

SPOTLIGHT ON PRODUCTIVITY

Spotlight

ARTWORK Xavier Veilhan, *Man on the Phone*, 2006  
Painted polyester resin, 27.25' x 11' x 7'  
Permanent installation, Cité Internationale, Lyon



# The Case For Executive Assistants

*Why would you pay managers big salaries and then ask them to make their own hotel reservations?* by Melba J. Duncan

AMONG THE MOST striking details of the corporate era depicted in the AMC series *Mad Men*, along with constant smoking and mid-day drinking, is the army of secretaries who populate Sterling Cooper, the 1960s ad agency featured in the show. The secretary of those days has gone the way of the carbon copy and been replaced by the executive assistant, now typically reserved for senior management. Technologies like e-mail, voice mail, mobile devices, and online calendars have allowed managers at all levels to operate with a greater degree of self-sufficiency. At the same time, companies have faced enormous pressure to cut costs, reduce head count, and flatten organizational structures. As a result, the numbers of assistants at lower corporate levels have dwindled in most corporations. That's unfortunate, because effective assistants can make enormous contributions to productivity at all levels of the organization.

At very senior levels, the return on investment from a skilled assistant can be substantial. Consider a senior executive whose total compensation package is \$1 million annually, who works with an assistant who earns \$80,000. For the organization to break even, the assistant must make the executive 8% more productive than he or she would be working solo—for instance, the assistant needs to save the executive roughly five hours in a 60-hour workweek. In reality, good assistants save their bosses much more than that. They ensure that meetings begin on time with prep material delivered in advance. They optimize travel schedules and enable remote deci-

sion making, keeping projects on track. And they filter the distractions that can turn a manager into a reactive type who spends all day answering e-mail instead of a leader who proactively sets the organization's agenda. As Robert Pozen writes in this issue: A top-notch assistant "is crucial to being productive."

That's true not only for top executives. In their zeal to cut administrative expenses, many companies have gone too far, leaving countless highly paid middle and upper managers to arrange their own travel, file expense reports, and schedule meetings. Some companies may be drawn to the notion of egalitarianism they believe this assistant-less structure represents—when workers see the boss loading paper into the copy machine, the theory goes, a "we're all in this together" spirit is created. But as a management practice, the structure rarely makes economic sense. Generally speaking, work should be delegated to the lowest-cost employee who can do it well. Although companies have embraced this logic by outsourcing work to vendors or to operations abroad, back at headquarters they ignore it, forcing top talent to misuse their time. As a longtime recruiter for executive assistants, I've worked with many organizations suffering from the same problem: There's too much administrative work and too few assistants to whom it can be assigned.

Granting middle managers access to an assistant—or shared resources—can give a quick boost to productivity even at lean, well-run companies. Firms should also think about the broader developmental



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benefits of providing assistants for up-and-coming managers. The real payoff may come when the manager arrives in a job a few levels up better prepared and habitually more productive. An experienced assistant can be particularly helpful if the manager is a new hire. The assistant becomes a crucial onboarding resource, helping the manager read and understand the organizational culture, guiding him or her through its different (and difficult) personalities, and serving as a sounding board during the crucial acclimation. In this way, knowledgeable assistants are more than a productivity asset: They're reverse mentors, using their experience to teach new executives how people are expected to behave at that level in the organization.

### Getting the Most from Assistants

Two critical factors determine how well a manager utilizes an assistant. The first is the executive's willingness to delegate pieces of his or her workload to the assistant. The second is the assistant's willingness to stretch beyond his or her comfort zone to assume new responsibilities.

**Delegating wisely.** The most effective executives think deeply about the pieces of their workload that can be taken on—or restructured to be partially

## After years of cutting back, companies can boost productivity by arming more managers with assistants.

taken on—by the assistant. Triaging and drafting replies to e-mails is a central task for virtually all assistants. Some executives have assistants listen in on phone calls in order to organize and follow up on action items. Today many assistants are taking on more-supervisory roles: They're managing information flow, dealing with basic financial management, attending meetings, and doing more planning and organizing. Executives can help empower their assistants by making it clear to the organization that the assistant has real authority. The message the executive should convey is, "I trust this person to represent me and make decisions."

Not every executive is well-suited for this type of delegating. Younger managers in particular have

grown up with technology that encourages self-sufficiency. Some have become so accustomed to doing their own administrative tasks that they don't communicate well with assistants. These managers should think of assistants as strategic assets and realize that part of their job is managing the relationship to get the highest possible return.

**Stretching the limits.** Great assistants proactively look for ways to improve their skills. When I was the assistant to Pete Peterson, the former U.S. commerce secretary and head of Lehman Brothers, I took night classes in law, marketing, and presentations to burnish my skills. Today I see executive assistants learning new languages and technologies to improve their performance working for global corporations.

In my work, I frequently encounter world-class executive assistants. Loretta Sophocleous is the executive assistant to Roger Ferguson, the president and CEO of TIAA-CREF; her title is Director, Executive Office Operations. She manages teams. She leads meetings. Roger says that he runs many decisions past Loretta before he weighs in.

Another example is Noreen Denihan, whom I placed over 13 years ago as the executive assistant to Donald J. Gogel, the president and CEO of Clayton, Dubilier & Rice, LLC. According to Don, Noreen fills an informal leadership role, has an unparalleled ability to read complex settings, and can recognize and respond to challenging people and circumstances. "A spectacular executive assistant can defy the laws of the physical world," Gogel says. "She [or he] can see around corners."

Trudy Vitti is the executive assistant to Kevin Roberts, the CEO Worldwide of Saatchi & Saatchi. Often when you ask him a question, he'll say, "Ask Trudy." He travels for weeks at a time and says that he has utter confidence in Trudy to run the office in his absence.

Compared with managers in other countries, those in the United States do a better job of delegating important work to their assistants—and of treating them as a real part of the management team. Outside the United States, educational requirements for assistants are less intensive, salaries are lower, and the role is more typically described as personal assistant.

You can often tell a lot about an executive's management style—and effectiveness—from the way he interacts with his assistant. Can the executive trust and delegate, or does he micromanage? Do assistants like working for her, or does she have a history

## Idea in Brief

The average company has gone too far in cutting back on administrative help. Skilled executive assistants can boost productivity, assist in on-boarding new managers, provide reverse mentoring, and act as the air-traffic controller of an office, particularly for managers who travel frequently.

Not every manager makes good use of an assistant. This is a particular problem for younger managers, who've grown up with technology that's increased their self-sufficiency. The two keys to maximizing the value of an assistant are delegating wisely and encouraging the executive assistant to stretch and add responsibilities.

Hiring a good executive assistant can be more difficult than filling other management jobs. Personal chemistry is paramount. The job requires emotional intelligence, good judgment, and capacity for foresight.

of many assistants leaving quickly or being fired? Not every boss–assistant relationship is made in heaven, but an executive's ability to manage conflicts with an assistant can be an important indicator of his overall ability to manage people.

### Finding the Right Fit

Hiring the right assistant can be a challenge. In some ways, it's trickier than filling traditional management positions, because personal chemistry and the one-on-one dynamic are so important—sometimes more so than skills or experience.

Expert assistants understand the unspoken needs and characteristics of the people with whom they work. They have high levels of emotional intelligence: They respond to subtle cues and react with situational appropriateness. They pay close attention to shifts in an executive's behavior and temperament and understand that timing and judgment are the foundation of a smooth working relationship. A good assistant quickly learns what an executive needs, what his or her strengths and weaknesses are, what might trigger anger or stress, and how to best accommodate his or her personal style. Good matches are hard to come by: That's the reason so many good assistants follow an executive from job to job.

After many years of debriefing assistants who've been fired, I've identified several factors that make for bad relationships. The most common missteps an assistant makes are misreading the corporate culture, failing to build bridges with other assistants, failing to ask enough questions about tasks, agreeing to take on too much work, and speaking to external parties without authorization. Bosses usually contribute to these deteriorating relationships by not being open in their communications or not being clear about expectations.


There's an assistant I placed recently who's having trouble developing the right relationship with

her boss. The executive called me and said, "Melba, I expected her to read through these memos and then get them out very quickly to my managers. But she left them on my desk, didn't call me over the weekend, and didn't send them out." I asked the assistant about it, and she said, "He didn't tell me it was important—I can't read someone's mind." But in fact, in this job you're supposed to be able to read minds—or, at the very least, you're supposed to ask questions.

**SIMPLY PUT**, the best executive assistants are indispensable. Microsoft will never develop software that can calm a hysterical sales manager, avert a crisis by redrafting a poorly worded e-mail, smooth a customer's ruffled feathers, and solve a looming HR issue—all within a single hour, and all without interrupting the manager to whom such problems might otherwise have proven a distraction. Executive assistants give companies and managers a human face. They're troubleshooters, translators, help desk attendants, diplomats, human databases, travel consultants, amateur psychologists, and ambassadors to the inside and outside world.

After years of cutting back, companies can boost productivity by arming more managers with this kind of help—and executives who are fortunate enough to have a skilled assistant can benefit by finding ways to delegate higher-level work to him or her. Executive–assistant relationships are business partnerships: Strong ones are win-wins between smart people. In fact, they're win-win-wins because ultimately the companies reap the benefits. ♣

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**FOR FURTHER READING**  
Robert C. Pozen lays out the principles of a more-productive work life in "Extreme Productivity," page 127.