sent, forms are signed and e-mails are responded to in a timely manner.

PAs, in addition, communicate verbally on behalf of their employers – on the telephone, or by having conversations with colleagues directly, and they often speak on behalf of their bosses.

Listening skills are also paramount; studies have shown that the Executive may spend up to one-half to two-thirds of their time listening to others. PAs must listen nearly as much as misunderstandings can be avoided and work production increased when the PA is allowed to listen intelligently. The obvious example would be during meetings, when the PA is taking minutes.

One cannot underestimate the amount of communicating the PA does, and when this is demonstrated through speed, accuracy and completeness – this is the strong rationale for PAs being touch typists and shorthand writers – then the efficiency of the Executive is much increased.

Secondly, the PA **interacts with others**. From the beginning to the end of the working day, the PA must deal with people – instructing, asking, requesting, persuading, explaining, reminding, listening and co-operating. Working well with others involves much more than merely getting along with them; it involves a conscious effort on the part of the PA to exercise good judgement and tact, to feel concern for other people and others’ views, and to develop the personal character traits of loyalty, trust and fairness.

These softer skills are paramount to the success of the PA; a PA can contribute substantially to the employer's prosperity by maintaining good human relationships between internal and external stakeholders. To put it simply, the PA's manner with co-workers, Executives and outside contacts has much to do with the overall success and reputation of the business.

Thirdly, the PA uses their **skills to relieve the boss of routine duties**. PAs have a mastery of skills that are as broad and diverse as any middle manager; when they assume responsibility, work without direct supervision and exercise good judgement, they free up management time. Examples include the PA representing their employer to the public and other business people, acting as the 'buffer' by screening calls and visitors to the Executive, and being an ambassador for their firms. PAs very often carry out the social niceties that bosses often forget, and may also supervise admin staff, handle correspondence, obtain information and refer enquiries to other departments such as complaints – all *without disturbing the Executive*. If the Executive dealt with all of these items, as they came in, then they wouldn't be able to get their jobs done and this would not make good business sense.

Fourthly, the PA **saves the organisation money**. That is, it makes sound financial sense for Executives to employ PAs. In the 1990s many organisations decided they could do without PAs(!), and I worked for one blue-chip where several hundred PAs were made redundant. "I don't need a PA," you'd hear an Executive say, "I can do my own emails and letters!" But, this was a false economy and the company I am referring to, having found productivity decreasing and too many managers spending too much of their time on admin, actually re-recruited many PAs several years later. It is a false economy for Executives to work without support – the PA not only is a more cost-effective way of carrying out administration, but they also help maintain a healthy work-life balance for their Executive, and allow the Executive to spend their time on what they are paid to do: strategy, vision, leading and managing. An Executive who spends just 10 hours of their working week on e-mails or correspondence will cost the company more money in lost management time, in terms of their hourly rate over a whole year, than it would cost the company to employ a reasonably-paid PA².

In summary, the PA keeps the business running smoothly through the application of their skills and abilities. And, the mark of a superior PA is their ability to assume responsibility and do high-quality work without direct supervision. This where they add most value – by freeing up management time to allow managers to do their jobs.

My presentation was well received. I had no questions at the end of it(!); perhaps those new Senior Managers didn't think there was quite so much 'science' behind being a PA... but they certainly understood more fully why they should be using the services of a PA and how their PAs could maximise their effectiveness.

In closing my presentation, I left those Senior Managers with just one final thought: I explained that all of the above assumes that the manager allows the PAs to do their jobs properly. There is little point the boss fiddling with his diary when he has a PA to do it. If you will excuse the expression, 'Why have a dog and bark yourself?' springs to mind, so the PA can only really be responsible if they are given the autonomy to do so. I wonder how many Executives actually have PAs but don't give them, their PAs, the freedom to make decisions, use their initiative, and get on with their jobs? But, that's probably another topic for a future article!

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Notes:

1. UK Labour Market Statistics Summary Tables 2016, April-June 2016 data.
2. Assume an Executive earns £100k per year; their hourly rate would be approximately £48 per hour. If they spend just 10 hours per week (2 hours per day) doing 'admin', the cost to the business is a staggering £25,000 per year – nearly the cost of a full-time PA. If that PA then works for two Executives, their salary is easily paid out of non-wasted management time.