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FEATURE

Achieve Success With the Right Executive Assistant

By Joanne Grady

No longer "just" a secretary, today's executive assistant truly plays one of the most crucial roles in a corporate environment. In fact, the selection of an executive assistant can be the most important personnel hire that you will make.

Why do I need an executive assistant?

Any corporate or business leader who has a demanding job, manages staff and is responsible for revenues, business development and philanthropic activities needs an executive assistant. Many people who don't think they need an executive assistant actually deserve one but may not want to spend the resources. Simply put, hiring an executive assistant will fully enable you to do the job that you need to do. Many women in business have done it all, have done it alone and have achieved success with little help. There comes a time, however, when it is not possible to continue to be successful without professional support.

What do I look for in an executive assistant? First and foremost, it is critical when considering



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an executive assistant that your personalities match well. You need to respect, trust and like this individual who will be supporting you and managing the details of your daily life.

Second, their overall business skills must be top notch. Specifically, writing and editing skills, technical and computer expertise, a knack for organization and strong communication skills are very important considering that this individual will be speaking on your behalf.

The notion of loyalty and trustworthiness is vital for you to work well with your executive assistant. During the screening process, take note of their work history and the reasons that they left prior posi-

tions. Also, make sure that their long-term goals match yours.

How will working with an executive assistant improve my performance as a senior executive?

Improved performance starts with very clear, direct and documented lines of responsibility. Make sure your assistant knows what you expect from him or her. Like partners, spouses, siblings

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and children, executive assistants cannot read minds. Your executive assistant should want to do the best job she or he can for you. You do, however, need to have boundaries and know where they are.

An executive assistant should also know your budget limits when making purchases for you. He or she should have clear direction on the best time to schedule your meetings and whether you are sharpest in the morning or afternoon. Your executive assistant should be aware of your vacation policy and the advance notice you need when he/she plans vacations. Since needs, moods and schedules change so frequently, open communication is the best policy.

What type of salary is necessary to attract a good candidate? Salary is an important consideration, especially in a tight job market. There are, however, other incentives to entice a candidate to work for you after establishing a solid track record of six months – such as set pay increases, a bonus program and offering flexibility in the schedule. Then, after a successful 12 months on the job, you should consider paying your executive assistant above “market rate” – from low \$40,000 to high \$50,000 – to retain your employee and maintain a high quality of work.

How do I go about finding a good candidate? You need to spend the time that is necessary to find the right candidate. When executives hire high-level talent to run different companies or manage product lines, it is common to take three to six months to identify talent. If there is a crunch to fill the position, hire a long-term temp to take care of daily tasks. Do not hastily fill the spot if you are unsure of the candidates.

You may want to use a staffing service to gather and screen candidates and help you through the process. You can use your own networking resources to attract candidates, such as your college alumni association, board memberships or

other affiliations. In addition, you should talk to other high level executive assistants who may know others who are looking for positions.

What qualifies a candidate to be executive assistant? During the past six to 10 years, the demands upon executive assistants have changed dramatically. Most executive assistants are now required to have a college degree, and college graduates entering the work force need some real work experience. Therefore, entering a business as an executive assistant provides unmatched exposure and experience into the inner workings of a business and may be a launching pad for other career pursuits. The starting salary for executive assistants is also more attractive than other entry level positions.

The most compatible candidates are college graduates who majored in communications, marketing and business. Other attributes are being extremely well-organized as well as possessing the ability to multi-task and having technical proficiency in Microsoft Word, Excel and Power Point. Candidates should also be aware that they need to make a commitment of at least one to two years in the position, even if they aspire to other opportunities.

How to Get Started? Once you have analyzed your needs, reviewed your business goals and determined a budget, it's time to take the next step. Create a position of executive assistant by developing a plan on how you are going to fill this position and incorporate it into your business structure. By hiring the right person for the job, you may be able to achieve or exceed your goals quicker than you ever imagined.

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