

The lost art of using a secretary

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Even though Alex Cheatle runs a company that employs 350 people in 11 countries, he does not have a personal assistant.

"When it comes to things like booking meeting rooms and organising my diary I do it myself," explains the founder and chief executive of Ten Group, a concierge service. "I tried using a PA and it took me longer because I was used to doing these things very quickly."

Mr Cheatle says he is probably an "extreme example" but his experience points to a long-term trend in the workplace.

A generation ago, having a secretary was a middle-management perk. These days you are unlikely to get a PA until you are much further up the ladder. As a result, many people starting senior jobs that come with an assistant are used to doing administrative tasks themselves.

So, how do you use a 21st-century PA?

The first thing is to get in the right frame of mind. Rather than view him or her as a 1950s secretary, you should be thinking of a more holistic executive assistant (which is also what most secretaries were until the 1930s).

"Treat your PA like a business partner," says Sue France, author of *The Definitive Personal Assistant & Secretarial Handbook*. "Allow them to be your right-hand person and your second brain."

They are likely to be up to the challenge: the past decade has seen the rise of executive assistants whose duties are more akin to being chief operating officer of their boss's working life.

Next, you need to let go. "It can be terrifying but you need to allow this person to be in

charge of your day," says Angela Mortimer of the eponymous support staff recruitment consultancy.

If only your PA controls your diary and calendar, there will be one point of contact and no double bookings. As for the rest, says Ms Mortimer, the tasks you delegate should be decided through discussion: "Open up and talk about your objectives over the next four to six months."

What you should be aiming for is someone who can not only interpret the briefest of instructions but also anticipate much of what you need. In fact, your PA should be sufficiently au fait with your thinking and the business that they can perform an ambassadorial role.

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"Trust your PA to represent you when required and be your 'face' or stand-in," says Ms France.

Virginia Merritt, a leadership adviser, says PAs can "keep an eye out for people who should be on your radar". Moreover, they can feed back what the rank and file sentiment is: "A PA can walk the floor for you."

But perhaps the most important thing is to build absolute trust. Not only will a senior PA be privy to sensitive information, but many executives use them as sounding boards and someone they can confide in. "I asked one MD what he valued the most in the role," says Ms Mortimer. "He replied, 'I want someone who is more loyal to me than the company.'"