

I spent a number of weeks thinking about and preparing for this article and I came to a few interesting conclusions which I want to share.

Firstly PA's are the frontline in the organization (*sure this is not new news!*), but if you really think about it, we are surrounded by customers. Our customers are our bosses, teams, internal/external stakeholders and clients. A few lucky PA's get to work in admin teams but the rest of us are a bit like reporters who are embedded with the army during war time (*a feeling that is best understood by administrative professionals who work with engineers, architects, accountants and sales teams.*) If you are lucky, you get to know them and grow close to them but your job is unique and they don't always understand what you do, how long things take and how difficult and thankless this job can be at times.

Secondly, we function as shock absorbers for our bosses, teams and sometimes even with external clients. *Now what do I mean by that?* Well, as office professionals we often take the blows meant for other people, we apologise for things that are not our fault, fix things we did not break and listen to and diffuse conflict situations not of our making.

Thirdly, we are ultimately responsible for the quality of work that reaches the boss' desk and managing timelines of submissions. We are the final check point and we are often the one who needs to manage poor performance from direct reports (*that most often out rank us*)

Lastly we are expected to be on top of EVERYTHING, ALL THE TIME, NO EXCEPTIONS! The fact that we have two eyes, two ears, one brain and the same 24 hours that everyone else has is beside the point!

Feeling stressed yet?

Let's face it, what makes our chosen profession so fulfilling and exciting is also what makes it very challenging at times.

Let's unpack some of the Top PA stressors:

1. PA's work with top leadership of companies and have a front row seat to the action

Working in the shadow of a powerful executive can be thrilling but can also be very scary at times. You have a window into the business that few other staff on your pay grade have. You will know about instability or problems in the company and many other things that the average employee is never aware of (*and doesn't have sleepless nights about*). You will work the same amount of hours as your boss (*in most cases*) and be as connected to your smartphone as they are. PA's who work on a senior level no longer have "working hours" they are expected to be available 24/7.

2. PA's have access to sensitive information and people try to access it

You have access to your boss' mail and other sources of confidential information; people know this and will at times try to exploit their relationship with you to get access to that information. It is your job to guard any information which is deemed sensitive and you may find yourself in difficult or abusive situations if are not willing to spill the beans.

3. PA's are expected to gate-keep and protect their bosses

We have all experienced this scenario: Your boss runs into a colleague between meetings and says “*sure come and see me*” then gets back to the office and says that if that colleague calls or asks for a meeting you are not to schedule under any circumstances. This can be extremely stressful, you need to be professional, not damage your boss’ brand but you also need to keep that individual at bay by running interference.

4. PA's are on the front line of technological and other changes in their offices

PA's by virtue of their jobs need to adopt and become proficient with new office technology very quickly. PA's often need to provide over-the-shoulder training to other team members on new software, or set up the boss’ new smartphone. Technology has changed the role of the PA over the last few decades and in my opinion will continue to do so. Change at this rate can be extremely intimidating especially if you are not technical or resistant to change.

5. PA's need to manage the demands of the office vs those of their homes and children

Our roles are service driven and our world has become so hyper-connected we find ourselves working around the clock. Unlike the executives we support we don't have staff or wives at home that can look after things, we need to do that too! So what happens, we work a full day in the office and then get home and do the night shift. Work life balance and quality time with our families become neglected. Creating feelings of guilt and eroding relationships

6. PA's need to put a smile on their face (*even when they are having a bad day*)

PA's do not have the luxury of expressing the emotions that they feel or simply closing their office door. You may be experiencing problems or heartache in your personal life but when you are in the office you need to smile, make people feel welcome and see to the needs of others. This can be incredibly draining.

7. The PA Personality

One of the most stressful things for PA's is often their own personalities. Most successful PA's I know are type A, perfectionists. They are driven by excellence and always strive to produce consistently superb work. This is a wonderful way to do your job (*but at what cost to your personal wellbeing?*)

Another common problem for PA's is not being able to say “NO”. This places immense demands on their time and capacity to produce good work.

So why have we outlined these seven stressors above? To depress you? To stress you? No, rather the opposite! It is to show you that you are normal! Administrative assistants don't like others to know that they are experiencing stress or have difficulty coping. That is why I chose the title “**I am a PA and I have stress!**” What I want you to take away from this article is that you are not alone and many other

PA's are going through this too! It is not a sign of weakness on your part but rather a natural reaction to the pressures that this job puts on you.

We cannot live in perpetual stress so we need to manage it and get a healthy perspective on our roles and our lives. Develop better boundaries and improve our work life balance. Be a bit more selfish and take some time out when needed to avoid burnout.

The good news is that we as office professionals are uniquely skilled to cope. We are born problem solvers and project managers. We are hugely adaptable, disciplined, resilient and capable employees. We have good relationships, which means that we can reach out and get support from others (*if we ask!*).

In the next part of our series we will be exploring toxic working environments and how to cope if you can't escape!