Management Support Fellowship Award 2007

Now There is no Excuse For Not Having a Computer Backup!

Keyboard Design for the Information

Job Etiquette Rules
33rd Annual Conference

MANAGE TIME IN A CHAOTIC WORLD!

Time Management@the Speed of Thought
Nine Steps to a More Organized Workspace
How to Have the Time of Your Life and Get Your Work Done Too

PLUS:
How to be an Island of Excellence in an Ocean of Mediocrity – Breaking All the Rules!
and
Great Results – Business Solutions for Greater Productivity

Call 703 237-8616 and register over the phone
http://www.theaeap.com/seminars/

September 18 – 20, 2008
Sheraton Westport Hotel
Lakeside Chalet
St. Louis, Missouri
Editor's Letter

Keyboard Design for the Information Revolution
By Nicole Matoushek

It’s A Communication Showdown - Video And Live Meetings Square Up, Face-To-Face
By Richard Jebb

Now There is no Excuse For Not Having a Computer Backup!
By Vic Thomas
Greetings and welcome to the summer issue of PA Enterprise. It is an exciting time at DeskDemon. We have many new projects in the works to make DeskDemon even more helpful to our users! Keep checking back to see what is in store! One of exciting projecting recently launched was our JobDesk. If you are looking for a job or just curious on what opportunities are available, pop over and check out the openings in your area. Create your profile, upload your CV, create email alerts, and more. It is definitely worth checking out.

Even more exciting are the finals of the Management Support Fellowship Award Program. Our finalist has submitted a Day in the Life piece to help you understand their job and qualifications better. After reading each candidates submission, take the time and give your support to the finalist you find most deserving. What makes this program so special is the fact the grand prize winner will be voted by those who know the job the best, you, their peers. Voting will close on October 31st, 2008.

As well as learning about the finalists, we have an article on keyboarding. Keyboarding is important, and Keyboard Design for the Information Revolution talks a bit about ergonomics and different types of keyboards. This article informs you how to evaluate keyboards and how to work with the keyboard you have. Backing up your computer is crucial, if you have ever had a computer crash you can appreciate how beneficial backing up your computer data is. There are many easy ways to back up your computer, read about some of them with Now There is no Excuse For Having a Computer Backup.

Once again, don’t forget to cast your vote for your favorite finalist for the Management Support Fellowship Award. We hope you enjoy this month’s issue of PA Enterprise.

Until next month!

Susan Silva
Managing Editor
susan@deskdemon.com

Copyright 2008 DeskDemon.com
All rights reserved. No part of this publication (whether in hard copy or electronic form) may be copied, transmitted, or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording, photocopying, or otherwise, without the prior written consent of DeskDemon.com. Whilst every care is taken in the compilation and publication of this publication, DeskDemon.com cannot be held responsible for any consequences, mistakes or omissions. DeskDemon.com cannot accept any responsibility for inaccuracies or changes, or for any other loss. Inclusion of any advertisements does not imply recommendations or endorsement by DeskDemon.com
We make meetings work for you.

Every year thousands of companies trust their meetings to us. Not only because we have more than 2,000 meeting rooms in over 300 hotels across Europe, the Middle East and Africa. But also because we take the time to attend to the little details. Like making sure the layout of the room suits your meeting. Having the right equipment ready and waiting. Serving a delicious lunch just when it’s convenient to break. So let us quote on your brief today and we’ll deliver a meeting that works for you.

To book, call 0845 604 6045
or visit holidayinn.co.uk/meetingsplanning
Creating a safe and comfortable computer set up or office work environment has become an increasing focus during the Information Revolution that started in the 1990s. The Information Revolution is best described, as a worldwide shift to information and technology resulting in more computer based job opportunities and home computer environments. The proper office and home computer set up is important in reducing musculoskeletal discomfort as well as work-related injuries. There are several different components to the computer workstation set up including: the keyboard design, mouse or trackball, monitor, work surface, chair, foot support and work organization factors. All of these components need to be evaluated to assess and improve office workstation postures. This article will focus only on keyboard design. 

Keyboard Design: The fundamental ergonomic risk factors that are typically present in a computer set up include: awkward postures, static positions and highly repetitive tasks. Methods of reducing these ergonomic risk factors with an office or computer set up involve maintaining neutral joint postures, alternating tasks, implementing stretch breaks and providing adjustability to the workstation set up. The keyboard is one of the primary components of the computer set up that can result in poor postures, static positions and highly repetitive tasks. The purpose of keyboard design is to promote neutral postures and reduce the strain on the working joints, muscles and tendons. By improving and promoting neutral arm, wrist and hand positions, computer related injuries can be prevented. 

Good Postures: When typing and using a keyboard the good postures involve keeping the shoulders, wrists and elbows in a straight and neutral position. For the shoulder, ideally the arms should be hanging loosely at the sides, with the shoulders in about 0-15 degrees of flexion. The elbows should be at about mid range or between 80 and 90 degrees of flexion. The elbows should be level or slightly higher than the keyboard. The wrists should remain straight and neutral. The hands and fingers should be loosely relaxed, with fingers curved or flexed slightly. 

Bad postures: Common postures that are observed with keyboard use and should be avoided include: excessive shoulder flexion or abduction, elbows that are flexed or extended beyond 80-90 degrees of flexion, wrists that are flexed or extended or ulnar deviated due to the position of the keyboard. 

Alternative Keyboards: Alternative keyboards can help keep wrists straight and in a neutral position, thus reducing the stress and strain on the joints and muscle and tendon structures. Alternative keyboard designs include: 

• Split keyboards: split keyboards are designed to promote a straight position of the wrist. This is accomplished by either separating the key pads and increasing the distance between the right and left hand sides or by tilting the keyboard pads away from one another. 
• Tented keyboards: tented keyboards divide the right and left sided key pads and tilt them up like a tent. This position reduced forearm pronation. 
• Built-in wrist rests: this feature helps provide additional support to the wrists and forearms; care must be taken to avoid excessive contact pressure onto the peripheral nerves. 
• Sloped keyboards: traditional keyboard design uses a positive slope of the keyboard, meaning the back of the keyboard is higher than the front of the keyboard. A positive slope of a keyboard often causes excessive wrist extension and thus an increased pressure within the carpal tunnel and increased strain to the working tendons. By contrast, a negative slope or neutral slope, where the plane of the keyboard is either level or slightly higher than the front, often promotes a more neutral wrist position. 
• Key position: the position of the keys is classified as straight, concave or curved. The various positions of...
the keys allow the fingers to work in a
more neutral and relaxed position.

Guidelines for Evaluating Keyboard
Design:

The following guidelines can be helpful
with keyboard selection:

• Verify that the keyboard is compatible
with existing computer hardware and
software.
• Make sure the individual keys are easy
to depress. Additional effort on individual
keys can increase effort and strain.
• Verify that the keyboard is compatible
with the alternate input devices such
as the mouse, pen tablet or trackball.
• Evaluate the workstation design to
ensure the keyboard fits properly
with the workstation and does not
cause more severe or additional
musculoskeletal stress or discomfort.
• Evaluate the posture and size of
the keyboard user to ensure it is an
appropriate fit.
• Assess whether the keyboard may
affect the users performance or
productivity.
• Verify that all necessary components
are present on the keyboard. For
example, not all alternative keyboard
contain number pads, if the user
requires a number pad, select the
appropriate model.
• Allow the user to try several different
models.
• Allow the user to try the keyboard on
a trial basis.
• There is no one keyboard that fits all; a
comprehensive ergonomics workstation
evaluation is necessary to evaluate the
individual workstation, keyboard user
and postures.
• The ergonomic evaluator selecting
the keyboard should be experienced
and knowledgeable in ergonomics.
• Train the user on the proper use and
maintenance of the keyboard, and
instruct the user it may take several
weeks to get used to a new design.
• Follow up with the Comprehensive
Ergonomic Program and reassessment
of the workstation to ensure worker
safety and comfort.

Laptops: As the trend of remote office
environments continues to grow, so
does the use of laptop computers.
The laptop computer does provide
lightweight and portable computer
access to allow the user unlimited
flexibility. However this luxury does
not come without adverse effects.
The laptop computer keyboard is an
ergonomic debacle. The keyboard is
concentrated on a single flat plane
thus eliminating the ability to separate,
tilt, tent or replace the position of the
individual keys and keypads. There is
virtually no adjustability to improve
the positions of the shoulders, elbows,
wrist and hands. However there
are some guidelines to use that will
promote user safety and comfort.

Guidelines for Laptop Users:
These guidelines can be used to reduce
musculoskeletal strain and fatigue from
laptop use.

• Try to set up laptop as ergonomically
as possible, some hotels and airports
offer docking stations, use airplane
food trays or pillows to promote the
neutral postures.
• Set up the laptop so that neutral
positions of the shoulder, elbow, wrist
and hands can be maximized.
• Use a chair that is stationary and does
not have arm rests, so that the position
of the arms can be adjusted.
• Use regular keyboard if available.
• Avoid resting the wrist on the wrist
rest while typing to avoid compression.
Rest wrists while not typing.
• Use larger joints such as the hand
and arm to move from key to key as
opposed to stretching fingers and
wrist.
• If the key touch is light and the keypad
is shallow avoid pounding on keys.
• Use or plug in mouse as opposed to
using the glide screen.
• Try to maintain a neutral neck position.
Avoid looking down for too long, tuck
chin and keep head balanced over the
shoulders.
• When carrying the laptop, use a
padded shoulder strap.
• Take frequent stretch breaks to reduce
the strain from awkward postures and
static positions.

Summary: The keyboard is only one
piece of the ergonomic puzzle. In
order to effectively reduce the
musculoskeletal discomfort and injuries
that result from computer set ups, it is
essential to evaluate and adjust all of the
components. There is no one keyboard
that fits all, careful assessment and
evaluation of the individual keyboard
user is essential when recommending
an alternative keyboard design.
Keyboard design principles help to
maintain neutral joint postures of the
arms, wrists and hands. In addition
to improving working posture the
keyboard user should always keep the
keyboard centered with the monitor,
perform frequent stretch breaks and
alternate tasks.

Nicole Matoushek, MPH, PT has
15 years of experience in clinical
managed care and disability
management. She is founder of
http://www.ErgoRehabinc.com
She has developed numerous
managed care, ergonomics
and work injury management/
prevention programs and training
courses. She is dedicated to
helping others succeed in the
workers compensation sector.

She has authored two books
"Acquired Hope: A Journey
of Advanced Recovery and
Empowerment" and "365 Days of
Abundant Hope" both available
on amazon.com and http://www.
acquiredhope.com

Nicole lives each day in hope and is
passionately dedicated to helping
others succeed in obtaining
abundant health, wealth and a
fuller life!

The Secret to Getting Rich:
http://www.inspirednhopeful.
theSGRprogram.com
We live in an era when many forms of traditional communication are heading online, when demand for video communication and video conferencing are on the rise and we spend much of our working lives opposite a screen. I’m a freelance copywriter, a communications professional, so I’ve decided it’s time to ask, is the value of face-to-face meetings diminishing; do they face a redundant future? The case for Video Video is being used increasingly for team meetings, conferences and even for meetings between clients and suppliers. Statements attempting to explain why include: the rapid adoption of broadband; the need for increased staff productivity and decreased capital expenditure; issues relating to travel as a result of international terrorism and the need to reduce everyone’s carbon footprint. All of these are touted as the reason that companies see video conferencing as viable alternative to regular meetings and conferences. Why video is set to take over.

But we’ve been here before haven’t we? Video was much tipped to kill the ‘Radio Star’ in the early 80’s, yet has so far not managed to kill anyone. And I think it is unlikely to be any more successful with the professional event and meeting organiser, as despite the best efforts of video and its techie cohorts; face to face meetings are on the rise. In the UK, where I live, meetings and conferences contributed £12billion to the economy last year.

What is it about video anyway, why does it aspire to cause so much destruction? Is it really so aggressive? Perhaps we’ve all got the wrong idea about video. TV the One-eyed God It’s true that video communication has well and truly penetrated our lives; we’re used to seeing everything on a screen. The television has been the one-eyed god of our living rooms for decades and video-conferencing technology builds its success on the continued development of this visualised form of worship. It is perhaps not surprising then that when management hear the words ‘video conferencing’ they charge as if approaching the divine conferencing solution.

But the reason video fails to completely consume us is all too apparent, it lacks the ability to radiate the most essential elements of human communication: you can’t build a relationship with a screen and you can’t interact with someone fully on an emotional level, unless you’re sharing the same environment. When a meeting is a video-conference, it lacks character and influence and there are subtle, ‘human’ benefits to a ‘real’ face-to-face meeting. The Case for Live Meetings What about the inspiration and determination gleaned by the individual from being in a room full of hundreds of enthusiastic and energetic peers. Or that invaluable feeling of empowerment developed after spending a day or two in the company of fellow employees, sharing drinks, expressing ideas and rubbing shoulders with the big wigs. You can’t discount the value of the sales commitment offered by third-party dealers after attending a series of rousing speeches and inebriating
beverages. Video-conferencing simply can’t provide the riches delivered by genuine human interaction and it’s a mistake to overlook the human aspect of anything, especially business.

There’s another issue with anything on a screen. It’s simply less effective than meeting face-to-face. Make the Message Stick A meeting that involves real people creates far more intense emotions, you can’t help but feel involved and live meetings offer the opportunity to get your message across on so many different levels, meaning the message sticks in the memory that bit longer. Ask yourself this question: What did I watch on TV a few weeks ago? If you can remember, can you remember how you felt whilst watching; the emotions it stirred in you? Most people can’t remember the plot line from their favourite soap a few months back. Do the same exercise on the last event or meeting you attended, I’m willing to gamble it’s a lot easier to pinpoint how you felt there. What it comes down to is that sitting in front of a screen is a less effective form of communication than actually meeting. The other people can’t see you, so you don’t have to concentrate; you don’t have to conform. Establishing the Right Tone When you see something on screen it’s emotionless, it doesn’t appeal to all five senses. And therefore has less impact. In many cases, the person talking isn’t even aware if you’re watching or listening, and certainly has no feeling for the mood you’re in and therefore what the appropriate tone of voice is. And as a freelance copywriter, I know how important it is to get the tone right. Communication in any form simply misses the target when the tone is wrong.

Video technology can be used to great effect as part of a conference or seminar and there are situations where the ‘human aspect’ of meetings is less important, at these times video-conferencing can save time and money. Being able to download a conference or seminar you missed to watch at your convenience is a massive bonus and adds to the success of the live event.

Clearly, there’s a place for video-conferencing in the business world, as there is with much new technology, everything has its place and its role should always be to enhance and hone the delivery method. Video and live meetings can get on well; many of them work in harmony creating great effects together, so let’s stop putting them at loggerheads.

Surely video doesn’t really want to kill anyone, it’s just been misunderstood. Use all communication in any way that is appropriate for the format, use your imagination, but don’t use video conferencing as a replacement for real meetings and conferences as you are unlikely to achieve the powerful results these face-to-face human interaction activities deliver.
How to...
If you've ever wondered, "How do...?" about any aspect of your job, then How to is for you - it's teeming with ideas and suggestions about best practice and managing your career.

Templates
Need to write a letter or memo? Then why not take the edge off the task by using a well-structured DeskDemon template. It'll leave you time to concentrate on the content.

Tips and Tricks
There are always practical new things you can learn - useful little shortcuts to make your day run more smoothly. Well, we have literally hundreds of tips and tricks to improve your day.

What is...
Our world is so awash with specialist terms and ideas it can be bewildering. But that's why What is...exists - to get you out of the jargon minefield intact and stronger.

Quotes
A powerful quote can change your day for the better - and, if it really hits home, your life as well. It can also save time when you need a quote for a presentation!

Idioms
Have you've ever wanted to know where the terms "Hair of the dog", "Keeping up with the Joneses" came from? Worry no more! Idioms will offer you the answer.
Management Support Fellowship Award 2007

Over the past year, we have posted many excellent nominations. Each month you chose the best of the best. And now, it’s time for YOU to choose the individual that will represent the profession as an ambassador and take home the amazing first place prize of £10,000!

The Management Support Fellowship Award is special, not just because it celebrates the vital role of Executive PAs and secretaries but because it’s ONLY award where the winners are decided by their peers and that’s you! After all, you’re the people who know best!

Our finalist has submitted a Day in the Life piece to help you understand their job and qualifications better. After reading each candidates submission, take the time and give your support to the finalist you find most deserving. Voting will close on October 31st, 2008.
MICHELLE CORR

Please tell us a little about the company/organisation you work for, including what it does, the size, sector and your location.

BCCM/BCTC is a not for profit public/private sector partnership, which draws together key stakeholders from both the private and public sector to provide a united and common approach to continually improving and regenerating Belfast. The growing membership scheme represents over 400 city centre businesses with one aim of making Belfast a city of international class. Strategically signed in 2002, Belfast City Centre Management Company formed a Strategic Alliance with the Belfast Chamber of Trade & Commerce.

How long have you been with company and in this role (if different)?

I joined the company originally in April 2005 as a temporary administrative assistant. I worked in this position for four months. Unfortunately, just before I was due to sign on as a permanent member of staff, personal circumstances meant that I had to move away for a year. BCCM decided to keep my post open until my return in July 2006 when I rejoined as the Senior Administrative Officer.

What is your role within the organisation and who do you work for? (please mention if you have many bosses and the roles you perform for them, if it differs from boss to boss).

My role as Senior Business Administrator is extremely varied. My daily duties consist of:

- Diary Management
- Assisting with the co-ordination of the Belfast Awards
- Co-ordinating high profile meetings
- Event management (Retail Forum, Chamber AGM)
- Market Research and reporting
- Customer Relations Management
- Communications (Mail shots, City Business magazine distribution)
- Supervising Staff
- Travel Arrangements
- Design and presentation (company website, Belfast Awards presentation)
- Office management
- Ordering/Purchasing

I also am Personal Assistant to the City Centre Manager and provide secretarial support to:

- Senior Management Team (3 people)
  - BCCM Chairman
  - BCCM Board of Directors (18 directors)
  - Executive Chamber Council (24 members)
- Office team (14 in total)

I also provide ad hoc duties to external partners such as Belfast City Council and Department for Social Development as and when needs be, co-ordinating meetings and mail shots and distributing important information.

In theory I have 4 bosses, i.e. City Centre Manager, BCCM Chairman and the three Senior Managers to whom I provide managerial support. In reality this number is much greater as I often provide managerial support to the Board of Directors and Executive Chamber Council to whom the company is accountable and therefore priority is given to these members. My role for each boss varies from secretarial support to personal assistance, organising travel and events, booking conference facilities and catering etc.

How has your role changed over the past 12 months?

In January 2008 I was promoted to Senior Business Administrator and was given responsibility for supervising two Junior Administrative Assistants. My job role has changed from solely providing administrative support to supervising larger projects, managing the office, taking on some HR duties and my role as an administrator has broadened to include more important tasks such as producing evaluation reports which are distributed to the Board of Directors. Becoming a Supervisor has provided me with new challenges and opportunities, enhancing my skills and abilities daily.

What would you say are the three most important skills you use at work and why?

The three most important skills I use at work are:

- Time Management: As a PA and Administrator/Supervisor a number of colleagues in various fields rely on me to organize and assist the implementation of tasks, alongside the completion of responsibilities that fall under my remit as well as my own.
- BCCM is continuously inundated with new projects, tasks and research, all of which needs the support of an efficient and effective administrative team. As most of our projects are time sensitive, I find it useful to take 10 minutes at the start and end of every day to evaluate my priorities, schedule work in my personal calendar including the admin team calendar and let everyone else know what I am working on and what my time restraints are. This ensures that all tasks can be addressed and completed within their necessary timeframe. I also keep a Priorities List which I update daily. This lists all the tasks currently outstanding stating the details of the task, deadline date,
who is responsible for completing the task and who the finished article is to be sent to.

Empowerment: This refers to both self-empowerment and the empowerment of others. There is no better motivator than to attempt something you have never done before and succeed at it. I believe that in order to stay happy and content within your working environment it is important to take on new challenges with a positive attitude. By approaching new things in this way you can push your own boundaries and do things you never thought you could do before. This also comes into play when supervising staff. Rather than shadow employees or simply tell them to do something, it is much more productive to inspire them to look at new challenges in the same way. By giving employees this sense of trust they can learn to grow within their role.

Communication: This is probably the most important skill in my job. With the wealth of information that passes through our office it is crucial to maintain and improve lines of communication, be it with external bodies or with colleagues in the workplace. One example of how I exercise this skill is to consistently provide my colleagues with feedback in relation to tasks set to ensure that they are secure in mind that all tasks will be complete within the timeframe set. I also have check-ins with the two admin assistants to ensure that they have the resources and support they need to complete their job roles.

What does a typical day look like for you? (If you don’t have a ‘typical’ day, please give as much information as possible about the different tasks you get involved in).

There is no such thing as a typical day in BCCM. Every day is different from the last with new challenges always appearing. There are a few regular tasks every day such as every morning and evening I take the time to plan out my activities, I regularly update the company website, I have regular meetings with my manager to track progress of the admin team and I ensure I am on hand to complete my PA duties at all times. The main task I am involved in all year round is the co-ordination of the Belfast Awards which is a massive gala ceremony that myself, my manager and a small event management team put together every year to celebrate the successes of business in Belfast. Other tasks include market research on topics such as trade waste, events evaluations etc. both collating responses from surveys and drawing up the reports to go to the Board of Directors. I also do some design work in-house. I designed the corporate website, the on-screen graphics for the gala ceremony of the Belfast Awards for two years running, various leaflets and presentations. I enjoy being able to exercise this creative flair as gives me the opportunity to develop my skills further in other areas. The various projects I would be involved in are too many to number but a breakdown of these can be found on the company website (www.belfastcentre.com - key projects).

What is the biggest challenge that you've faced at the company, how did you tackle it and what was the outcome?

When I first joined the company the biggest challenge I faced was learning to cope with the demands of providing support to such a large number of people. In the beginning I was the administrative officer and was completely overwhelmed by what was expected of me, trying to keep track of all the tasks I had to manage. The first thing I did was to draw out a chart of everyone who would be relying on my skills and prioritised them the time constraints required to complete each task.

In order to develop my time management skills I sought approval from management to participate in a time management course and a course aimed at managing multiple objectives and deadlines. I planned and developed a colour coding system and set new procedures in place so that tasks coming in could be quickly categorised and put on my list in order of urgency. I also took the time to get to know the people I would be working with as forging strong relationships in the beginning can greatly affect the way the working relationship progresses. Through all these measures I was able to complete my assigned tasks within deadline and to a high standard. As time progressed and I found myself becoming faster and more efficient at completing my tasks. I took the time to evaluate the way the office works and took the initiative to make some changes, i.e. outsourcing the distribution of our magazine, which meant less work for the already over-stretched staff and it also saved the company over £12,000 per annum.

Now that I have recently been made a supervisor over two junior members of staff I am finding new challenges every day and I am really enjoying being pushed to my full potential.

What are some of your work related achievements? Can you describe a particular situation or project at work where your input (or word to that affect) made a significant difference to its success.

Over the past two years my achievements have been very significant. Apart from my own personal progression through on the job learning, I also decided to pursue academia in order to benefit the company I work for and to further my own career prospects. In April 2007 I successfully completed my NVQ Level 3 in Administration, my Technical Certificate in Administration and my Key Skills 3 in Number. I am currently in the middle of completing my NVQ Level 4 in Management and have recently started a degree in Business Studies. I am a student member of the Charted Management Institute and hope to become a fully fledged member once I have finished my NVQ 4.
My other achievements include saving the company £12,000 on distribution costs, £2000 on stationery costs, and £1000 in postage costs this year alone. I also designed the company’s website and maintain this daily.

One of my biggest achievements would be the success of the Belfast Awards for two years running as so much work goes into this event from such a small team (4 people, myself included). As a co-ordinator for the Belfast Awards (a huge gala evening with over 400 guests), I assist in mystery shopping, managing the launch event, Gala ceremony and after party, as well as providing support to applicants, processing applications and I am involved with all of the back-end support for the event i.e. choosing centre pieces, chair coverings, menus etc. I also design the on-screen graphics shown at the awards ceremony.

How have you got to where you are today in your career? (A little about your career progression. Have you moved up the ladder internally? Has your career spanned different sectors or have you worked for other companies but remained in the same sector?)

In two short years I believe I have made an impression within the organisation which was recognised recently by my promotion to Senior Business Administrator. I put my success to having a genuine interest in what the company does and by treating it as if it were my own. If the company succeeds, I succeed and I am always on the lookout for things I can do to improve the way in which the company operates. I take pleasure in celebrating our successes and knowing that I have the support of the company behind me and knowing that they want me to succeed makes a huge difference to the way I approach my work. This positive attitude, taking my own initiative and striving for success has, in my opinion, made me stand out to my superiors and helps me gain recognition in being a valuable team player, which in turn improves my prospects for career progression.

What do you find most enjoyable about your job?

As an administrator, I enjoy the daily challenges given to me and the feeling of satisfaction at dealing with these challenges. When I don’t succeed at what I set out to do, I enjoy the learning process that takes place to ensure I succeed the next time around. I also enjoy being one of the main lynchpins that holds the organisation together and knowing that people are depending on my skills and knowledge to make their lives that little bit easier. As this award recognises, this job is to provide support to other people and it gives me great satisfaction that because I am good at my job, someone else doesn’t have to stress so much about theirs. Although there are times when it can be difficult, and often people in support roles don’t always get the credit they are due, I like the feeling of being in the background, being one of the cogs that turns a complex machine and knowing that even though I may not always be seen, I am always important.

As a PA the main satisfaction I get is knowing that my boss can depend on me to take up some of the slack and make his life that bit easier. His job is high-powered and often very challenging and to be able to relieve some of the pressure even if it is just making him take time for lunch makes me feel I have an important role to play. It is also nice to have a strong relationship and a role model encouraging me to further myself and appreciating my work.

Are you in a position to mentor or pass on skills to colleagues, describe a situation where you have done so?

This is my first time in a supervisory position over two junior members of staff and I am keen to mentor them and help them appreciate the finer details in becoming an exemplary member of the support staff. I think in the beginning of a career in administration it is easy to become disillusioned about the important of the job as you are usually left doing all the smaller jobs that give little reward. It will be my aim to ensure that my staff understand the value of their job and the positive effects that their efforts can bring to creating a great working environment. Already I have initiated one of the staff members on the same NVQ 3 in Administration course that I completed last year to provide him with all the necessary tools and motivation he will need to progress in his career. I see personal development and empowerment as key to the self-esteem of staff members which will in turn greatly affect the way in which they approach their jobs. It is nice to finally be able to pass on some of my experience and skills to other people and watch them grow as I did.

What key nuggets of advice would you offer to PAs and secretaries for success in their career?

- Just because you are in the background doesn’t mean you’re not important. VALUE YOURSELF!
- Understand that it is OK to say no if you feel overwhelmed. Sometimes we are taken for granted and need to stand up for ourselves. You are a superstar...not superhuman!
- Be flexible and take critique positively
- Forge strong relationships early... when you are in a support position for someone you get on well with, it makes life so much easier!
- If a senior member of staff sounds off, don’t take it personally...when you provide support on a daily basis it is easy to be seen in a support position in other areas. Grow a thick skin!
Natural diamonds are formed in specific conditions, many billions of years ago from carbon deep within the Earth where high pressures and temperatures conditions combined to produce the diamonds. Diamonds are valuable and rare because it is not easy to retrieve the relatively small amount of industrial and gem-quality diamonds from extreme conditions of hot African deserts or the icy cold of Canada, even with all the sophisticated equipment we have nowadays. Approximately 250 tons of ore is mined and processed to produce a one carat polished diamond of gem-quality. Few are large enough to be polished into diamonds.

A little about the product?

Diamonds are the hardest and strongest stone known, and can only be scratch by another diamond, so are very suited to be worn every day as a gemstone in jewellery, i.e. engagement and wedding rings. As it is scratch resistant, it stays well polished, and hence the innovative advertising from De Beers that “a diamond is forever”! Tip: If you own diamond jewellery, store them separately, so they do not scratch each other.

How long have you been with company and in this role (if different)?

Although what one plans to do often never happens, as each day brings new challenges and new projects to resolve, and tackle. I could be trying to find accommodation for an overseas colleague, who has arrived in the office without accommodation for the night as everywhere is fully booked due to say a fashion week, to locating a colleague urgently who is overseas and out of contact, or liaising with the team regarding the team meeting agenda or minutes, or liaising closely with venue finders, or just catching up with my archiving and document management. At all times, as my boss’s work is often sensitive and confidential, I have to exercise confidentiality and discretion. My boss is often out of the office, so we liaise via email/blackberry, mobile, and SMS. I peruse his emails to check anything urgent or that I can assist or liaise on, diarise any appointments made with him direct, and to keep in the loop.

Often I am asked by non-admin staff what it is that I do as I seem to be so busy. So for two weeks I listed my tasks as I did them each day, and it ranges from 35-45 tasks on average a day and one day I was shocked to find that I had managed to do 50 tasks! Sometimes a task is listed as one but actually within that task there are lots of tasks, i.e. recharging my boss’s expenses is one task, but within that task, I have to reconcile the expenses by locating the matching receipts, ondiscoveringa flight has been charged twice with differing amounts, liaising to obtain a refund, prepare a breakdown spreadsheet, liaise with the overseas offices to get a purchase order number, then advise accounts to process the recharges. A simple task of raising purchase orders could include, if a new supplier, liaising with new supplier for bank details etc, completing and submitting form to set up new supplier details on company system to obtain new vendor number, and if problems with creating purchase order on system, liaising with accounts payable for assistance.

What is your role within the organisation and who do you work for?

I have been with the company for five years, the first year in the Legal Department as PA to the Legal Director and the last four in the Finance Department. I transferred there from the Legal Department and was PA and Team Secretary to the Head of Finance and his team; then two years ago promoted to PA to the Finance Director. The Finance Department deals with the financial side of the company’s business, such as budget management, cashflows, pensions, payroll, account payables and receivables, tax and VAT. My boss, as an Executive Director of Finance and Administration for the company, manages all strategic and
financial planning and policies, facilities and risk management, and is involved in several Committees and is Director of various Boards. He also heads a team of 20, as well as having five Managers reporting direct to him. Thus, my job is very varied and very busy, with extensive diary/travel management, meetings and documentation and queries that invariably pass through a busy office. My tasks could range from making the tea, to organising transportation and accommodation for visiting staff from our overseas offices, to researching rewards for the team and to software requirements to streamline the work processes.

How has your role changed over the past 12 months?

My role’s responsibilities has increased over the last year, there is much more work accountability and control over my work; taking ownership of all enquiries, resolving or escalating (or identifying alternative contacts) as appropriate; more challenging projects such as organising presentations/workshops, budget planning meetings involving numerous busy people, to re-arranging waitlisted flights and changing appointments at the eleventh hour, to creating the secretarial intranet, an online office manual for the benefit of secretarial and administrative colleagues. There are new duties and new software systems to be learnt, and continuing professional development.

What would you say are the three most important skills you use at work and why?

The three most important skills that I use at work is organisation, prioritising, and forward thinking/staying one step ahead. To meet deadlines and be efficient for the smooth running of our department, I have to be very well organised and have everything at the tip of my fingers. To be ready and flexible for anything, e.g. personally deliver conference materials to a venue the night before, if no one can do it, and the first to be at a venue to check all is in order, table layout and seating plans, equipment working, setting up etc, and have a Plan B if Plan A fails, and make sure everyone is in the loop, so nothing is left to chance. I have many conflicting duties, so have to prioritise each different requests from the many that I receive, and thinking ahead by providing solutions and suggestions, for instance, if one of our internal large meeting room is needed all day, and someone has blocked an hour here and an hour there, I would find and book an alternative for those hours to make a swap, or if a dinner venue is unavailable, to give alternatives as a solution. It is much more helpful and efficient to give an alternative than a negative. If my boss is unavailable for a certain date/time requested, I would give suggestions rather than say he is unavailable.

What does a typical day look like for you? (If you don’t have a ‘typical’ day, please give as much information as you? (If you don’t have a ‘typical’ day, please give suggestions rather than say he is unavailable.

A typical day could be like this:

• 8.50am Arrive at office, gather paperwork and to do’s from locked cupboard (we have a clear desk and restricted documents policy) and organise for the day ahead, take daily FT and coffee into boss, review diary for the day, and check emails.
• 9.30am Morning walkabout to touch base with the team, and to check the whereabouts of the team (if boss is looking for any particular team, I would need to know!), tidy up the communal areas, check copier and printers, top up with paper (my view is a well looked after office equipment is less likely to breakdown and saves repair costs), weekly check of stationery cupboards and tidy deliveries, distribute faxes, collect post
• 10.00am Greet and meet visitors and obtain refreshments from internal coffee shop. Open post, sort and distribute. Answer and deal with queries from colleagues: when is boss next available, who to contact with regard to such and such an issue, documents needs binding, the air-con is too hot/cold, there are flies in the office, where is a meeting room located, arrange security for next week’s visitors, organise flowers/gifts for a retirement, liaise with in-house travel agents to reschedule flights, book accommodation, car hire, liaise with overseas office regarding meeting timings, accept events/function invites, re-scheduling and re-scheduling diaries, sending out outlook invites, typing up complicated itinerary for boss’ business trip making sure all contact details, confirmations are accurate, taking and vetting numerous calls, and so on.
• 12.40pm Go to gym class/or it could be a working lunch to attend a Webinar or Travel Meeting
• 1.20pm Lunch in the staff restaurant, catch up with colleagues from other departments.
• 1.50pm Prepare for next meeting.
• 2.00pm Brief meeting to discuss recycling schemes progress/or attend a Values Workshop.
• 2.30pm Finance software training/or attend a diamond floor tour
• 3.30pm Check and respond to emails, prepare documents for boss’s meetings next day, update secretarial share point; follow up receipts for Barclaycard statements from team; collect signature book and distribute signed documents, deal with IT queries, log issues, liaise with Switchboard to co-ordinate conference phone, assist overseas’s visiting colleagues to print colour documents off and scan, liaise with auditors regarding dates of meeting; raise purchase orders, locate a document for a colleague, arrange courier ▶
for post, organise signatories of directors for legal documentation; researching venues and reporting back to boss.

- 5.30pm Tidy and lock papers away and leave desk clear, before leaving the office for a networking function or attend IQPS branch function, or cooking dinner for the family at home.

What is the biggest challenge that you’ve faced at the company, how did you tackle it and what was the outcome?

My biggest challenge that I faced at the company is to raise the most funds with two colleagues for a charity of our choice within three months for the Company’s “Show We Care Day”. It meant using up every spare time I had after working hours and at weekends, to research, plan, target and campaign for sponsors, market and promote, to formulate and achieve the ideas, and putting it all into action and producing a fun and active day for everyone and raise funds at the same time. There were lots of obstacles to overcome, some relating to legal issues, others trying to encourage people to take part and contribute their skills, and so on. It turned out to be a 24/7 operation, and I was buzzing. It was hard work but fun and a great sense of achievement to be able to help the charities of our choice, charities that help Aids orphans (Fikelela) and providing sustainable agriculture for the most vulnerable (GardenAfrica). I also required a lot of nerve to approach shops and strangers for free samples, for example, often at underground stations, free samples are given out and I had to ask for more than one. Armed with boxes with my colleague, I would locate where the “boss” was and asked nicely if he was the “boss” and then explain about the fundraising in the office, and often, they are happy to help and would fill up my boxes with the samples. It pays to be polite! We raised £6,600 in three months, which is a lot of Rands.

An excellent and amazing result.

What are some of your work related achievements? Can you describe a particular situation or project at work where your input (or word to that affect) made a significant difference to its success?

My work related achievement was meeting Archbishop Desmond Tutu, patron in chief of the charity I raised funds for and having breakfast with him and Princess Irene of Greece and Denmark (Prince Philip’s cousin); and being nominated for the company’s Values Awards last year, for living the company’s values.

More down to earth achievements are creating and implementing an intranet site for my secretarial and administrative colleagues, an online office manual to share ideas and best practices relating to our work, a central share point for documentation and information and to save re-inventing the wheel. I started by canvassing colleagues about the idea, liaising with IT to discuss solutions and our Legal Department to discuss legal issues, testing, finalising and launching. It has received much support and encouraging comments. I also saved the company archiving costs by halving the storage space needed and saving stationery costs by re-using the lever arch folders instead of archiving them, which is environmentally friendly too. By transferring old files from hard lever arch folders to soft cardboard folders, and re-using the lever arch folders for new files, the bulky lever arch folders are not archived for upwards of ten years with the old documentation wasting space and storage costs. I also refreshed my boss’s non-existent filing system. As he is financial he wanted it to be numerical and as I worked better alphabetically, we compromised with both numerical and alphabetical and happily, it works very well. I am a supporter of IQPS, and its Central London Branch, and it has been a challenge to organise several events for the branch meetings, writing articles for the branch newsletters, and recently contributed on the working party of IQPS for its future and continued success.

How have you got to where you are today in your career? (A little about your career progression. Have you moved up the ladder internally? Has your career spanned different sectors or have you worked for other companies but remained in the same sector?)

I got to where I am today in my career through passion and enjoyment of my work, creative efficiencies, hard work, determination to promote the secretarial position as a profession (that it is just as important a role in a company as any senior staff), and enthusiasm. I have worked in all areas of law, in travel, in property, estate agents, investments, design consultants, in government, training consultants, and mining working my way up from an office junior to typist, to Office Manager and PA. Each time, I hope I have left my mark! I do not strive to be a good PA but to be a brilliant PA.

What do you find most enjoyable about your job?

I most enjoy about my work is the interaction with people, being able to help and provide solutions to challenging projects. Completion of a difficult project is most satisfying, i.e. identifying a software to streamline the completion of 125 Inland Revenue Forms on a computer rather than have them handwritten individually. I also enjoy providing the full PA support to my boss, little things like topping up his desk printer with paper, sharpening pencils, tidying up his office, and switching off his office equipment when not in use when he is away from his office on long trips, and even making him coffee. To me this enhances and creates a good working environment for him, enabling him to concentrate on the things that he does best and making effective decisions, without concerns and distractions. ▶
Are you in a position to mentor or pass on skills to colleagues, describe a situation where you have done so?

I have often mentor or pass on my skills to colleagues. A colleague may need a Powerpoint presentation created urgently, but unable to do so as she did not have the required Powerpoint skills, I was able to help, or it could be they needed my local knowledge to find a restaurant, shop or somewhere economical to stay, or even directions to a venue. I have offered advice and helped with financial issues; finding the most economical bookings, always on hand for any requests, even to provide pumps to blow up balloons and decorate an office, and ideas for gifts. I have provided a “buddy” service to new colleagues/temps, advising on office procedures and processes, who to contact etc. I thrive on new technology/systems and colleagues often seek my advice on IT issues and I pass on my knowledge without hesitation. Always giving and sharing, I have been told I am a brilliant mentor by my peers and colleagues, a great motivator and team member. I am always thoughtful and helpful with whomever I am in contact with, often giving up my personal time to do so.

What key nuggets of advice would you offer to PAs and secretaries for success in their career?

My advice for success? Believe in yourself and the great things you can achieve. Be true to yourself and stand up for what you are good at. Be positive and positive things will happen. Get a job that you are happy in and enjoy doing, as it helps you to accomplish great things and it really does give you the edge and confidence to do so with brilliance and flair. Dress for the part, look professional and you will be treated professionally. Treat PA as a career as a profession, and raise profile of the role: PA’s are like diamonds, unique and special by nature. Always follow up with a thank you letter/email after every meeting/function/hospitality, good for keeping in touch and you never know when you may need their assistance in the future. Treat everyone you meet with courtesy and respect. Make maximum use of all technology, the internet is a godsend, Google for any information you need and put deskdemon.com in your favorites (the news alerts are great). Keep up with professional development and skills. Finally, keep networking, you learn so much!

In a nutshell, enjoy, have fun and smile!
Please tell us a little about the company/organisation you work for, including what it does, the size, sector and your location.

I work for a well respected water utilities company that supplies water and sewerage services to a large area ranging from North Somerset to Dorset, Wiltshire to West Somerset. The company has approximately 2,300 employees, with about 500 based at our headquarters in Bath and all other staff located throughout the region.

How long have you been with company and in this role (if different)?

I have been with the company for nine and half years and have looked after seven directors over this period.

What is your role within the organisation and who do you work for? (please mention if you have many bosses and the roles you perform for them, if it differs from boss to boss)

I am a Personal Assistant to the Director of Compliance and Sustainability and his team of staff.

How has your role changed over the past 12 months?

The organisation of both internal and external meetings has increased, as my Director’s role has grown. My company’s Information Technology has advanced, which means I can now book meeting rooms, buffets, refreshments and car parking spaces electronically on my PC.

What does a typical day look like for you? (if you don’t have a ‘typical’ day, please give as much information as possible about the different tasks you get involved in) .

A typical day includes electronic diary management, checking and dealing with emails, dealing with the post, organising many and varied internal/external meetings including booking hotels, dinner, buffets, refreshments, meeting rooms etc. Liaising with attendees of meetings, arranging agendas, PowerPoint presentations, dictation (shorthand or verbal) of meeting notes. Cover three Directors’ and the Chairman’s phones at all times. Deal with any customer complaints or enquiries by phone or letter, as necessary. Book travel, hotels and conferences for my team. Electronic filing and paper filing. Photocopying and printing are amongst the many ad hoc jobs that a PA does in a day.

What is the biggest challenge that you’ve faced at the company, how did you tackle it and what was the outcome?

I had a boss who was a bully and being a non-confrontational person, had to deal with this in a professional way. I ignored his attitude for six months, but then felt enough was enough. I decided a more assertive approach was called for, so put this into practice upon his return from a business trip abroad. He soon got the message and couldn’t do enough for me after that.

What are some of your work related achievements? Can you describe a particular situation or project at work where your input (or word to that affect) made a significant difference to its success?

When I worked for Rotary International on a fundraising project for Polio Plus, I stayed on for an extra two and a half years to manage the full term of five and a half thousand covenants, which helped raise the total fund in the UK, Ireland and Gibraltar to over £9 million.

How have you got to where you are today in your career? (A little about your career progression. Have you moved up the ladder internally? Has your career spanned different sectors or have you worked for other companies but remained in the same sector?)

I have worked in different sectors throughout my career, firstly training to be a secretary, then progressing to personal assistant. My employment has been very diverse - concrete manufacturers, large electronics company specialising in top secret work, Rotary International, plastic bag manufacturers, water utilities. I also did some temping, which was a great experience, as it gave me a lot of confidence - and of course, a variety of secretarial jobs.

What do you find most enjoyable about your job?

I am lucky to be in a role that is very varied. I also enjoy working in a large, modern, relaxed, open plan building, which is the headquarters of the company and this means I get to meet and talk to lots of people.

Are you in a position to mentor or pass on skills to colleagues, describe a situation where you have done so?

In my previous job as PA to the Managing Director in a large factory, I was fortunate enough to be able to pass on many of my secretarial skills to a lady who was a receptionist and wanted to become a secretary.
What key nuggets of advice would you offer to PAs and secretaries for success in their career?

Always try to look smart and well groomed so that you look the complete professional - which you are! To smile and be polite costs nothing, but brings its own rewards. Remember you are never too old to learn new skills and when you do - share them with your colleagues. Treat people with respect, as you would wish to be treated.
KAREN RICHES

Please tell us a little about the company/organisation you work for, including what it does, the size, sector and your location.

Shell Aircraft is part of the Shell Group and has three different functions, one is the Corporate Aircraft which operates to serve the flight requirements of the Shell senior management team, the second is the Advisory which offers aviation-related expertise on safety issues in specific areas world-wide, and the third is Special Project which works with the industry on researching safer ways to operate aircraft which could include its equipment fit. Shell Aircraft are based in Heathrow (where I work), Rotterdam, Houston and Calgary. We have a team of 90+ working throughout the four locations.

How long have you been with company/organisation and in this role (if different)?

I have worked for Shell Aircraft for just over 16 years and in my current role as Office Manager and PA to the MD since 1996.

What is your role within the organisation and who do you work for?

My role at Shell Aircraft is very varied, that is one aspect of the job I really like. I work as Office Manager at the Heathrow offices and PA to the MD who is now located in our Rotterdam Office. My role involves ensuring that the office is running smoothly and to budget. I support the MD ensuring that he stays out of trouble and gets to his meetings on time, which sometimes can be a hard task. I also work closely with the other Directors as and when required. As part of the management team I am required to travel to our other offices in Rotterdam, Houston and Calgary. This is not as great as it might sound as you usually only get to see the offices or an airport and Calgary in winter is very cold.

How has your role changed over the past 12 months?

My role has changed considerably over the last 12 months, especially with the relocation to Rotterdam. This move has impacted on how I support and communicate with my boss, virtually is certainly more difficult, and you need to ensure you use all the technology available. We regularly talk on video cam and share files over the network. My role as a Line Manager has also grown. The support I give to my direct reports, through the difficult time of redundancy notices, has truly tested my skills to the limit.

What would you say are the three most important skills you use at work and why?

Listening – Sometimes people just want to share, they don’t want answers.

Coaching – Direct lines need to be developed and sometimes a gentle point in the right direction is required.

Organisation – Certainly need this when you are juggling so many balls.

What does a typical day look like for you? (If you don’t have a ‘typical’ day, please give as much information as possible about the different tasks you get involved in).

Everyday is different, you might plan to do a certain task, and then an email or phone call may direct you elsewhere. Prioritising is key to success. I get involved in everything from arranging a handyman to come and fix something, ordering of new IT equipment/mobile phones to organising meetings, travel and conferences to publishing information on our intranet website.

What is the biggest challenge that you’ve faced at the company, how did you tackle it and what was the outcome?

My biggest challenge has certainly been the relocation of our offices to Rotterdam. We found out about the move some 24 months ago, so it has been very difficult for personnel to keep motivated and focused on the now and the future (most of the staff involved have been with Shell Aircraft for 10 year +). We are nearly there and are well into the recruiting of our replacements to handover our roles. Training others to do your job is hard, when you are not involved in the future of the company anymore, so I have tried to coach them into feeling that they are still involved in the future and it is the training and handover that will make it so. It will then be the time to concentrate on new beginnings (my next big challenge).

What are some of your work related achievements? Can you describe a particular situation or project at work where your input (or word to that affect) made a significant difference to its success?

One of my biggest achievements was a refurbishment of our offices. There were issues from some members of staff and the new open plan environment when they were used to having their own offices. I worked with the contractors and with staff members to ensure that the end result was one of great success. Everyone was happy with his or her new workspace and, I believe, felt included in some of the decision-making.

How have you got to where you are today in your career? (A little about your career progression. Have you moved up the ladder internally? Has your career spanned different sectors or have you worked for other companies but remained in the same sector?)

What is the biggest challenge that you’ve faced at the company, how did you tackle it and what was the outcome?

My biggest challenge has certainly been the relocation of our offices to Rotterdam. We found out about the move some 24 months ago, so it has been very difficult for personnel to keep motivated and focused on the now and the future (most of the staff involved have been with Shell Aircraft for 10 year +). We are nearly there and are well into the recruiting of our replacements to handover our roles. Training others to do your job is hard, when you are not involved in the future of the company anymore, so I have tried to coach them into feeling that they are still involved in the future and it is the training and handover that will make it so. It will then be the time to concentrate on new beginnings (my next big challenge).

What are some of your work related achievements? Can you describe a particular situation or project at work where your input (or word to that affect) made a significant difference to its success?

One of my biggest achievements was a refurbishment of our offices. There were issues from some members of staff and the new open plan environment when they were used to having their own offices. I worked with the contractors and with staff members to ensure that the end result was one of great success. Everyone was happy with his or her new workspace and, I believe, felt included in some of the decision-making.

How have you got to where you are today in your career? (A little about your career progression. Have you moved up the ladder internally? Has your career spanned different sectors or have you worked for other companies but remained in the same sector?)

What is the biggest challenge that you’ve faced at the company, how did you tackle it and what was the outcome?

My biggest challenge has certainly been the relocation of our offices to Rotterdam. We found out about the move some 24 months ago, so it has been very difficult for personnel to keep motivated and focused on the now and the future (most of the staff involved have been with Shell Aircraft for 10 year +). We are nearly there and are well into the recruiting of our replacements to handover our roles. Training others to do your job is hard, when you are not involved in the future of the company anymore, so I have tried to coach them into feeling that they are still involved in the future and it is the training and handover that will make it so. It will then be the time to concentrate on new beginnings (my next big challenge).

What are some of your work related achievements? Can you describe a particular situation or project at work where your input (or word to that affect) made a significant difference to its success?

One of my biggest achievements was a refurbishment of our offices. There were issues from some members of staff and the new open plan environment when they were used to having their own offices. I worked with the contractors and with staff members to ensure that the end result was one of great success. Everyone was happy with his or her new workspace and, I believe, felt included in some of the decision-making.

How have you got to where you are today in your career? (A little about your career progression. Have you moved up the ladder internally? Has your career spanned different sectors or have you worked for other companies but remained in the same sector?)
I have always worked in the Business Support function, first started off as an office junior and within the two main companies that I have worked with Shell (16 years) and Balfour Beatty (15 years) have worked my way up through the ranks to a PA role to the MD and/ or Directors.

What do you find most enjoyable about your job?

I mostly enjoy the variety, no two days are the same, and the people are also great, the thing I will miss most when I move on at the end of this year.

Are you in a position to mentor or pass on skills to colleagues, describe a situation where you have done so?

I have three line reports at the moment that I mentor. As I mentioned earlier, we are currently going through considerable change as a result of the relocation to Rotterdam. This move has required all of the business support members (including myself), to deal with difficult news and make difficult decisions. I have arranged for everyone to make use of the outplacement facilities available, and ensure that we have had up-to-date training to ensure that we are ready for our new roles in 2009. There has also been the opportunity to travel to our Rotterdam office on more regular basis to assist with the development of the support team there.

What key nuggets of advice would you offer to PAs and secretaries for success in their career?

- Listen, don’t presume you know everything.
- Coach, don’t preach.
- Lead by example.
- Respect others, everyone has a part to play, however small.
Please tell us a little about the company/organisation you work for, including what it does, the size, sector and your location.

The organisation is called TPAS (Tenant Participation Advisory Service) and is a non-profit organisation which provides advice, training, research and consultancy to social landlords and their tenants in order to build up the partnership between them. It is a UK wide organisation with an office based in Scotland, England Ireland and 2 offices in Wales. I am based in the North Wales office in Llandudno Junction.

How long have you been with company and in this role (if different)?

I have been with TPAS for 10 years 8 months starting off as an Administration Officer and in the past 4 years have been translating all TPAS’s correspondence from English to Welsh. 3 years ago a staff restructuring took place and I was made Office Manager.

What is your role within the organisation and who do you work for?

My role is to provide an effective and efficient customer focused administration and to provide essential administration support to the team of 5 at the North Wales Office. I am the organisation’s translator and provide translation facilities to the organisation as a whole. I manage the office with regards to office administration and any office duties such as maintenance of equipment, stationery orders, invoicing, diary management, housekeeping. I also line manage the administrative assistant on a daily basis. I provide support to 3 members of staff in my office and I’m line managed by 1, however, I also occasionally provide support to staff members in the South Wales office and the Director on corporate events/duties.

How has your role changed over the past 12 months?

No changes have been made in the past 12 months

What would you say are the three most important skills you use at work and why?

My ability to translate English to Welsh is my main skill as it is a specialised and much needed skill in Wales. Other skills include my meticulous attention to detail and good organising skills which ensures that office systems have been streamlined and standardised and all events are thought through in great depth.

What does a typical day look like for you? (If you don’t have a ‘typical’ day, please give as much information as possible about the different tasks you get involved in.

There is no typical day in TPAS. Each day begins with the usual logging down telephone messages and passing them along to the relevant members of staff, then opening and logging the incoming mail. After that it’s a quick check of any overnight emails and dealing with them. Following on from there the work is varied. It’s usually dependant on the Project Officer’s workload - providing administrative support/ translating documents/mailouts/ statistical reports/newsletters etc. We have an annual conference each November therefore a great deal of support is needed to ensure this is run smoothly and each May I arrange and co-ordinate our Annual Participation Awards Ceremony. Throughout the year, we hold various seminars/briefing events and training courses which again I arrange and co-ordinate. I line manage the administrative assistant who works 3 days a week and cover her duties on the 2 days she does not work (i.e. basic administration tasks).

What is the biggest challenge that you’ve faced at the company, how did you tackle it and what was the outcome?

The biggest challenge was finding out that the lease on our office premises was running out and that we could not renew it. I needed to investigate new properties and costings as well as the actual cost of moving (redirection of mail/telephone calls/removals/ decorating etc). The new property had to be in a central location, within our price range, disabled friendly and accessible by public transport. At the time 2 members of staff had just left and we were in the process of recruiting their replacements and an additional part time administrative assistant therefore there was only 2 of us to manage the actual ‘move’. The outcome was good - we had an ideal office, centrally based at a price we could afford. We are still at the same offices, now with 5 members of staff.

What are some of your work related achievements? Can you describe a particular situation or project at work where your input (or word to that affect) made a significant difference to its success?

My biggest achievement at work would have to be the Annual Participation Awards. These began a few years ago as part of our annual conference - it lasted half an hour presenting 3 or 4 awards to a handful of people. In 2003 I took over the organisation of the annual event and it has since got bigger and better. They are now seen as the Participation Oscars that takes place as a whole day event, presenting 9 awards with over 160 delegates. I take this event on solely with only...
a little administrative support as I feel it’s easier that way. I am extremely proud of this annual event.

How have you got to where you are today in your career? A little about your career progression. Have you moved up the ladder internally? Has your career spanned different sectors or have you worked for other companies but remained in the same sector?

Before joining TPAS, I worked in the Estimating Dept of a Building Construction company - that as my first job. I went on from there to TPAS, where I’ve been for nearly 11 years.

What do you find most enjoyable about your job? The creativity and variety of my job is most enjoyable. I also enjoy working with a great team.

Are you in a position to mentor or pass on skills to colleagues, describe a situation where you have done so?

I am a line manager of one administrative assistant and when I am on annual leave she has to cover parts of my work. I have therefore had to provide her with some in house training on various parts of my job and will continue to do so as the increase in workload continues. I have also had to provide training to my replacement when I went on Maternity Leave.

What key nuggets of advice would you offer to PAs and secretaries for success in their career?

Organisation is the key to effective administration and if you have good procedures and systems in place, it makes your work life a lot easier.
EMILY ROBE

Please tell us a little about the company/organisation you work for, including what it does, the size, sector and your location.

I work within the Specialist Equipment Division at A-Plant, a leading equipment rental company. We operate five businesses focused on different product groups – from powered access machines to rail equipment. Our division is one of three and we operate nationally.

How long have you been with company and in this role (if different)?
I've just celebrated my second anniversary with the company.

What is your role within the organisation and who do you work for?
I am PA to the MD of Specialist Equipment and I also support five Operational Directors who oversee 52 depots. I mainly look after the MD and his needs which range, from diary management, compilation of reports, preparation of spreadsheets, organizing travel arrangements to the general admin functions a PA carries out. My role for the OD’s is one of a central point for communication, so organizing travel, making sure they submit relevant reports and data, purchasing, and the odd word processing task.

How has your role changed over the past 12 months?
The current MD came into the role in October so there has been a transitional period for that. There have been many changes within the company and our procedures, a lot of the time consuming part of my job has been added to our intranet whereas it was paper based previously.

What would you say are the three most important skills you use at work and why?
Organisation skills, dealing with a number of different projects, people and problems daily means I need to be very well organized to keep ahead of them.

Problem solving skills, again dealing with a number of problems ranging from last minute travel arrangements, IT problems to name a few means that I sometimes have to be able to think on my feet and help someone find a solution to their problem.

Communication skills. A lot of the work I do is via email and the telephone and so I have to be able to communicate accurately to various people in order to convey the correct message, ensure deadlines are achieved and that people understand what is needed. I could be dealing with a customer, a depot manager or one of our Senior Directors.

What does a typical day look like for you? (If you don’t have a ‘typical’ day, please give as much information as possible about the different tasks you get involved in).
There is no typical day in this role, generally through the day I chase purchase orders, raising purchase orders where necessary, collate a variety of pieces of information from attendance lists for meetings, organising relevant travel arrangements. Typing minutes of meetings, drafting memos for the MD, along with recording data on various spreadsheets. Making sure that the Directors and the depots adhere to deadlines and company procedures.

I also provide cover if the PA for another MD is on lunch or leave.

What is the biggest challenge that you’ve faced at the company, how did you tackle it and what was the outcome?
When I first started with the company I inherited a number of systems which my new boss needed overhauling, I was trying to get used to a new company and their procedures and at the same time, change to suit my own needs and that of the MD at the time. At the time of my joining the company I had only recently started working after taking a career break and I forgotten how much involvement it took.

What are some of your work related achievements? Can you describe a particular situation or project at work where your input (or word to that affect) made a significant difference to its success?
I can’t think of anything specific but I do get lots of feedback from my boss and the Operational Directors when I organise things for them. They all trust me to get the job done and that I will check with them if there is anything I am unsure of. It’s a great feeling when people say thanks and appreciate what I do whether it be large or small.

How have you got to where you are today in your career? (A little about your career progression. Have you moved up the ladder internally? Has your career spanned different sectors or have you worked for other companies but remained in the same sector?)
I started out after college and moved through various companies as a Secretary, but an opportunity to work as a Receptionist with a local Chamber of Commerce started my current career path. I was trained up as a PA to the Adult Guidance Manager and she invested a lot of time in me and gave me some excellent skills. I took a career-break, started working for myself as a project manager and what would be termed as a Virtual Assistant now. I returned to college and updated all my IT qualifications before
returning to work in this position.

What do you find most enjoyable about your job?

Everything! I love the job because of the variety and the people and the company are excellent to work for! Are you in a position to mentor or pass on skills to colleagues, describe a situation where you have done so? My boss and I work out of a satellite office so I don’t have that opportunity at this moment in time.

What key nuggets of advice would you offer to PAs and secretaries for success in their career?

My advice to any prospective PA would be: don’t undervalue your ability. Have confidence in what you do and people will have confidence in you. ➤
Please tell us a little about the company/organisation you work for, including what it does, the size, sector and your location.

I work for G4S plc, formerly Group 4 Securicor. We are the largest security solutions provider in the world, with offices in over 100 countries and around 500,000 employees worldwide. We’re actually the largest employer in the FTSE100 - we have a lot of people! You will have seen our secure vans transporting cash and our security guards in all sorts of places - most recently at Wimbledon.

How long have you been with company and in this role (if different)?

Almost two years.

What is your role within the organisation and who do you work for? (please mention if you have many bosses and the roles you perform for them, if it differs from boss to boss).

My title is the rather long-winded one of Executive Administration Manager and PA to the Group CEO and Group COO. I am based at Group HQ near Gatwick, which is where most of the Senior Execs and all the Group Functions are based. The first part of my role is to ensure that our Senior Execs receive the best possible support; which means recruiting good people, organising cover, looking at any training needs, etc. The second part of my role is mainly focused on our Group Chief Executive, Nick Buckles, making sure his days run as smoothly as possible. I also look after Grahame Gibson, our Group Chief Operating Officer, when he’s in the UK - although he spends most of his time in our US office, and I work closely with Jennifer, his US PA. We have a fantastic friendship although we’ve never met.

How has your role changed over the past 12 months?

The Executive Support Team has been through a lot of changes over the last 12 months and after a long period with a succession of leavers, new joiners and long-term temps, we finally have a settled team of great people, which I’m really pleased about. The next stage is to organise more team building to really strengthen what we’ve done so far.

What would you say are the three most important skills you use at work and why?

Relationship Building: I really believe that a lot of what we do is building relationships, knowing who the go-to person is for anything that the day can throw at you. I try to put myself out to help other people, partly because I enjoy it, but also because I know that I’ll get that help back in spades. Its very easy when you work for the big boss to do the ‘don’t you know who I am’ routine to get what you need, but its much more rewarding to get the assistance you need from someone who really wants to help you.

Multi-tasking: I once was told that you can do 5 things at a time plus or minus two. This is a very good rule of thumb. If you’re doing more than that, you won’t be able to do anything properly.

Prioritising: I have learned not to use my inbox as a to-do list, and to focus on what needs to be done, rather than what I’d like to do... although it is a struggle sometimes. Writing down everything that you need to do is really useful, as it separates it into a proper ‘task’.

Other key skills are the ability to mind read / read upside down / type like lightening / use Google like a pro / have a memory like an elephant / sense of humour (hugely important) and a healthy dose of perspective.

What does a typical day look like for you? (If you don’t have a “typical” day, please give as much information as possible about the different tasks you get involved in)

This was yesterday...

8am I start my day on the train on the way to work, checking overnight messages on my Blackberry. With one boss in the US and offices all over the world, it isn’t a 9-5 job, although it’s not often that it becomes intrusive.

- 9am I arrive just before 9am and make a cuppa for myself and Nick, if he’s in. We try to have a catch-up most days at some point during the day, if he’s in the office, but if he’s out for any length of time, we catch up on the phone. He asks me to reply to a couple of letters, and to rearrange some appointments, and I remind him that we have the next quarterly management review meeting coming up in September, and that we spend some time talking about the structure and agenda for the meeting.
- 10-12pm I spend the morning rearranging those meetings and organising an induction visit for a visiting VIP from the US.
- The post arrives late morning and I sift through everything, disposing of an enormous amount of junk mail in the recycling bin, and putting the rest into files for Nick and Grahame to review when they’re in the office. I scan and email one urgent personal letter to Jennifer, his US PA in - I know, I know! I get an email from Jennifer, our COO’s PA in -
- 12-1pm After lunch at my desk
the US. She’s been asked to get confirmation that Graham has no criminal record in the UK, as this is a legal requirement for our Greek company and he sits on their Board. I speak to our Legal team and they get in touch with Graham’s local constabulary to get the necessary paperwork.

1pm - I take a telephone call from a disgruntled member of the public, who complains that one of our Cash vehicles was parked on a kerb near his work. I take his details and ask Terri, the PA to the Managing Director of our UK Cash Company to ask someone to respond to his complaint. The PA in our India office emails me to see if I can get a start date for one of the regional managers, as they’re preparing an internal memo to congratulate him on a promotion. Get this information from HR and write straight back - he starts his new job tomorrow…!

1:30pm - looking for dates for an IT Strategy Forum for 10 IT Managers around the world to come to the UK in September. I have confirmation from almost everyone that they can make the date I’ve proposed, I’m just waiting for the Hong Kong office to get back to me in the morning.

2:30 - 4pm Spend some time researching some flight options and visa requirements for a visit to Kenya, and talking to our Comms team about an internal event that Nick’s hosting in a couple of weeks. Get some bad news that one of our Cash vehicles was parked out the lock mechanism, wiggle the lock with a steel ruler and the handbag is set free.

6pm - help one of the PAs unjam the drawer that her handbag (and car keys) is stuck in… we work out that it’s not locked, the lock is jammed, but anyone who could help has gone home. Help! We look at the nearby drawer, figure out the lock mechanism, wiggle the lock with a steel ruler and the handbag is set free.

6:20pm - Write out tomorrow’s to-do list, and then walk to the train station.

What is the biggest challenge that you’ve faced at the company, how did you tackle it and what was the outcome?

I think that the craziest thing happened in my first few weeks at G4S. Our Chairman hosts an annual pheasant shoot, which I have the dubious pleasure of organising. I’m a vegetarian and anti-blood sports, so it’s one task that I really dislike doing. My contact at the estate is always saying that I should come along, but I’d rather go and meet his lovely Labrador dogs than see any dead birds. Anyway - the day of my first G4S shoot started, and I knew that everything was organised and was expecting a nice quiet day in the office. At 9:15, I get a panicked

He won’t even give me any details citing extreme confidentiality. As he won’t tell me the name of the company he works for in New York (and he’s calling from a London number) I dismiss him as a spoof caller and invite him to call later (he doesn’t). That’s the third spoof call today. I had someone claiming to be his cousin last week.

4:30pm Visitors arrive for a meeting with Nick, so I pop down to reception to bring them to his office and make refreshments all round. Make a mental note to not provide biscuits next time - they never get eaten, and they somehow end up on my desk. Speak to our Investor Relations manager about a lunch date that she’s been trying to put into Nick’s diary. Update the contact details for the senior management team in the Business Continuity Plan for our Facilities team.

5:30pm - Finally arrange for a lift from our HR Director for Nick as he’d decided to run to work the next day. Do an expense claim form for my trip to London last week and put it in Nick’s signature book for first thing in the morning.

6pm - help one of the PAs unjam the drawer that her handbag (and car keys) is stuck in… we work out that it’s not locked, the lock is jammed, but anyone who could help has gone home. Help! We look at the nearby drawer, figure out the lock mechanism, wiggle the lock with a steel ruler and the handbag is set free.

6:20pm - Write out tomorrow’s to-do list, and then walk to the train station.

What is the biggest challenge that you’ve faced at the company, how did you tackle it and what was the outcome?

I think that the craziest thing happened in my first few weeks at G4S. Our Chairman hosts an annual pheasant shoot, which I have the dubious pleasure of organising. I’m a vegetarian and anti-blood sports, so it’s one task that I really dislike doing. My contact at the estate is always saying that I should come along, but I’d rather go and meet his lovely Labrador dogs than see any dead birds. Anyway - the day of my first G4S shoot started, and I knew that everything was organised and was expecting a nice quiet day in the office. At 9:15, I get a panicked
call from the Chairman’s PA in Denmark - the Danish High Commissioner and his wife have had their guns impounded at Heathrow, as they did not think to bring their gun licenses with them! And to make it interesting, they’re flying back to Copenhagen from Gatwick the following day - so somehow I have to get unlicensed guns across London - and find loan guns for them for the shoot.

Luckily G4S has a security team at Heathrow, so they were able to help me with my ‘gun running’ (once all the necessary protocols were gone through) and the shoot estate is amazingly helpful and manages to secure the next-best-thing to the required guns, which all prove satisfactory. Phew, job well done I thought. But no. The only feedback I got was that the chauffeur was too early to pick them up from their hotel to go to Gatwick the following day.

How have you got to where you are today in your career? A little about your career progression. Have you moved up the ladder internally? Has your career spanned different sectors or have you worked for other companies but remained in the same sector?

My first proper PA role was working for three Directors at one of the major record companies. One of my bosses was the newly appointed Director of HR, who had previously worked as PA to the CFO. Although I found it extremely difficult working for her; as she had no real need of a PA - she still did everything herself - I learnt an enormous amount from her approach and attitude to the role. The other two bosses were very definitely in need of a PA. One travelled an enormous amount, knew exactly what he needed and just needed someone reliable to do it, and to occasionally take out for a nice lunch! The other needed organising from ‘the bottom up’ - new filing systems, diary systems, team management systems -- you name it. From these three different bosses, I learned a good deal about the kind of PA I wanted to be, about the standards expected, about working and adapting to different personalities and the importance of knowing your way around an organisation.

I then went to work for a much smaller company - a design consultancy in Soho. I’ve always been interested in design and I thought that a smaller company would allow me to get more involved with the running of a business. I have to say that this move was a real mistake. The office was a start-up, rapidly losing customers, and the owner, who was independently wealthy, had no real interest in moving the business forward. My day was spent chasing outstanding invoices, fobbing off suppliers, ordering stationery, making endless trips to M&S across the road for clients/staff/customers/tea breaks and I soon realised that I was being paid a great salary for being an office dogbody. No-one seemed to have any interest in the business, and so I handed in my notice.

I then landed a dream job at a larger design consultancy in Hammersmith. This was my first managerial role - I looked after the Chairman and also the team of PA/Design Assistants. Although the people were fantastic, the company lost two major clients about six months after I joined, and I was made redundant on a last in-first out basis. However, I did get the loveliest reference from the Chairman, which I still read with pride from time to time.

After a few months temping, I went to work for the Vice President of Legal at an internet service provider. I stayed with this company for nearly 5 years, with a fantastic team and a lovely boss, all of whom I’m still in contact with. The company was sold in 2006 and of course Legal were one of the first to know when the process started. My boss decided to leave for a complete change of direction, and my friend Kim told me about the job here at G4S. I came for an interview, ‘just to see’ and then another, and then another... and realised that it was time to make the move. One of the best things that working with lawyers taught me was the ability to look at a situation calmly and logically and see it as just a problem waiting to be solved. I can’t underestimate how useful this mindset is - it immediately takes a huge amount of stress out of dealing with the random things that are thrown at you.

What do you find most enjoyable about your job?

The people. I have a great boss, he’s incredibly straightforward and easy-going, a real pleasure to work for. I also have fantastic co-workers, both those that I know in our building, and the people I deal with daily all around the world. I really do feel as if I have friends I’ve never met.

Are you in a position to mentor or pass on skills to colleagues, describe a situation where you have done so?

Not at the moment, although it’s something I’m planning to introduce in the future. We have some less experienced PAs at G4S, and I’d like them to see me and the rest of the Exec Support Team as role models/mentors.

What key nuggets of advice would you offer to PAs and secretaries for success in their career?

Focus on building relationships with key people. These are the people that can help you get things done - receptionists, the guy in the postroom, IT, other PAs, your customers and suppliers. Know what your company does, how it is structured, and what part your boss plays in the overall picture. Read the internal newsletter, subscribe to Google Alerts on your company. Know what’s important to your boss and know their strengths and weaknesses. How can you help? Keep your skills and your CV up-to-date, and keep an eye on the job market. No matter how much you love your job, it never hurts to see what’s on offer and to know your market worth. If nothing else, you’ll know there’s something better out there.

And remember it’s just a job. Your friends and family and your health and happiness are what really matters.
Please tell us a little about the company/organisation you work for, including what it does, the size, sector and your location.

The company I work for is IPC Media Ltd, a Time Warner Company it is the UK’s leading consumer magazine publisher with approximately 90 brands and selling 350 million magazines every year. The Head Office is based in London with offices also in Croydon and Poole in Dorset.

How long have you been with company and in this role (if different)?

I have worked for the company for 32 years and in my current role for over 10 years.

What is your role within the organisation and who do you work for?

My role within the organisation is the Personal Assistant/Office Manager to the Editor of Woman’s Own Magazine.

How has your role changed over the past 12 months?

My role over the past 12 months hasn’t changed much but I am getting more involved with actually writing an compiling a page in the magazine.

What would you say are the three most important skills you use at work and why?

The three most important skills I use at work are communication, understanding and working on my own initiative.

What does a typical day look like for you? (If you don’t have a ‘typical’ day, please give as much information as possible about the different tasks you get involved in.

As well as looking after the Editor I am the main contact for the 25 staff on the magazine. I answer all reader enquiries either on the phone or by e-mail, organise meetings, travel arrangements for readers coming to London for makeovers, all the contributors payments and I compile the Chat Room page for the magazine every week. There are many more but it would take up too much room.

What is the biggest challenge that you’ve faced at the company, how did you tackle it and what was the outcome?

My biggest challenge has been to help organise and take part in the Woman’s Own Children of Courage Awards that is held every year at Westminster Abbey. Ten children are awarded medals for their bravery and courage. Over the years the presenters have been The Queen Mother, Princess Diana, Prince Charles and Cherie Blair. The ceremony is then followed by lunch at the House of Lords, it is a star studded event and I really enjoy taking part in such a humbling occasion.

What do you find most enjoyable about your job?

The most enjoyable thing about my job is that no one day is the same and I work with a great bunch of people.

What key nuggets of advice would you offer to PAs and secretaries for success in their career?

During the school holidays we have work experience girls and boys in the office wanting to learn about how a magazine works and the different roles within it so I take them under my wing and show them.

• The key advice I would offer to Pa’s and Secretaries would be to have great organisational skills and enjoy your job.

I am often called upon by the Editor and the Art Director to give my opinions on the front cover of the magazine and sometimes they have changed the cover lines after making my comments.

How have you got to where you are today in your career? (A little about your career progression. Have you moved up the ladder internally? Has your career spanned different sectors or have you worked for other companies but remained in the same sector?

I have made my way up the ladder starting my working life as a filing clerk to where I am today. I have also done other jobs within various other magazines but within the same publishing company including production and commissioning.

What do you find most enjoyable about your job?

The most enjoyable thing about my job is that no one day is the same and I work with a great bunch of people.

What key nuggets of advice would you offer to PAs and secretaries for success in their career?

During the school holidays we have work experience girls and boys in the office wanting to learn about how a magazine works and the different roles within it so I take them under my wing and show them.

• The key advice I would offer to Pa’s and Secretaries would be to have great organisational skills and enjoy your job.
I have the greatest boss in the world – she thinks in the same way as I do, is hugely talented and is actually very hard to escape – in fact, she is me!

As a VA I work for up to 40 different clients dealing with everything from audio typing, market research, call answering, general PA duties, conference organisation etc., no two days are ever the same.

As “boss lady” it’s also my job to manage our workflow by delegating tasks, make sure everyone gets paid and to generate new business. I suppose I’m quite unusual as a PA in that I have control over how, when and where I work.

The team has completed most general secretarial type jobs remotely, the only thing we haven’t quite mastered yet is virtual coffee (although we do occasionally send out Starbucks coffee cards as thank you gifts).

How has your role changed over the past 12 months?

The VA industry is growing rapidly with more and more people realising that, with improved technology, remote working is a practical reality which can give you a better work/life balance and improve productivity whilst saving costs.

This has meant a larger market for our services, it has also meant increased competition, which has encouraged more VAs to specialise in niche industries or sectors.

At the annual National VA Conference in April there were certainly more people working on a professional basis rather than as a lifestyle business, which is a trend I wholeheartedly welcome.

What would you say are the three most important skills you use at work and why?

Prioritisation. With so many different clients to look after, it’s important to keep on top of deadlines and balancing your workload. I’m very anti multitasking for this reason – as Mr. Stephen Covey says “The main thing is the main thing” which is difficult to accomplish if you have three phones ringing, a fax to send and a document you are trying to type!

We have a unique turnaround guarantee of next working day for our regular clients, so in order to keep our promise we regularly assess progress of work and re-prioritise it accordingly throughout the day.

Having an eye for detail. Because of the way we are employed, each and every piece of work which goes out of the office has to be perfect, and we couldn’t do that without a natural eye for detail. It’s the little things that count. Having the same measurement abbreviations throughout a piece of text for example, or making sure that all the fonts are consistent. It’s very difficult to teach so when we take on a new VA we have a series of tests they must complete before we even start to show them how we work.

Saying no. PAs and secretaries are by their nature helpful people. You want to say yes to everything – it takes a lot of effort to train yourself to say no. But if you agree to complete a task which is unrealistic, then you are actually not helping them at all. We find that lots of clients aren’t used to working virtually and will often ask us to work in a non-efficient way (e.g. using badly designed templates for example). As virtual assistants it is our job to suggest and improve how we work. It can be done in a nice way, but saying no is an important tool in my box of tricks. What does a typical day look like for you? (If you don’t have a ‘typical’ day, please give as much information as possible about the different tasks you get involved in).

Virtual assistants have the ability to work from anywhere with a broadband connection which is useful as my boyfriend lives in London and I can happily travel up and down from Glasgow to see him. I am slightly unusual in that I have an office rather than working...
from home. I do have a home office, but I use it mainly for planning rather than working. My office is literally four blocks from my house so I’ve managed to eliminate the daily battle with the rush hour.

So the day starts at 9am by switching on our VOIP phones for the 20 different clients who we provide call answering for. We’ll forward any answerphone messages via email, and acknowledge and assign any work which has come in overnight.

Generally we’ll each have a To Do list to work through which we plan every evening at 5pm for the following day. This is the atypical bit – it can be anything from sending an email newsletter to typing a property report. Meanwhile throughout the day other pieces of work will come in and be scheduled too.

On top of that, we have weekly marketing, finance and team meetings all planned to make sure our business runs smoothly.

At 5pm we plan the following day and make sure we have completed all our tasks. The phones switch off at 6pm and then I get to go home. However, there are sometimes tasks which need to be finished off or checked in the evenings, so I often end up working quite long hours. The upside of that is that if I decide I want to go for a coffee with a friend or take the afternoon off to have my hair cut, it’s really not a problem!

What is the biggest challenge that you’ve faced at the company, how did you tackle it and what was the outcome?

About two years into the business I found I was working really long hours, paying out a lot of money on employees who weren’t really pulling their weight and subsequently not being able to pay myself properly. Something had to give – I hated my job and for the money I was earning I would have been better off working in McDonalds! I decided to try business coaching. It was a huge risk, costing more money than I was bringing in and which I wasn’t 100% convinced would work – after all, I had tried everything to make the business work and I wasn’t capable of putting in any more effort than I was already doing. The distance and insight that the coach was able to bring to my business was invaluable. He taught me some business fundamentals, which I had never learned having a purely administrative background, and he instantly put in place some ways of bringing more money into the company so that I could free up my time to manage it properly – working on the business rather than in it.

A lot of the skills he taught required retraining my brain to think in different ways. It’s hard work! He also got me working with the numbers in my business so I understood where the money was coming in and where it was being spent. He even helped me to find and train new staff with excellent skills and attitudes – the skills can be taught, the attitude cannot. I’m happy to say that a year later the staff I recruited are still here and working excellently and the changes he made have more than paid for his fee.

What are some of your work related achievements? Can you describe a particular situation or project at work where your input (or word to that affect) made a significant difference to its success.

We had early success when won a regional New Business Award of The Year Award from RBS in 2005, beating off stiff competition from over 1,000 other entries. However, as only one in five businesses survive their first three years in business I regard that as my biggest achievement to date.

Creating the Society of Virtual Assistants was another success, albeit by accident. What started as a Scottish resource quickly gained momentum and recruited VAs from across the UK. Originally I had started to raise the profile of what was then a relatively new concept in the UK, supporting each other at exhibitions, creating press releases and sharing experiences. Most of the other virtual assistant sites are aimed at the American market and therefore have little relevance when you consider differences in law, accounting practice and telephone systems, to name just a few of the obvious differences. I believed very strongly that the organisation should be free to join, open as a resource to all and should not be based on membership fees which could affect the quality of VAs approved by the organisation.

How have you got to where you are today in your career? (A little about your career progression. Have you moved up the ladder internally? Has your career spanned different sectors or have you worked for other companies but remained in the same sector?)

My first job was as a nanny. There are huge similarities in the skills I use to manage children and the ones I use to manage bosses and clients – I’m not sure if that says more about me or them!

Having left school at 15, I eventually went back to college aged 20 to do an HND in Music Business Administration with Marketing in the hope of getting a job in the music industry. I got a work placement at London Records in the marketing department organising product launches, video shoots and parties for All Saints, Goldie, Asian Dub Foundation and Harvey Danger. That was so much fun that I went back once I finished college and temped for a while launching The Sugababes and 21st Century Girls.

A permanent job came up working for Sony Music Publishing in their film and TV department. The work involved finding music for films, adverts, computer games and TV programmes, negotiating fees, clearing them with the artist and licensing them. If you look very closely in Sony’s Playstation 2 game The Getaway you’ll see a blonde version of me as one of the “extras” – we were short of girls in the Playstation office and grabbed
me when I was in discussing the music. Due to a number of personnel changes I ended up running the department for 8 months including introducing a new licensing system and pre-cleared music for use in TV programmes. Other highlights included having Gary Barlow make me a cup of tea and having Will Young of Pop Idol fame as my PA briefly. (See – making me cups of tea is a great career move!).

When they replaced my boss it wasn’t really the same place to work, so I made a sideways move into the advertising industry, which I had always been interested in. This job was a lot more secretarial, working as a team assistant for Abbott Mead Vickers BBDO supporting a team of account executives on the whisky (Macallan and Famous Grouse) and confectionery (Maltesers, M&Ms, Bounty, Snickers, Topic, Celebrations, Lockets and Tunes) brands. (Yes, I got freebies!).

Wanting to move back up to Glasgow to be nearer my family, I took a job at Euro RSCG Riley working as an Account Executive mostly on recruitment campaigns. When I had hankerings of starting my own business my boss was incredibly supportive and even arranged for me to be able to work part-time in order to get the business started.

Although the business has always worked full-time, I only worked part-time in it until finally leaving Euro RSCG Riley two years after starting up, having bought another VA business which increased our cashflow significantly.

What do you find most enjoyable about your job?

I enjoy the variety of tasks we get asked to do – life is never boring! I like working with different people, and although it’s sometimes stressful, I do like balancing the workload of all the different clients and hitting each one of those deadlines.

Are you in a position to mentor or pass on skills to colleagues, describe a situation where you have done so?

Through the Society of Virtual Assistants I provide a forum where new and aspiring VAs can ask all sorts of questions about working as a virtual assistant, not just from me, but from the 350+ other members and get their experience too. As an organisation, we promote best practice and are working to create a Code of Practice for VAs which we hope will be universally adopted to avoid some of the more common mistakes that inexperienced VAs can make when starting up.

I run monthly SVA Chats which focus on particular topics relevant to both new and established virtual assistants – for example, marketing or accounting. We also have an email-based SVA Start Up Course which takes you through everything you need to do to start your own virtual assistant business.

What key nuggets of advice would you offer to PAs and secretaries for success in their career?

Don’t put up with being “Just the secretary…” We have a lot more to offer than just making the coffee. You should be proactive about how you see your career progressing and make time in your schedule for reviewing it. Volunteer to organise events or to create reports. Suggest a better way of storing company-wide templates or procedures. Take responsibility for projects and make sure everyone knows you were responsible. We’re very bad at blowing our own trumpet – it’s unfortunately necessary in order to get the respect we deserve.
Please tell us a little about the company/organisation you work for, including what it does, the size, sector and your location.

I work for Connect Communications (Scotland) Ltd, based in Paisley with a small office in Edinburgh. We are Scotland’s leading contract publishers. The company has been running since 1999 and started with David Cameron, the Managing Director and a newly appointed secretary at the time. There are now 32 members of staff with 60+ clients and I’m proud to be part of the company today.

Our clients come from varied industries and are made up from both the private and public sector, they include The Law Society of Scotland, The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland, BSkyB, The National Health Service and many Scottish Councils to name but a few. For our clients we publish their internal and/or external publications which take many forms but mainly newspapers or magazines. We provide a full communications package from editorial services to print and distribution. We are now breaking into the online publication market, which is proving very popular

How long have you been with company and in this role (if different)?

I have worked with Connect since 1st March 2007. I started as Office Administrator/PA and progressed to Production Controller, my current role, in the space of one year.

What is your role within the organisation and who do you work for?

My starting role at Connect was as Office Administrator and PA to the Managing Director. My line manager is Mr. Alan Ramsay who nominated me for the monthly award which I subsequently won for the month of January. In this role I supported every single person in the company. I was the only office support member and as you can imagine my day to day tasks were extremely varied and plentiful! The role was very re-active, the work always came to me, I didn’t need to look for it, however I found it important to be pro-active and devise new systems to keep the administration function of the company moving forward. Prioritising skills were an absolute necessity in this role. I was very adaptable and open to supporting my colleagues with all manners of tasks and because of this my job spec grew arms and legs! My line manager passed over tasks to me without hesitations. From that week I had to start training myself to manipulate data from an excel spreadsheet without much success. They were always very grateful when I managed to sort their problems! I was also the “voice of Connect” as answering the main switchboard was also my responsibility. I enjoyed developing a relationship with the clients and suppliers I spoke to on the phone.

How has your role changed over the past 12 months?

My role has changed dramatically over the last 12 months. My role started to grow immediately after starting with Connect. My line manager and my colleagues soon realised I could handle more workload and hence the role became far more involved than I was originally interviewed for. The major changes, however, came in January this year when I was offered the role as Production Controller, only 10 months after being with the company. The previous Production/Financial Controller handed in her notice on the 21st January at 3.30pm and at 4.30pm I was offered the job, it was an extremely happy moment. My line manager and the MD had faith in me that I could do the job and offered it to me without hesitation. From that week I had to start training in my new role while of course still doing my Office Administrator job. At this time our Edinburgh team were moving office and I was the main co-ordinator of the move, this demanded a lot of my time. I also had to take the lead on advertising, reading CVs and interviewing candidates to replace myself on the front desk. The MD wanted me to be line manager to my replacement so as well as learning my new role I was also learning to be a line manager for the first time. I felt as if all my birthdays had come at the one time! This was everything I had ever wanted in a career, responsibility, supervisory duties and of course still being a PA!

I was always well aware how important my role was as Office Administrator. Without my support, my colleagues would have been under far more pressure and unable to meet deadlines. My MS Office skills came in very handy when my colleagues were trying to
train my replacement. I had a deadline to train on my new role as much as I could before being left to take the reigns by myself come 28th April when the existing production controller left the company. I’m now two months into my new role full-time and in around four months I will start training on becoming the Financial Controller also. I can’t believe how much my role has changed and how I’ve progressed as a person since this time last year.

What would you say are the three most important skills you use at work and why?

The most important skill I have and use every day is my ability to stay organised. In the multi-tasking role I’m in, being organised is key to not only keeping my head above water but giving me that ultimate “I’m in control” feeling which leads me to feel very energetic and enthusiastic. The other skill I have and find very important is prioritising. When there are numerous tasks to be actioned, emails coming in by the dozen and lots of jobs needing tracked and monitored, I need to prioritise in order to not let out of my sight the most important tasks.

The third skill I’m glad to be able to say I have is the ability to be understanding. I witness on a regular basis my colleagues being under pressure and quite stressed on some occasions. Their stress could easily become my stress when they pass tasks to me, especially when I have a large workload of my own and my colleagues are popping in and out of my office regularly to give me more tasks. It would be easy to become stressed myself. However, I understand there is absolutely no benefit in doing so and far more benefit in realising that there are jobs to be done, the tasks will never end, my colleagues are under pressure and this is the way it will be most times when the business is becoming more successful and winning more clients. I have the ability to keep calm, gain perspective and get on with the job at hand. Everyone has a bad day, instead of taking it personal and having an awful day myself, I rise above it and get on with the job at hand and that is a great skill to have!

What does a typical day look like for you? (If you don’t have a ‘typical’ day, please give as much information as possible about the different tasks you get involved in).

A typical day in my new role looks like this:

- Arrive at work before 9am, check emails, action anything that appears to be urgent
- Start working my way through my diary tasks assigned to each day
- Opening up the communication channels with my colleagues and printers alike on jobs that are due to happen that day
- Have some proactive time and book print slots with the printers for future jobs
- Attend to any quote requests there may be for new jobs/clients
- Have some PA pro-active time and check the MDs diary entries and action accordingly
- Attend to line manager duties and help with queries throughout the day and assign new tasks
- Update the “Work in Progress” spreadsheet which records all existing and future work at Connect, this is our bible which
  - I am responsible for managing
- Dealing with re-active requests, problems and questions from colleagues, clients and suppliers
- At the end of each day, I take the time to look over the following day’s diary entries and prepare myself for the day ahead
- Tidy up emails, paperwork and my desk at close of play each day in preparation for a brand new day
- On a Friday afternoon I send out a weekly jobs list to the printers so that we are all aware of what jobs will be happening the following week
- Each day can be very different dependant on which jobs are being focused on but one thing never changes, my 3pm cup of coffee!

What is the biggest challenge that you’ve faced at the company, how did you tackle it and what was the outcome?

My biggest challenge I’ve faced at Connect was when I first started training for my new role while at the same time training my replacement. No matter how under pressure I became, I had to realise that there was a new member of staff who was relying on me to help them settle in to their new role and train them on the basics of the job. This was not the ideal time to be training another member of staff but this was the situation that was presented to me and I had to ensure that while learning my new role as much as possible, my focus was to make sure the new person was trained and comfortable in their new role. This was difficult however paid off in the end. As soon as my replacement was up to speed with the basics of answering the switchboard and diary management etc, I picked up my training again. I told the new administrator that my door was always open and if he had any questions or was unsure of how to do a task, to come and speak to me. This happened on many, many occasions and whilst encouraging him to search for answers himself, I was always happy to point him in the right direction. We’ve all been the new person once and as his line manager, it was my duty to make sure he was happy in his new job.

What are some of your work related achievements? Can you describe a particular situation or project at work where your input (or word to that affect) made a significant difference to its success?

When I started with Connect, one of my duties was to control the stationery stock and buy in stationery items. I soon realised the existing supplier set up...
by the previous administrator was quite an expensive company and we bought everything from them. I shopped about and split up the stationery items between three suppliers and ordered from each supplier the items they were most competitive for. I then put together a spreadsheet analysis of cost savings and realised that if we ordered one of each item every month we were saving over £500 per stationery order. My line manager was extremely impressed and astonished and the financial controller was extremely grateful! Everyone was a winner except the company that I took the business away from however I now have a better relationship with them and as such they have re-negotiated their prices with us to our satisfaction.
This article explains what a (PC or Laptop) Computer Backup is and how it can now be done quickly and easily and hence why there is really now no excuse for not having a computer backup.

In this article having a Computer backup means taking a copy of all of your software and all of your data held on all of the hard drives inside your PC. Having a full backup of this type means that should any or all of your hard drives fail or your computer is stolen, you still have a complete copy of everything that was on your computers hard drives.

Hard drives are very reliable, but they can go wrong. Also viruses can corrupt the data on your hard drives. If and when a hard drive problem occurs you will be glad you took the trouble to keep a full system backup. The alternative is reloading and configuring all of your software again and then there is the more difficult problem of all that lost personal data such as emails, documents, spreadsheets, PowerPoint presentations, Music, Videos, Photos etc.

In the past computer backups would have been difficult and time consuming as they might have involved using a lot of floppy disc. Alternatively you could have gone for either an internal or external Tape Backup unit. A tape backup would do the complete system backup for you, but it might take several hours to backup everything on a system containing perhaps only many megabytes (MB) of data, but systems today often have gigabytes (GB) of data. (Note, 1GB is 1024MB i.e. over a thousand times bigger.)

One method to backup your complete system these days is to use a DVD writer, if your computer system contains a suitable DVD drive. You can buy software that will backup your complete software and saves it to the hard drive in a number of compressed large files. Usually two of these large files can be saved to a 4.7GB DVD.

Now There is no Excuse For Not Having a Computer Backup!

By Vic Thomas
So if your full system backup produced eight of these large files you would then have to save these files to four DVDs. All this can be done, it just takes time and effort and a collection of rewritable DVDs. You must also remember to do this at regular intervals, and to keep 2 or 3 sets of these backup DVDs, so that you are never overwriting your current backup disks. However, there is now a better way and the next method is why there really is no excuse for not having a computer backup.

You can now get external hard drives that can simply be connected to your computer (PC or Laptop) via connections such as the USB connector. These external hard drives can be used to store even more data, but another very good use for them is as backup devices. When you purchase one of these external hard drives it may well come with software that allows you to do full backups as described above. These backups can be done easily and quickly in one step as all of your software and data is stored to compressed and possibly encrypted files on the external hard drive. Encryption of these backup files on the external hard drive is a very good idea as it means any sensitive personal data that is backed up is secure, just in case this external hard drive is stolen.

If you purchase an external hard drive that does not come with its own backup software then all you need to do is purchase the same type of backup software that was mentioned above when describing backing up to DVDs, but in this situation the software will simply backup directly to the external hard drive eliminating the need to copy files to DVDs.

So now you can do full backups easily and quickly at regular interval. There is however, another very useful feature that should come with these types of backup programs and that is to specify specific directories that you want monitored and if any file in these directories is updated or a new file is created then these files would be backed up immediately/dynamically to the external hard drive.

So for example on a Windows system you might specify that your “My Documents”, Desktop and Favorites directories be backed up dynamically. If you then created a new document and saved it in the “My Documents” directory a backup would also be saved to the external hard drive. If you then updated this document and saved it, the software would automatically backup the file again, possibly giving it a version number on the external hard drive so that if need be you could go to the backup and choose from a list of backed up copies of the same file. This could be useful if you deleted something for example from a saved Word document, but then later wished you still had that content, in which case you could go back to the older backed up version and retrieve the deleted text.

One other thing to consider is that if you keep your external hard drive permanently connected to your computer there is the possibility that a virus could corrupt this hard drive or if your computer is stolen the external hard drive may also be stolen. To guard against this situation you could also do the DVD backup strategy as described above occasionally, or you could invest in a second hard drive that is only used for the full backups and disconnected and stored somewhere safe between backups. If you decide to only connect your external hard drive to your computer when you do a full system backup, you could use the same external hard drive to backup any other computers you have, assuming the external hard drive has the storage capacity.

You may well have paid hundreds or even thousands of Dollars/Pounds etc for your computer hardware and software. You will have spent many hours configuring and adding data to your system in terms of documents, spreadsheets, music, photos, videos etc. So if you take all of this into account and look at the relative cost of purchasing an external hard drive just for backing up you system, you should now agree that there is no excuse for not having a Computer Backup.


From Click Digital Products
Webmaster at http://www.ClickDigitalProducts.com

It’s a Digital World we live in and sometime we need help, click the following for more articles like this at Click Digital Products. http://www.clickdigitalproducts.com/technology/Tech-info
Do you ever have a problem and wish you could get objective advice from your peers?

Ask on The Hub

Join in on topics from your peers around the world. DeskDemon’s The Hub is a forum for networking with your peers. Share your thoughts, experiences, and advice worldwide.

Post a question or a thought or join in to comment or help others.

The Hub has a section for everyone. Sound Off, Admins4Admins, Cafe Admin, Topical Climates, and The Humor Zone

Take a minute to visit The Hub at DeskDemon:
http://www.deskdemon.com/community/forums