

Managing your Personal Assistant

By Ann-Maree Moodie | smh.com.au | 10 June 2008

Imagine if all the executive and personal assistants in your workplace suddenly stopped work and walked out of the building and no one knew when - or whether - they were coming back.

How would this affect your day? Would you know when your next meeting was scheduled; who was responsible for current projects; whether the venue, catering and keynote speaker for next week's client seminar was organised? At a more basic level, do you know how to use the telephone, send an email, work the fax machine?

"The role of the modern-day executive assistant is one that is varied and challenging," says Jane Elder, executive assistant to Eric Wang, chief operating officer at funds manager Perpetual.

"Being an EA is no longer viewed as the standard boxed-in secretarial role. It is a career to be proud of."

Those black and white photographs of secretaries at the typing pool are rightfully housed in a museum. Today's executive assistant is fully engaged in the business. "An EA can be asked to do anything - from the standard administrative tasks to event management, project management - the scope is endless," Elder says.

"[They] are the critical filter between the outside world and the manager. [They] need to be up to speed on the current priorities in the business and use discretion to decide what's important and what's not - while at the same time taking into consideration what may be important in the future."

She says interpersonal skills are essential and being able to demonstrate these skills to the organisation on a daily basis puts the EA in the perfect position for career advancement.

At the recent Executive Assistant Network annual conference, speakers consistently referred to the complexity of the role.

The job can involve writing business plans, helping to formulate the board's monthly agenda and contributing to strategic planning and corporate policy. Being a project manager, troubleshooter and stakeholder relationship manager is part of the scope of the role.

Many more women than men are executive assistants.

"The contemporary EA is in a highly collaborative role and she is no doubt an asset to the organisation," Angelo Malizis, the former chief executive of Wizard and Mobius Financial, told the conference. "She is an information broker and can easily be referred to as the corporate conscience."

The best way to create an effective working relationship between a manager and assistant is to communicate openly and honestly, says Jonathan McIlroy, a director of the Executive Assistant Network. Otherwise, they won't have an insight into the challenges the manager is facing in the business and be able to take control of the issues that affect the daily schedule.

"An EA who has a good relationship with her boss will arrange meetings with other key executives before being asked to do so because she is aware of sudden situations that have arisen within the business or as a result of unexpected developments in the media," McIlroy says.

"A well-managed EA will be able to monitor major projects and timelines for the managers and feed them appropriate reports as and when necessary without being asked to do so and remove other non-time-critical pieces of information."

The best relationship between a manager and the assistant is when there are few secrets.

"The more open and honest you can be with each other the greater the ability of each person to help make your unique team of two even more efficient," McIlroy says.

Managers who have only considered their assistant as a diary manager, travel manager or communication secretary should look at some of the good working relationships between executive assistants and managers in corporate Australia.

"Ask yourself how much more efficient, productive and, ultimately, successful you could be with a business aide or manager with a very wide brief who can help you not only achieve, but to exceed, your goals."

A close working relationship will undoubtedly mean having access to confidential information so it's important to set suitable boundaries between what the assistant should do and what they are prepared to do.

"The issues of boundaries is an interesting one and varies in every situation," McIlroy says.

Some managers, for example, say it is not appropriate for their assistant to be asked to handle personal situations, such as buying gifts for family, making appointments for the manager's children to see the dentist or doctor, or booking family travel.

"Overall, whether it's a purely business request or a social request, it comes down to the nature of the relationship between the parties and what both are happy with."

Assistants should know that they can refuse a request that makes them uncomfortable.

"Conversely, the manager needs to know that in an emergency or exceptional circumstance they can ask for any kind of moral support or assistance necessary to ensure the team functions at its best," McIlroy says.

"Sometimes this will cross the lines into assisting with family matters or may require a level or type of work above and beyond the norm. That's the nature of modern business but nothing should be too great a challenge for a team that communicates honestly and openly."

Bird's eye view

When it works, a range of mutual benefits come from the relationship between a manager and an executive assistant.

"From the manager's point of view, you make their life easier for them so they can focus on the key aspects of their role by facilitating a seamless working environment," says Jane Elder from funds manager Perpetual.

"From an EA's perspective, you have a bird's-eye view of what is happening in the business. Gaining exposure to projects across the business provides you with continued professional development. From a personal perspective, a successful relationship can make your role extremely rewarding and satisfying."

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