



Skilled up

CAREER A PA's role is becoming more complicated, demanding and technical. If you want to keep up, this can only mean one thing – training **By Iwona Tokc-Wilde**

OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS various surveys have all come to the same conclusion – the role of the PA is undergoing significant changes and they are now just as likely to be managing teams and projects as taking minutes and managing diaries. “By implication, if you’re not continually developing and learning new skills to keep up with the changes, you’ll be left behind,” says Sue France, PA trainer and UK Chairman of European Management Assistants.

The Administrative Professional Skills 2011 Benchmarking Survey from the International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP) confirms two main worldwide trends: PAs are more important than ever (“general office management” is where your responsibilities have increased the most) and their workload has substantially increased (“juggling multiple priorities” is your biggest daily challenge.)

You may now be expected to support more than one executive, too (45% of IAAP’s respondents support one or two and 52% support three or more), the trend which also became apparent following the UK’s first annual National PA Day survey conducted last September (51% of you support more than one and 25% support three or more executives.)

WHAT SKILLS?

The shift towards more responsibility means that PAs’ skill-sets needs updating, too. It’s been 175 years since Sir Isaac Pitman invented shorthand – so what skills do you need in 2012?

“Although traditional skills like minute taking and IT are still relevant, we now see more emphasis on high-level skills like project management, networking, conflict resolution, emotional intelligence, budgets and change management,” says Emma Hicks, ➔

➊ Strategic Partnership Manager and Trainer at Reed Learning. That's because, as a result of corporate restructuring, PAs have taken on more high-powered roles and now have closer links with the board. "Executive PAs now attend board meetings on behalf of CEOs," says Mike Connolly, Director at Pitman Training Hammersmith. "So, in addition to core skills, they also need to have an understanding of HR, marketing, sales and finance so that they can fully grasp the points made by board members from those divisions. Otherwise, how can they take accurate short-hand summary of the issues discussed?"

WHAT COURSES?

Bearing in mind the skills now needed to work at the top of the profession, what specific courses are most relevant? "For a top-level executive position you now need a degree and role-related qualifications," says Emma. "At Reed Learning we offer Level 3 Certificate in Professional PA and Administration Skills and Level 4 Certificate in Office and Administration Management, both nationally recognised and accredited by the Institute of Administrative Management."

Level 4 is aimed at senior PAs and covers commercial and business awareness, people and change management, problem solving and conflict resolution. "But don't think you must go straight to Level 4," says Emma. "We get some PAs who do Level 3 because the modules (Time Management, Project Skills and Creating Effective Events) are more relevant to where they currently are in their professional development."

At Pitman Training Hammersmith, Mike recommends Foundations in Finance, Business Accounts and Business IT with Marketing and PR. "Traditional secretarial and administrative skills courses such as the latest version of Microsoft Office, Shorthand Fast, Speed Writing, Typing and Minute Taking are also still popular," he says. "The old stuff never dies," agrees Emma. "Minute Taking is still our second most popular course." What other courses are 'hot' right now? "Project Skills," says Emma. "Also Introduction to Management and Introduction to Supervision and Team Leadership because more PAs take on management of junior secretaries. Networking is hot right now, too, as well as Emotional Intelligence and Persuading and Influencing People."

To learn skills like persuasion and time management, you don't even have to leave your home or office. "We've launched 15 virtual courses in response to companies looking for more flexible and cost effective ways of learning," says Emma. "Each is an hour long and very interactive – you get to use the chat function, do the exercises and take breakout sessions."

HOW TO PAY FOR IT

How do you get your boss to pay for your training and to give you time off to study? "Present them with a business case of why you should get the funding and time off, together with the benefits your new skills will bring to the organisation," says Sue.

Your business case must be strong because there's no obligation on the employer to pay for the cost of, or for the hours spent, training, says Andrew Crudge, employment solicitor at law firm Thomas Eggar. "However, you do have the statutory right to request time off, but only if you work for an organisation with 250 or more employees and have been employed by them for at least 26 weeks. The training must be for the purpose of improving your effectiveness at work and improving the performance of your employer's business, although it doesn't have to lead to a formal qualification."

Unfortunately, your employer has the right to refuse your

ADVICE

How to fit in training when you work full time

TIPS FROM DENISE TAYLOR, AWARD-WINNING CAREER PSYCHOLOGIST WITH AMAZING PEOPLE:

- ➊ **PLAN STUDY TIME.** Before work, in the evenings or at weekends? Stick to it.
- ➋ **BE ORGANISED.** Create space for all the materials you need, and a folder on your computer for your assignments.
- ➌ **DIARISE YOUR DEADLINES.** Allow for time to complete and set up a two-week 'warning' prompt.
- ➍ **MAKE GOOD USE OF YOUR COMMUTE.** Read your study materials or think about assignments.
- ➎ **FOCUS ON THE END.** Remember the reasons why you've decided to study. Each assignment gets you closer to your goal.
- ➏ **MAKE TIME FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS.** Don't let your studies take over your life.

request if they believe these criteria won't be met, or if they feel they can't reallocate your work or meet other demands of the business. In which case "you may have to look at your personal finances and holidays, and perhaps take the learning over a longer period to spread out the time and cost," says Sue.

WILL IT BOOST MY PAY?

On the upside, if you learn more, you earn more, too. A study by the Consultative Committee for Professional Management Organisations reveals that professional qualifications and membership of professional bodies significantly boost a person's lifetime earnings potential. "In the case of a PA, the total additional income could be in excess of £64,000," says Gareth Osborne, Director General of the Association of Professional Assistants. "Investing in your professional development helps you stand out," says Emma. "If you're looking for a new position, it can differentiate you from the other 20 candidates all vying for the same job. It's tough out there and employers are looking for the best of the best."

"We see the pay rankings going up, for example for multi-lingual PAs," adds Mike. "Languages are becoming more important for the gatekeepers to CEOs in global organisations." According to Crone Corkhill's 2011-2012 Market Report & Salary Survey, a multi-lingual executive assistant in London West or Manchester can earn between £5,000 to £7,000 a year more than one with no second language.

THE FUTURE

What skills and training will senior PAs need in 5-10 years' time? "You'll always need the core skills and the trend towards more responsibility will continue, too" says Mike. "There will also be more specialist PAs, like the medical PA and the legal PA, with skills and depth of knowledge unique to those sectors," he adds. Online collaboration skills will be in high demand, says Emma. "That's why we've launched social media marketing courses in partnership with Google." ■