



Practice Management

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SOME PITFALLS TO AVOID IN THE ROLE OF A PERSONAL ASSISTANT TO AN EXECUTIVE

1. INTRODUCTION

In the fast-paced world of business, the role of a personal assistant (PA) to an executive is crucial. PAs are often the backbone of an executive's day-to-day operations, handling everything from scheduling appointments to managing communications and ensuring the smooth functioning of the executive's office. However, this role comes with its own set of challenges and pitfalls that must be carefully navigated to ensure effectiveness and maintain a positive working relationship with the executive. In this article, we will be exploring some common pitfalls that a personal assistant must avoid to excel in his/her role.

2. THE PITFALLS A PERSONAL ASSISTANT TO AN EXECUTIVE MUST AVOID

The pitfalls a Personal Assistant to an Executive should avoid in order to excel in his/her role are as discussed below:

2.1 Lack of Proactivity

One of the primary responsibilities of a personal assistant is to anticipate the needs of his/her executive and take proactive steps to address them. This could include preparing materials for meetings ahead of time, researching potential business opportunities, or even anticipating travel arrangements as well as professional/personal subscriptions of the executive. A common pitfall that may bedevil a personal assistant is waiting for instructions to do the aforementioned,

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rather than taking the initiative. Executives often value assistants who can think ahead and act autonomously, thereby enhancing their productivity and effectiveness.

2.2 Poor Communication Skills

Effective communication is essential in any professional setting, but it is particularly crucial for personal assistants who serve as a direct liaison between the executive and the rest of the organization and external stakeholders. Clear and concise communication helps prevent misunderstandings and ensures that tasks are carried out correctly and on time. Personal assistants need to cultivate the skill of active listening to understand the executive's preferences and priorities accurately.

2.3 Inefficient Time Management

Time management is a skill that every personal assistant must master. Executives have demanding schedules, and PAs are responsible for optimizing their time by prioritizing tasks, scheduling meetings efficiently, and ensuring deadlines are timeously met. Procrastination and poor time management can lead to missed business opportunities for the executive, increased stress levels, and ultimately, a strained relationship between the PA and the executive.

2.4 Lack of Discretion and Confidentiality

Personal assistants often have access to sensitive information, ranging from strategic plans to personal details about the executive and the organization. Maintaining confidentiality and discretion is paramount to building trust and credibility in a PA role. Sharing confidential information, whether intentionally or inadvertently, can have serious consequences for both the assistant and the executive, including damage to reputation and legal repercussions.²

2.5 Overstepping Boundaries

While proactivity is encouraged, personal assistants must be mindful of their role and avoid overstepping boundaries. This includes making decisions without consulting the executive, speaking on behalf of the executive without authorization, or getting too involved in personal matters. Respecting boundaries fosters a professional

² See, Section 37, Chapter IV of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999; Section 39, Part VII of the Nigeria Data Protection Act, 2023; Section 19, Chapter 1 of the Rules of Professional Conduct for Legal Practitioners, 2023; Legal Aid Council (2020) 'Paralegal Booklet' available at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/13x4HMmtlywstwefdTWpK5c84qhoWaWF9/view> accessed on 4th July, 2024 and Yakub Hammed (2024) "The Roles of a Personal Assistant to an Executive in today's Dynamic Commercial Environment" available at <https://www.mondaq.com/nigeria/management/1454912/the-roles-of-a-personal-assistant-to-an-executive--in-todays-dynamic-commercial-environment> accessed on 11th June 2024.

working relationship and ensures that the assistant's actions align with the executive's intentions and preferences. It is important that a personal assistant don't abuse his/her closeness to the executive and overstep his bounds as a personal assistant.³

2.6 Neglecting Professional Development

Personal assistants should continuously seek opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge. Neglecting professional development can lead to stagnation and inhibit career growth. Staying updated on industry trends, mastering new technologies, and honing interpersonal skills are essential for staying competitive and effectively supporting the executive in an evolving/dynamic business environment.

2.7 Inadequate Organizational Skills

Organizational skills are the foundation of a personal assistant's role. From managing calendars and appointments to coordinating travel arrangements and maintaining files, PAs must be meticulous and detail-oriented. Disorganization can lead to missed deadlines, scheduling conflicts, and a loss of credibility with the executive. Utilizing digital and AI tools and systems can help streamline organizational tasks and ensure optimal efficiency.

2.8 Failure to Prioritize

With a multitude of tasks to handle, personal assistants must possess strong prioritization skills - understanding which tasks are urgent, important, or can be delegated is key to optimizing productivity and meeting deadlines. Failure to prioritize tasks effectively can result to inefficiencies, missed business opportunities or essential tasks falling through the cracks, ultimately impacting the executive's performance and overall business outcomes.

2.9 Inflexibility and Resistance to Change

The business landscape is constantly evolving, and personal assistants must be adaptable to change. This could involve adjusting to new technologies, accommodating shifts in priorities, or adapting to changes in the executive's schedule or preferences. Being flexible and embracing change demonstrates resilience and ensures that the assistant remains a valuable asset to the executive and the organization.

³ Evnoia Group, "When a Personal Assistant Becomes Too Personal?" available at <https://evnoiagroup.com/2505-2/> accessed on 19th June 2024.

2.10 Ignoring Self-Care

Personal assistants often juggle multiple responsibilities and work long hours to support their executives effectively. However, neglecting self-care can lead to burnout and decreased productivity. It is essential for a PA to prioritize his/her well-being by taking very good care of him/herself by taking breaks from work, maintaining a healthy work-life balance, and seeking support when needed. A healthy and energized personal assistant is better equipped to perform his/her duties effectively and sustainably over the long term.

3. CONCLUSION

Navigating the role of a personal assistant to an executive requires a unique blend of skills, including organization, communication, proactiveness, discretion and adaptability, to mention but a few. A personal assistant must effectively and efficiently apply these skills to avoid pitfalls discussed above. This will not only ensure a smooth and hitch-free working relationship between a PA and his/her executive, but also place him/her on the right path to professional/career success while positively contributing to the executive's personal and business success.

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