



Hidden Resources: The Strategic Potential of a Professional Administrative Assistant

They manage projects that span different departments and all corners of the globe. They proficiently use the latest software and technology to communicate, organize, and administer company processes and assets. They combine negotiating savvy with good customer service. They are entrepreneurial, professional, loyal, good at solving problems, and they understand your business from nearly every aspect.

We're not talking about your managers or your business analysts. These positions certainly require a strong set of skills, but the one person in your organization who has the broadest range of aptitudes and abilities – and makes their boss look good in the process – is a professional, experienced administrative assistant. In fact, according to the International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP), administrative assistants play an increasingly important role in the day-to-day workflow of a faster-paced, response-driven business environment. From performing common clerical duties to managing data to helping a C-level executive run an organization efficiently, today's executive administrative assistant bears little resemblance to secretaries of the past – who were known mainly for their typing skills and telephone manners.

Nobody said Running a Company Would be Easy

Facing greater amounts of business travel, a more rapid pace of communications, and a global demand for a technologically-savvy organization, a successful C-level

executive needs someone who can stay on top of the many different challenges a leadership position faces. This increasingly globalized business climate requires more complicated scheduling, as well as the ability to communicate clearly and understand cultural barriers.

So whether vendors and colleagues are down the street or halfway around the globe, the complexity of business interactions continues to grow, with executives juggling increasingly hectic schedules – which, in turn, place greater demands on support staff. And without a competent executive assistant, an executive must function at a distinct disadvantage – forced to focus on the tactical as well as the strategic. Clearly, the greatest reported executive challenge of 2007, "excellence in execution," cannot be accomplished alone.

The Value of a Trusted Gatekeeper

While executives usually serve as the most visible members of an organization, their ability to function efficiently – and fulfill the many responsibilities that come with being a director, a negotiator and a leader – would be nearly impossible without the assistance of key support staff. Traveling executives are also increasingly dependent on support staff to maintain stability and an efficient office workflow during their absence. In this regard, the administrative assistant is often responsible for an increasing number of tasks beyond the obvious, including company liaison with building management, office maintenance, shipping, and vendor management.

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"In general, my executive assistant helps me set my priorities and manage my staff and public so that I can focus on high-gain activities," reflects Jan Rivenbark, CEO of Cash Cycle Solutions. *"Often she coordinates company-wide projects with my executive team without my involvement. She is an extension of my office for all those things that don't neatly fit under a CFO, a CTO or a division president. And to a lesser extent, she represents me to the outside public in the same fashion."*

Perhaps the most critical aspect of a successful executive/administrative assistant relationship is trust. To protect the confidentiality of the sensitive, confidential decisions and information that exist in any executive office, the right person needs a strong sense of loyalty and integrity. *"My most recent executive assistant worked with me for over ten years,"* recalls Jim Esposito, managing partner of Summerhill Partners. *"The confidential nature of my position as the head of HR for a major business unit meant that for my assistant, absolute integrity, tact, and fair play were a daily part of the position. I needed her to remain professional both in and out of the workplace, and if I had ever felt I couldn't trust her, our partnership would have ended immediately."*

Who makes a Good Administrative Assistant?

In many ways, the core responsibilities for administrative assistants have remained the same over the years: performing and coordinating an office's administrative activities and storing, retrieving, and integrating information for dissemination to staff and clients. As in the past, these office professionals continue to perform a variety of administrative and clerical duties necessary to run an organization efficiently. They serve as information and communication managers for an office, plan and schedule meetings and appointments, organize and maintain paper and electronic files, manage projects, conduct research, and disseminate information across a wide range of digital media. They also may handle travel and guest arrangements, as well as help busy, over-stretched executives take care of personal or specialized needs like shopping, making reservations, and arranging for reliable, timely transportation.

As the reliance on technology continues to expand in offices, however, the role of the administrative assistant has greatly evolved. Office automation and new organic organizational structures have enabled administrative assistants to assume responsibilities once reserved for managerial and professional staff. To that end, the competent use of computers has become requisite,

allowing admins to do tasks previously handled by managers and professionals, like create spreadsheets, compose correspondence, manage databases, and create presentations, reports, and documents using desktop publishing software.

According to Jade Barner, a local administrative professional with Kirco, *"in order to do my job, you really have to be a master communicator. I need to be able to switch gears on a second's notice from one person to the next. I interact with contractors, engineers and executives everyday in countless different ways. So to succeed, I have to deal with many different kinds of people and must relate to everyone at their own level in order to get things done."*

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A Strong Demand for the Right People

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, more than 438,000 office managers will be added to the profession before 2014. This reflects only a segment of the predicted growth, however, and the profession as a whole is predicted to grow 6.2 percent in the next six years. One of the reasons for this field's potential growth stems from the trend of organizations to downsize and streamline – which has created a strong internal need for business-critical positions like executive assistants and administrators.

Additionally, as executives become more consumed with the pressures of the global business environment, the need for competent administrative professionals will only increase. Or to put it another way, the administrative assistants ready and willing to partner with their executive in driving their business success and serving as the man or woman behind the curtain will experience job security and compensation that is equivalent if not greater than that of many other fields in the modern workplace.

Finding the right person has become a familiar challenge for executives searching for an assistant, though. The skill-set required to accomplish the assortment of tasks at the degree to which the position demands is extensive—a senior administrator must have managerial skills, knowledge in a diverse set of software programs, and business acumen that often rivals or exceeds that of their executive in key areas.

The Path to Opportunity

Most organizations require a college degree for an entry-level administrator, but people skills, intellectual curiosity, and a basic knowledge of business and basic software platform knowledge are also essential. In more advanced positions, business skills, as well as managerial and software expertise, should develop in directions that support the industry or the specialty of the executive.

Jayne Leonard, administrative assistant to the President of iVerify, understands what her boss expects, and enjoys the variety and fast pace of her critical support role. *“Every day is different, sometimes wildly so, and whether my boss is in a plane headed to Europe or stuck in a long-running meeting, my organizational skills and willingness to work across different departments helps me meet the high demands of both our jobs.”*

“Too many executive administrative assistants think they can be an executive assistant just because they managed some executive’s calendar, travel, etc.,” adds Jim Esposito, managing partner of Summerhill Partners. *“The self confidence and experience required to handle mission-critical tasks and projects without instructions or direction is a far less prevalent skill. Most people do not appreciate the fact that my executive assistant has significant influence over my subordinates and business partners and that the actions or inactions of my assistant are an extension of me. Done well, it’s truly an asset; done poorly, it reflects badly on our organization.”*

So with the right skill set and attitude, an administrative professional can move both vertically and laterally within an organization. In a role that directly serves a high-powered executive, however, failure or incompetence in any area is not an option. To successfully support the many needs of today’s executive, a good administrative assistant must offer the right mix of technology, communication, and organization skills. In addition, the demands of the job require a professional who can work effectively under pressure, hold their own in a wide variety of situations, and, most importantly, help advance the career of their boss and the growth of their company. At the same time, this dynamic position offers nearly unlimited potential to developing a highly-marketable package of skills, experience, and abilities.

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