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THE EVOLVING ROLE OF
THE EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT

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Introduction from Lily...

● Oxford Languages defines an 'Executive Assistant' as "a person employed to assist a high-level manager or professional with correspondence, appointments and administrative tasks". The role has often been misrepresented, as it has here, as a purely administrative or secretarial support function, covering tasks such as diary and expense management and the typing of correspondence. In reality, however, for those businesses that truly recognise the value of their Executive Assistants, the role is much more comprehensive and is pivotal to the success of, not only the executive team, but the business as a whole.

In order to explore this further, it is necessary to differentiate between the role of the Personal Assistant, or PA, and that of the Executive Assistant, or EA. Traditionally, the PA role encompasses purely administrative, transactional support. The primary function of a PA is to alleviate the administrative burden from the individual(s) they support, so that their principal's time can be dedicated to other areas which will further the business's success.





On the other hand, the EA role may encompass anything from overseeing budgets to extensive project management, standing in for their executives during meetings, and anything in between. The two roles are often differentiated by mindset, too; whereas the traditional PA role is more reactionary, a successful EA is proactive in their approach. Constantly one step ahead of their executive, EAs possess exceptional problem-solving and decision-making skills.

The most crucial difference, however, lies in the EA's greater responsibility and influence over the business. An EA worth their salt is a leader in their own right. Indeed, Jeremy Burrows, Executive Assistant to the CEO of Capacity, even coined the term 'leader assistant' to emphasise the significant impact that the role can have within a business, launching a very successful podcast with the same title.

This is not to say, however, that there are not those with a 'PA' title that take on the responsibilities that have been attributed to an 'EA', or vice versa, and it is worth noting that the titles are often used interchangeably. On the contrary, no two EA roles are the same, and the distinctions do of course differ from business to business.

In recent years there has been an ongoing discussion about how the role of the EA has evolved. The digital era brought with it a shift in the way that businesses operated and this became the driving force behind the evolution of the role. Increased

productivity, due to technological advances, lead to upskilling becoming a huge focus for the EA profession, enabling EAs to take on additional responsibilities at all levels of the business. Unsurprisingly, with the COVID-19 pandemic dominating the business landscape in 2020, the EA role has had to adapt, alongside business models, in order to remain relevant and effective throughout the pandemic and beyond.

More and more clients are coming to us with roles far broader than the 'traditional' scope of an EA. With busy executives being gifted more time in their days, due to fewer face to face meetings and reduced travel, some of the more administrative heavy elements of the EA role have subsided, resulting in executives seeking those EAs who can really step up and work alongside them, taking ownership of projects and duties which will have a direct impact on the way the business functions.

As we look forward, it is those EAs who are able to prove their worth, take on more strategic business related responsibilities, and truly become an extension of their executives, that will carve the future of the profession and continue to push it forward.

This document explores how the role of the EA has evolved; what the future of the profession looks like in a post-COVID-19 landscape; what expectations will be from the role going forwards; and the impact that the role has on a business's success.

How has the role of the EA evolved?

The coronavirus pandemic resulted in office-based businesses worldwide pivoting to become remote-based, more or less overnight. Two years on, and the vast majority of UK businesses are still operating a hybrid working model, with many businesses making permanent plans for hybrid working for the future.

Inevitably, the role of the EA has had to adapt in accordance with the changing business landscape. Only a select few have found that their responsibilities have not hugely differed from their previous day-to-day duties, whilst most have had to diversify their skillset and scope in order to best support their executive(s), teams and business as a whole.

We asked a number of EAs how their roles had evolved as a result of the pandemic and how they have adapted to the resulting changes and challenges. Some of the insights can be seen below:

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One of the challenges of full or partial remote working is staying aligned with your Executive – you don't have the opportunity to grab those five minutes to catch up as you walk to the lift or nip into their office between meetings. Ensuring regular scheduled catch ups, that you protect in the diary, is key to ensuring that you keep on top of your Executive's priorities. Making sure you are at the forefront of any technological changes in how your company is working is key – as we moved to a Teams environment I've looked to train myself on this platform so that I am using it in the most efficient and effective way for myself and the wider Senior Leadership team.

Rachael, Executive Assistant to Senior Vice President UK & EMEA Marketing for a global IT company

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It's a time where you have to step outside your box and make your skill set extend to other areas within the business; and also to personal, as well as business duties, if your role allows. I personally took on an extra role of keeping the troops entertained ... organising events and a weekly quiz. In my mind, keeping morale up was just as important as everything else for productivity and staff wellbeing.

**Matthew, Personal Assistant to
the Directors of a famous cooking brand**

From our conversations, the overriding theme is that EAs are doing everything they can to make the lives of their executives, senior teams, and the wider business as easy and pain-free as possible as we slowly return to a pre-pandemic structure of working, yet still have to navigate change. Whether

it is researching and suggesting ways that the business can pivot their offerings or operating models, taking on duties that would usually be out of their day to day role, managing the workforce's return to the office in a safe and responsible way, or undertaking training courses in project management or HR in order to plug a skills gap elsewhere in the business, it is clear that the role of the EA is more pivotal to a business's success than ever before.

After all, EAs hold a unique and privileged position within any organisation, whereby the nature of their role means that they have detailed knowledge of, and productive working relationships within, all areas of the business. As such, EAs are some of the most versatile and adaptable people within any business. The most indispensable EAs, then, not only act as a communications hub across all levels of an organisation, but are those that fully understand the strategic objectives of their business, and proactively identify business needs and opportunities to ensure that those objectives are achieved.

What the future of the EA role looks like:

Whilst the role of the EA has been evolving organically over the last few years, the coronavirus pandemic has accelerated this progression in ways nobody could have foretold. The post-pandemic return to work has seen a significant structural change to working where most industries are now engaging in hybrid and remote working initiatives, something that was previously unforeseen. This has led to a transition in the roles of both the EA and the executive teams whom they support. Some of the biggest adjustments are outlined below:

Adding Strategic Value

Undoubtedly, the impact of 2020 has catapulted the EA function from a supporting role to a strategic one – a true business partner. Since the pandemic, executives are relying on their EAs for far more than administrative assistance, instead seeking strategic guidance, thought leadership and technical advice, not just for themselves and their leadership teams, but for the business as a whole.

Ever the chameleon, high-calibre EAs are expected to agilely focus their attention on building and maintaining company cultures, implementing employee recognition and wellbeing initiatives, driving internal communication, managing projects and conducting marketing research, with the

same dexterity with which they execute their more traditional administrative functions, such as diary management, minute taking, event planning and logistical arrangements.

The successful strategic assistant's objective is to make their executive more effective at every opportunity by ensuring that they, themselves, are fully aligned to the company's strategy, acting as an extension of their executive and helping their business to achieve its goals.

Remote Working

It is apparent that remote and hybrid working is the future of previously full-time office-based businesses, with some companies even choosing to move out of their office spaces entirely. Whilst there can be huge benefits in terms of executives gaining valuable time back in their days, and a significant reduction in overheads, it brings a host of new challenges in terms of communication and visibility. Consequently, the symbiotic relationship between an executive and their EA is more important than ever. It is imperative that EAs are in regular contact with their executive(s) to ensure that their priorities are fully aligned; and that both parties have full visibility as to what is going on across the business.



Internal Communication

Similarly, it is paramount that internal communication is at the forefront of businesses' strategies going forward. Whilst there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to internal communication, EAs are central to ensuring that messaging cascades throughout the business in a clear, sensitive manner, which is fully aligned to the company's core values.

Whilst phone conversations, email and instant chat software, like Slack, can be good for general questions and queries, sometimes they cannot fully replicate face-to-face team or one-on-one interactions. A regular video call can bridge that gap, helping to build structure into a teammate's day, whilst ensuring that concerns are raised and appropriately addressed, achievements are recognised and celebrated, and that employees and

management are informed about what is going on within the business.

Regular, informal communication will also ensure that any issues or problems are escalated appropriately, in a timely manner, and resolved accordingly. Moreover, regular communication can help to alleviate the feelings of isolation and loneliness that many remote workers have reported experiencing in recent months; in turn, this leads to a more productive, engaged workforce and a culture of inclusivity.

The structural change to the working world has meant that the role of the EA has evolved since the pandemic. Most senior EAs will expect to manage their days in the office around the needs of the business, but it is usually no longer necessary to be in the office 5 days a week.

What executives will be looking for out of an EA in the future...

Tech-Focused

Continuing advancements in technology will continue to play a leading part in the evolution of the EA role, with more employers looking for EAs with technical skills that stretch further than Microsoft or G-Suite packages, to include cloud-based applications, website and database management, project management software and social media. It is vital, therefore, that EAs are proficient in the myriad of different technologies and software available that could increase productivity, not just for themselves, but for their executives, wider team and business as a whole.

The tech-savvy, commercially-aware EA will also proactively seek new tools and software to streamline business procedures and processes, allowing for better efficiency.

In addition, we expect social media to continue to dominate the marketing and communication side of businesses. Particularly within start-ups, SMEs and entrepreneurial businesses, EAs are frequently tasked with not only managing social media platforms, but creating social media strategies to enhance their business's online presence and overall success.

Again, those EAs who have a comprehensive understanding of technology and social media are the ones that will be most sought after, and indispensable, especially for smaller businesses. What's more, the ability to fix any IT issues which may arise is a must-have skill for many EAs, particularly in start-up environments where IT departments may not exist.

Naturally, automating more traditionally manual or 'mundane' tasks through technology leaves more time in the working week for EA's to add strategic value through undertaking projects, implementing effective processes, networking, organising client events and ensuring the success of the executive office.

Adaptable

It is essential that EAs showcase that they are flexible, adaptable and happy to roll up their sleeves and work on any task or project that takes priority for a business at any given time, whilst seamlessly managing to switch back to their previous task, and pick up where they left off, just as quickly. Many of the EAs that we have spoken to are now working on projects or undertaking duties that they had felt, pre-COVID-19, were out of their remit. However, those that can showcase this agility are valued as a fundamental team player within their businesses.

Resourceful

As a result of the pandemic, many businesses are, invariably, looking for ways to save money where possible and, as such, those EAs who are able to demonstrate resourcefulness are indispensable.

Resourcefulness does not just cover keeping costs to a minimum, however. EAs are often tasked with completing duties that they may not necessarily have faced before, or within a field in which they are lacking experience, especially within the current climate. EAs are not expected to have the answer for everything straight away, however, a commercially-minded EA should display resourcefulness when tackling unexplored territories to achieve results in a timely manner, leveraging their support networks and their initiative to add value to the business.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is a key attribute that all high-calibre EAs should possess. Not only does it enable them to understand their own emotions, but it leads to a high level of empathy for others. What's more, effective EAs are responsible for influencing executives, key decision makers and stakeholders, both internally and externally, and high emotional intelligence is essential in achieving this.

Crucially, a high level of emotional intelligence also results in more effective team work and communication skills, allowing EAs to take on more project-focused work and strategic tasks outside of their day to day duties.

Strategic Business Partner

Whilst the typical EA duties such as diary management, meeting agendas and so on are important, executives are looking for their EAs to be able to do more than this. Instead, businesses need EAs to become more strategic in their thinking and evolve past the traditional EA into a strategic business partner, acting as a trusted confidant and sounding board to their executive. The strategic EA is proactive in their approach, possessing the confidence to put forward, and execute, ideas and solutions to business problems.

In essence, EAs should become an extension of their executive, in terms of their strategic thinking; the quicker an EA can align their thinking to that of their executive, the more effective the partnership will be; tasks will be executed more efficiently; productivity will increase; and the business will reap the rewards.

What will EAs be looking for in the future?

For the majority of EAs on the market, the ability to progress or upskill is the most important thing that candidates look for in a role and company. Concurrently, this is the main reason candidates cite when they are looking to leave a role: there is no room for progression.

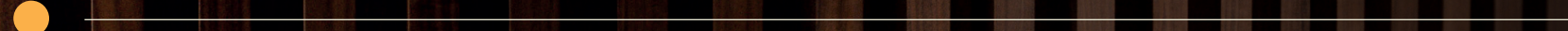
As a company, if you can offer progression, the opportunity to take on more responsibility, or provide training in order for your EA to upskill, this will go a long way. Progression makes employees feel as though they are growing with the company and provides them with a sense of purpose, resulting in lower attrition rates. It also helps employees feel supported in the workplace, which in turn increases engagement and productivity, as research has proven that employees are happy to invest in companies who invest in them in return.

Encouraging progression within an EA role allows EAs to become more confident in taking ownership of tasks and projects, and getting involved in other areas of the business. Investing in an EA and challenging them to take on projects outside of their day to day duties, enables them to become more strategic, which drives the business forward.

Dynamic and Open Culture

A business's culture is key to its long term success and, whilst every company may have different ideas about culture, the key to connecting with employees, retaining talent and building up rapport with the individuals within a company is to foster an open and dynamic culture. A positive culture can result in clearer thinking, higher productivity, a bigger picture mindset, innovation and empathy, which can, in turn, all contribute to pushing the company forward.

In the past, businesses have tended to be structured in a hierarchical way and, unsurprisingly, this type of culture lends itself to the individuals at the highest level making the decisions, which then filter down to the wider team. This has often been cited as unfair and having little regard for the team's day to day experiences. As such, companies are now moving towards an open working culture which favours leadership over management and directly responds to individuals' needs by taking the time to listen and understand any issues or challenges they may be facing and actively taking steps to resolve them. This type of inclusive culture is more likely to make its employees feel heard, supported and empowered to do their best work, share ideas, and fulfil their potential.



Trust and Mutual Respect

Trust and respect between executives and their direct reports is a pivotal contributing factor to a company's overall success. When employees feel trusted and are confident that their boss has their best interests at heart, they are more likely to engage in open communication, perform well and have increased engagement. Employees are now, more than ever, looking to work for companies and individuals who take the time to build meaningful relationships with their employees. Treating employees with trust and mutual respect results in them being more aligned with organisational goals; creates a sense of safety and comfort; and encourages teammates to go above and beyond in order to contribute to the business's success.

Summary

Whilst some of the more traditional elements of the EA role may no longer seem as relevant in the current climate, EAs are some of the most versatile and resilient people within a workforce. Rather than being viewed as purely an administrative function, as the role has in the past, it is evident that the role of the modern EA, is more pertinent, in a post-COVID-19 landscape, than ever before.

From adding strategic value across the board, to delivering change, saving cost and enhancing business culture, the EA has often been likened to the oil in the cogs of the working machine – making things run more smoothly, and alleviating precise time pressure on executives and senior business leaders. The future EA is a leader, in their own right, adding vast quantities to the bottom line and making executive teams more effective, whilst being fully aligned to the business's strategy and instrumental to organisations achieving their goals.

Whilst it can be difficult or challenging to quantify the value that an EA adds to the bottom line, one way to view it is as a percentage of the time, and therefore the salary, of the executive or executive team that they support. EAs can give executives up to 100% of their time back, to focus on other imperatives to enhance the business – how much do those initiatives add to the bottom line, too? In that sense,

you could view the EA role not as a gatekeeper of people, but of time. When you consider that executives spend, on average, 58% of their time on emails, a simple email triage system implemented by an EA can reduce the time spent on emails to circa 12%.¹ Instantly, an executive has 46% of their time back, to add value elsewhere.

Facilitating business growth is, of course, just one element of the role, when you add in the cost savings that a commercially-astute EA can bring in terms of travel, events and leveraging technology to enhance and streamline processes and procedures, the financial benefit for the business grows exponentially.

Far from a 'luxury' position, the high-calibre EA is firmly established as imperative to the success of the executive team, and the wider business. It is unsurprising, then, given the role's potential, that USA Today described the Executive Assistant as Silicon Valley's "power job", and reported that it is not uncommon for EAs there to pull in six figure salaries, plus bonus and equity.

By investing in EAs, businesses gain a fully-fledged member of the executive team, capable of performing under incredible amounts of pressure and adept at ensuring that strategic objectives are achieved.

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