

How men are keeping up with Miss Jones

PAs are attracting more males to their ranks as they take on greater responsibility, finds Jenny Knight

Once the preserve of women, an increasing number of men are becoming personal assistants as the job evolves into one with greater responsibilities including line management, dealing with budgets and decision making.

Sean Steel, 26, who is one of two PAs to the chief executive of Chartis Europe, the insurance company, planned to join the Civil Service. After taking a two-year RSA diploma in administration and secretarial procedures, however, he accepted a job as a secretary in a small pensions firm, armed with a typing speed of 65 words a minute and teeline shorthand.

He says: "I worked my way up through the ranks, then I moved to Chartis Europe where I have an organisational role that I thrive on. The chief executive is a very busy man and wants to make the best use of his time, so my job involves heavy diary management."

He hopes that more men will take up PA jobs and adds that he has never experienced prejudice in his role. "I have been welcomed by the women I work with."

Laura Richardson, PA of the Year 2010, says the role has expanded considerably from the "take a letter Miss Jones" days. "PAs often have budget



Sean Steel has entered the traditionally female preserve of the PA but has been welcomed by the women he works with

and line management responsibilities. They are trusted partners. I came from a marketing background and I would not have wanted a PA role if I had not known that there would be a wide range of tasks. If you show initiative when you are working for a senior person, you are ideally placed to take part in high-level projects."

During the recession the PA market retracted but demand has picked up

again. One change is that PAs increasingly are expected to provide good value for money. Over the past year many companies have made redundancies so now PAs often have to work for more than one person. Their role has also diversified into areas such as finance and marketing.

Geoff Sims, the managing director of Hays PA & Secretarial, says: "The PA has evolved from a secretary who

arranges meetings and makes tea into a real business partner. Technology has played a major part by making the world a small place. PAs now have a lot more responsibility for decision making and are expected to be able to work with spreadsheets and PowerPoint presentations. Being a PA is hard work but it is an ideal job for people with ambitions."

Some highly rated PAs have rela-

tively few academic qualifications but others are graduates. The Association of Personal Assistants has worked with Middlesex University Business School to set up a BA in business administration for personal assistants and a master's in management for personal assistants. A doctorate programme is expected to follow.

Christopher Juliff, 47, the diary, visits and events manager for Sir David Nicholson, chief executive of the NHS, says: "The work of the PA has changed and new technology means that the fact I cannot do shorthand and do not type so well is not important."

"I take care of Sir David's personal arrangements and arrange travel and hotels but the dominant part of my role is more strategic. I have to be aware of the organisation, how it works and the objectives. I am like a spider in the middle of a web making sure things do not overlap, that everything is pulled together and co-ordinated."

Juliff, a politics and history graduate who moved into the PA field at the Department of Education after being deputy manager at a job centre, was runner-up in this year's PA awards.

He says: "At the job centre there was a staff of more than 20 but one of the frustrations was that you would arrange meetings and people failed to attend. When working for a minister, what you arrange happens. People cannot jump quickly enough. In many ways working for Sir David is stressful but actually getting things done is a massive compensation for me. The NHS is the biggest organisation in Europe and I am incredibly busy."

Easing the loneliness of long-suffering assistants

The life of a personal assistant can seem isolated at times. Typically they work alone to support their boss and often have to manage without being able to seek advice or exchange ideas with anyone, Jenny Knight writes.

Strict confidentiality also means that PAs have to hold back and be discreet when other staff are gossiping.

So these vital employees can feel part of a team and share best practice, larger organisations are setting up networks of PAs. Hays, the recruiting experts, for example, won the *Executive PA* magazine award for Employer of the Year for the support and guidance it gives to its own PAs.

Personal assistants at Hays meet one another during training sessions, lunch-

time get-togethers and talks on subjects such as career development and building confidence. Giving them an opportunity to talk to other PAs within the company means that they are able to exchange tips and expertise.

Geoff Sims, the managing director at Hays PA & Secretarial, says: "More organisations are now aware to the value of the PA and support them by offering continual personal development programmes, by encouraging PAs to network and by setting up networks within the organisation."

"We champion PAs in our organisation. If a PA has to organise a conference, it saves time if they can talk to someone who has already done it. The more companies encourage the

advancement of their PAs the better for the company."

Co-operative Financial Services (CFS) is another organisation where action is taken to reduce the loneliness of the personal assistant.

Amanda Pickering, the leadership support co-ordinator at CFS, says that after the firm merged with the Britannia Building Society a meeting was called of all 43 PAs. She found that most PAs did not communicate with their counterparts. Each was concerned with their own business area and some felt isolated.

"We found that by talking to one another they could do their job better. We looked at best practice and introduced monthly meetings to talk about

what was happening in the business areas, issues and problems."

Pickering also launched "lunch and learn" sessions, with guest speakers from within the organisation and from other companies.

"This helps the PAs to network and learn from one another," she says. "We invite PAs from other companies with which we have a relationship to talk about their roles and challenges. The chief executive's PA also organises quarterly coffee mornings so the PAs can chat and meet colleagues. This year we are thinking of introducing a charity event for the PAs."

"These meetings also help their development towards taking more senior roles. We also provide buddying,

mentoring to give support and advice as well as coaching. I have found that PAs are now proactively helping one another. The networking has created a sense of camaraderie and pride."

"People used to say, 'I am just a PA', but they are getting to understand the impact their actions have on the business. Through colleague engagement they feel they are adding value. This makes them more confident and helps them to show more initiative. They also enjoy their jobs more."

PAs can share knowledge with others in similar jobs by joining organisations that help them to build professional networks, such as the Association of Personal Assistants and the European Management Assistants.

HAYS Recruiting experts
in PA & Secretarial

PA OF THE YEAR AWARD
REWARDING OUTSTANDING PERFORMANCE

hays.co.uk/secretarial

THE  TIMES  PORTMAN