

Focus report PA of the year

Dinner party gibe provides PA with recipe for success

An innocent remark stung Louisa James into winning the UK's top award, says Jenny Knight

With no idea about how mobile phone apps worked, Louisa James could have been forgiven for shrugging her shoulders and looking the other way when the idea for Jamie's 20-Minute Meals came up.

Instead James, PA to Tara Donovan, the managing director at Jamie Oliver Limited, took on the task of project managing the new app. "I had to understand something about apps and the new digital world," she says. "It was a baptism of fire but so exciting. I worked to manage a small team to create the app and get it on to the market. My job was to make sure the developers got the content, recipes and video shots on time and on budget. I loved it."

James has seen it become one of the most popular paid-for cookery apps and now she has been voted the country's top personal assistant.

Her prize for winning the Hays and The Times PA of the Year award is a five-night break for two in Prague, supplied by Portman Travel, and a place on the PA Retreat, a residential training programme for PAs run by Castalia Coaching & Training.

James, 35, of Wandsworth, London,

secured the top spot by showing energy and enthusiasm and by expanding her PA role into management and leadership, according to the judges.

Geoff Sims, managing director at Hays PA & Secretarial, says: "In the judges' view Louisa is an accomplished and professional PA with talents and enthusiasm that put her above the rest and make her an ambassador for the job. She told a friend at a dinner party about taking responsibility for the Jamie Oliver application and the friend asked: 'How come you are doing this stuff when you are only a PA?'"

"That sort of comment is like a red rag to a bull. It motivated her to show people what PAs actually do, how they give real value when working closely with bosses. Taking responsibility for the meal application was quite a different achievement for a PA."

Entries were up by 60 per cent this year and Sims and fellow judges Susie Barron-Stubbley, managing director of Castalia, Gareth Osborne, director general of the Association of Personal Assistants, and Laura Richardson, last year's winner, agreed that standards were also higher.

The winner who is talking her way into management

Since winning the Hays and The Times PA of the Year award in 2009, Anuska Elland has become a regular speaker at events and last year went to Dubai to address a conference on executive PA excellence, *Jenny Knight writes*.

Elland, 30, says: "Winning the award was absolutely fantastic. I felt so honoured to be shortlisted and nominated by my boss. To receive that recognition for the work you do is brilliant."

"It made a huge impact on my professional life and has given me a lot of opportunities. It raised my profile in my organisation and I was given a recognition award by the chairman."

Elland joined the NHS in 2006 as a temp before becoming PA to Kate Davies, the strategic director of the county drug and alcohol action team for NHS Nottinghamshire. Davies is now assistant director for equality, diversity and human rights and Elland's role is developing into that of project officer combined with her PA duties.

After winning the award she took a nine-month public leaders course and last June was made a trustee of MoMo Helps, the charity set up by the late Mo Mowlam, to provide easy access to funds to "plug gaps" for recovering drug users and the families of disabled people.

"My administrative experience and skills in organising and co-ordinating events help to raise funds," Elland says. The leaders course is designed to increase diversity on public boards.

Elland now hopes to set up a network for PAs within Nottinghamshire NHS and possibly to help establish one within the NHS as a whole. She has also recently completed a Chartered Management Institute diploma in management and leadership, followed by the Certificate in Strategic Management and Leadership.

"I am always looking to develop myself professionally and the award opened up more opportunities," she says.

"I have taken on more project management and am lucky to be supported by a marvellous boss. I also mentor a couple of PAs across the country."



Elland wants to set up PA networks



Baptism of fire: winner Louisa James, left, with her boss Tara Donovan, managing director of Jamie Oliver Limited

Sims adds: "This year there was a lot of debate among the judges because the shortlist was so strong. I also had phone calls from people who were not shortlisted, wanting feedback on why they hadn't succeeded so they could try to do better in coming years. These are not the actions of timid people but of committed professionals with a business-like approach."

James says: "I was shocked and thrilled when I realised I had won. I feel so honoured to be chosen as the PA of the Year. I give my all to the job and to be recognised like this is a wonderful feeling. People often do not realise the huge impact PAs can have in an organisation. I've been

here for six years and my role has completely changed."

Second place went to Christopher Juliff, diary, visits and events manager to the chief executive of the NHS. The

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judges praised Juliff's passion for his career, expertise and attention to detail in a high pressured environment. In third place was Zara Dyer, PA to the managing director at Liverpool Football Club, who impressed with her

passion for developing a PA network the North and support for her boss.

Barron-Stubbley says: "The final showed that PAs are moving away from a traditional role into taking on much greater management responsibilities. The winner demonstrated that. She has pushed the boundaries."

The competition was tougher this year because a presentation and personal interview with a question answer session was introduced. Osborne explains: "For the judge was a tough decision and we argued into the night. Louisa has taken the role to a very high level and her boss is a mightily supportive of her. We have some very capable individuals."

Tips to find the perfect match

Finding the right PA for a job is much more than simply going through a checklist of experience and qualifications. Judges of this year's PA of the Year award agree that personal chemistry is vital.

Gareth Osborne, director general of the Association of Personal Assistants, says: "Choosing a PA is a bit like a dating site where requirements must be matched. Some people need a tough PA and others a calming influence. It depends on team dynamics and personality. The PA is the power beside the throne and in the best teams they both seem to have second sight about what the other is thinking."

Some qualities are essential, whatever the industry. These include: total confidentiality, organisational skills, attention to detail, initiative and confidence. Increasingly, the ability to manage and to delegate are also important.

Susie Barron-Stubbley, managing director of Castalia, the coaching and training group and one of this year's judges, spent ten years as a PA and

executive assistant. She says: "Business needs are very different so the employer must look very carefully at what they require. But always there must be a mutual trust between an executive and a PA. It is down to chemistry, because they must like each other. My own PA sometimes has to pull me back or push me to do something and I have given her authority to do that."

Laura Richardson, executive assistant to the chief executive at Elexon, won last year's PA of the Year award, and is another of this year's judges. "The ability to keep information confidential is really important at executive level," she says. "The least hint that the candidate is gossipy will filter them out. PAs must also be proactive. They don't always have the luxury of asking the boss because the boss may be travelling or too busy. Instead, the PA must have the ability to make decisions and then defend them."

"Executives want a PA to manage their lives, not just ordering flowers but taking control of their diary and being

able to trust that their time will be spent on valuable things instead of meetings that could have been deleted. Some people think of PAs as a mouse in the corner but they have to be confident and be able to make things happen. PAs need to bear in mind strategic business goals that must be achieved and do their bit to see that they are achieved."

Interviews for the job tend to be long and searching because the perfect candidate has to combine almost contradictory qualities. They must be confident and outgoing but also calm and helpful. They must master detail and follow instructions to the letter, while also being able to make their own decisions.

They must be pleasant and easy-going, while being able to demand perfection from others and not be tempted to whisper bits of confidential information to friends and colleagues.

Small wonder that these paragons are highly valued by those they support.

JENNY KNIGHT