

PA PROFILE



**ADAM FIDLER** EA Educator

Words: **Amelia Walker**

Photography: **Dave Willis**

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"There are many people out there doing EA roles. There are 3.2 million in the UK alone doing admin roles and secretarial work, with 10 million working in positions that require admin skills to support their main job. In 2015, 20% of new UK roles were in 'admin' and over the next five years 1.2m people are needed to replace those expected to retire and leave the profession. It's a blossoming industry." Such figures are staggering.

Some of you reading this will know Adam, an International Executive Assistant Consultant who offers teaching, training and self-development of PAs, EAs and business support managers. He is the author and trainer of two of the UK's most sought-after corporate Executive PA courses 'From good to outstanding' and 'The Strategic Executive Assistant' which run regularly in London and Manchester. His corporate experience as a Board/C-Suite Level PA/EA in a variety of blue-chip organisations includes Boots PLC, Bank of America and as a Private PA to a high-profile Chairman.

I ask Adam what his strengths are as an educator of the assistant role. "I'm able to articulate, reference, frame and describe the role of the true Executive Assistant in a way that I'm not sure has been widely publicised or written about previously. It's not that what I offer, or what I believe in, or what I teach assistants to do is rocket science or totally new – but I've not seen other people, trainers, writers, able to describe and elevate the role the way that I can. I champion the job as 'managerial' and encompassing leadership qualities and I don't articulate it through traditional secretarial speak or words."

He develops this explanation further through his theory of 'Black Box' and 'Red Box' and the elevation of moving the role from 'Black Box' to 'Red Box'. The 'Black Box' mentality encompasses the secretarial stereotype such as transactional duties, processing, typing, filing, photocopying, even diaries.

The 'Red Box' mentality is about "the new role of the assistant", and focuses on assistants needing to develop, what he calls, a "managerial mind-set". This means assistants need to "align their behaviours and their leadership style into a 'manager'. And the first step in moving towards that 'Red Box' is fostering with assistants a change in their belief about what their role is. When you transition from 'Black Box' to 'Red Box' you will get a higher salary." Fundamentally, if your job description only describes transactional duties, your salary will always be capped.

"I went through this transition. I was a secretary for many years and bosses would instruct me with what they wanted me to do. But when I went on to work as a high-level EA, the role was different as I was suddenly expected to do a lot of the thinking myself. Where an old boss would come to me previously and say 'I'd like you to arrange a conference for me next week, invite these people and arrange a board dinner' – and I would carry out what I had been instructed to do – my new boss would say 'I'm thinking of having a board awayday next Thursday' and leave the room and I'd be left sitting there thinking 'what does he actually want me to do?' What that taught me was, at that level, I was expected to come up with the ideas to be creative, give him a draft agenda and think 'if I were the CEO what would I need for my board awayday?' And that was a hard transition. From that moment on, I developed

strategic awareness to become the creator and the shaper of content and be aware of everything that was happening in the organisation. I became a full participant and a leader – as opposed to an observer."

He defines the role of an EA as "a person who has to know the business thoroughly and have the competence to deal with strategic decisions, be able to lead, manage, be solution-focused and work with more autonomy and more independence. This is why I teach assistants to be aware that they have to develop independence of thought and action. Their roles should be designed around supporting the broader organisation, not just the executives. The big thing for them to learn is to influence on their own merit – and not through the executive they support."

I broach the term 'Business Partner' – which is another way that the role is sometimes referred to: "the term is all wrong! – what we mean is that EAs work in 'partnership' but even that is limiting as it implies that your job is always aligned to someone. I'm calling for assistants to become 'Business Managers' and this means designing your job around business needs, your needs, as well as your boss. In the old days, job descriptions were set in stone – that's very old-school. New assistants today actually have influence and respect. The world is very different now, we have to move with it."

So how can assistants become the best at their job? "The best assistants do what is known as 'reverse mentoring' – whereby they teach their executives to be better leaders. The top assistants help their executive to become more 'executive'. So, assistants should in fact ask themselves 'what does being an 'executive' actually mean as an EA?' It means having a managerial mind-set, having personal courage and conviction, saying no appropriately and diplomatically and operating within the boundaries of your role, of which you'll have to adapt and shape depending on the executive you support."

Such extensive skills surely will put assistants in good stead to get that long-awaited promotion? "It will help. It's about job content, responsibility when the chips are down. No one ever got promoted for being good at diaries and good at Word because everyone now does diaries and Word. So, the only way you are promoted, receive more salary, more recognition and more credibility – which is what assistants are always crying out for – is that you demonstrate managerial qualities. You need to be solution-focused, be able to write a business plan, feel confident enough to do a presentation in front of a board, manage other members of staff along with doing appraisals and performance reviews. Historically, these aren't the jobs of 'assistants' but the jobs of 'managers'. When we take away the automated activities, diaries and technology, if that is all your job is, there's nothing left. You have to create a new role and that new role is being a 'manager'. The reason it works, is, as an 'assistant' doing those things, you're a cheaper commodity than a boss employing a deputy CEO."

But do all bosses want this forward-thinking assistant? "Not all of them. Some still want the assistant who will sit there and does as he or she is told, but that job will not survive because new leaders have come through who are creative and wacky and want to have a conversation with their assistant and say 'what do you think?'".



A man in a dark suit and red tie stands on a rooftop, smiling, with a city skyline in the background. The text is overlaid on the lower part of the image.

**“I’M CALLING FOR ASSISTANTS TO BECOME ‘BUSINESS MANAGERS’ AND THIS MEANS DESIGNING YOUR JOB AROUND YOUR BUSINESS NEEDS, YOUR NEEDS, AS WELL AS YOUR BOSS”**

# "FROM THE BALCONY, YOU CAN SEE WHAT IS AND ISN'T WORKING, PEOPLE WHO ARE AND AREN'T IN SYNC, DANCING IN OR OUT OF TIME TO THE MUSIC. WHEN YOU DO THIS, YOU GIVE YOURSELF A TOTALLY DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE"

Not all assistants are quick to embrace this because they've not had to think in this way before.

"I used to get into work early and think if I were my boss, what would I want or hope or expect my assistant to have thought about on my behalf? The starting point is always putting yourself in the shoes of your executive – not in your own shoes. This in turn develops what is known as self-reflection and learning agility, whereby you step back and critically evaluate your role to think 'how could I be more effective for my executive and the company as a whole?'"

"The top-level role of an EA is 'neutral'. Look at it from a business perspective – elevate from the dancefloor onto the balcony. I had to learn to step back and look at the bigger picture. From the balcony, you can see what is and isn't working, people who are and aren't in sync, dancing in or out of time to the music. When you do this, you give yourself a totally different perspective. As an assistant, if you believe you are their just to support, do the diaries and are reactive, you are doing yourself a disservice because you'll never progress as you won't feel motivated. You've got to have other 'strands', be a team player and be collaborative and lead by example. The skillset and attributes required by today's assistants are enormous. It's a very difficult job."

What can assistants do to elevate themselves in the workplace and change people's perspectives? "It isn't what you do, it's how you do it. Influencing on your own merits and being self-aware, which leads onto emotional intelligence, emotional agility, strategic thinking, a sound commercial understanding and being effective rather than efficient."

And what does this mean exactly? "Efficiency can be automated but being effective is broader. As assistants, we can always look to think cheaper, smarter, quicker, in a timelier way, but the effectiveness of decisions of how you operate, how you act and support your boss is what is more important, as that uses your leadership qualities."

Many PAs that I meet lack confidence in their ability. "Confidence is definitely important but self-belief is what assistants should be striving for. The moment they change their belief about themselves and their role, remarkable things will happen around them because people respond differently."

"Many assistants don't always take charge of defining what they are about. When you know what you don't want in a job, it highlights exactly what you do want in a job. You will attract and manifest the job that you want. If you can't get from your job what you want, then you can choose to go elsewhere."

Can every assistant make steps to move from 'Black Box' to 'Red Box'? "Absolutely. Speak to your boss and ask for more responsibility. It's all about preparing for that next role."

We talk about the future of the role. Adam's response is to the point. "The role of the Personal Assistant will not survive. All that will remain is administrators, and they will either be automated or done by junior office staff. At the top level, you'll

have EAs which will be called 'Business Manager' or 'Business Support Managers'. It'll eventually be about supporting the effectiveness of an organisation, commercially and operationally. Assistants have a choice, they can either transition, elevate and step up – which a lot of them are doing – or they can go backwards and potentially be made redundant."

Evidently, where we have confusion with the perception of the role, we still need more clarity. "Assistants don't have the evidence, the weight, or the way of framing or articulating how their role should be or is defined to their companies. You have to be self-resilient and have self-belief. It's a very lonely job and you don't get much support from your superiors. Wanting to progress comes from you."

And so, with this in mind, it provides the perfect opening to close by announcing Adam's big news – and news that I'm sure PAs in the North especially will be excited to hear about.

"It's been a big ambition of mine to open my own secretarial school – and it's a pleasure to announce that in Manchester, which is my home town, I'm opening the Adam Fidler Academy which will be a day school for people who want to be the best Executive Assistants. I will offer assistants the right resources, support and environment which are reflective of my professionalism and beliefs about the role. It's not a corporate environment, it's creative and thought-provoking."

Adam's Academy is a training suite that will run tutor-led courses for small, intimate groups of around ten. There will be accredited courses from the Institute of Administrative Management (IAM) as well as his usual two-day programmes. "There is nothing for PAs in the North. There are networks but they focus more on the social aspects. If you are more north than Birmingham, there isn't a lot happening. So, I very much hope to capitalise on Liverpool, Leeds and Manchester, Scotland and to give people in the North the best opportunity to perfect the art of being a successful executive assistant, because a lot of those can't travel to London for learning."

So, what differentiates Adam's programmes from others? "High quality content. It's about people taking away elements that will work for them both now and in the future. I'll be doing more managerial training, general training and personal development – as this is what the future assistant is going to need to focus on in order to progress."

What is his inspiration? "Put simply, to share the knowledge of the journey that I've been through and help assistants to be better at their job. It's about giving as much as I can, changing people's thoughts about themselves and giving them confidence. Assistants need self-belief and the feeling of 'I can achieve this'. I'm bowled over by the talent and the ambition of today's assistant's. I'm struck by how savvy and strong this new generation is. They are the inspirations."

For more information about Adam's courses, visit [executiveassistant.org](http://executiveassistant.org)