

The Interview: What to Look for; What to Run From When Hiring An Assistant

By *Joan Burge, founder & CEO, Office Dynamics International*

There is no greater partnership in the business world than that of an executive and his or her assistant. A star-performing assistant can save you time, handle your projects, reduce your work load, act as a liaison between you and your staff or other departments, help you get organized, act as a buffer, and is worth her or his weight in gold. When you have the 'right' business partner, you reduce turnover, stress, and can excel in your own career. Therefore, it would behoove you to spend time when interviewing for this position. While I do not have a magic formula for you, I can provide some specific guidelines that I have used in hiring my own executive assistants and in helping my clients with interviewing, hiring, and training their new assistant.

Before the Interview:

Before you write an ad, post a job or interview one candidate, be very clear as to what you expect of this person and the qualities that are important to you. Aside from listing the skills required to do the job or the tasks that will be performed in that job, you need to consider what attributes, values, and behaviors are important to you. I know one high-level executive who must have an executive assistant who is professional personified—from head to toe! Another executive I know needs an assistant who can maintain calmness at all times, and another one needs an executive assistant who has outstanding customer service skills. If you do not take the time to think this through and make your list,

you will have turnover and continue to waste your time bringing a new assistant up to speed. Also, determine if you require a personal and professional assistant. It is important to be honest about this during the interview as some administrative professionals do not want to be involved in managing the personal side.

Depending on your level within your organization, your needs may be slightly different than what I am providing here. At minimum, you want an administrative assistant with five years of experience. This person will at least have exposure to the business world; should know basic office procedures, protocol, equipment, letter formatting, filing, telephone experience, and more.

Skills

I bet you think this profession is all about technical skills. Our 19+ years of ongoing-research proves differently. Every time we ask Human Resource professionals, Training & Development, managers, executives, CEOs, and administrative professionals, "What skills, attitudes and behaviors are necessary to succeed in this profession?" the list contains 90% interpersonal/soft skills and only 10% technical. It makes sense. I've been involved in this profession for 39 years; 20 years as an executive assistant and 19 years training and developing administrative professionals. While admins use technology all day, behind the technology are people. And to determine which technology to use and how it interfaces with process flow, one has to use their brains!

Every great assistant needs to be excellent at the foundation skills because these are the skills they use every day. What are some of them?

- Technically savvy
- Excellent communication skills
- Organizational skills
- Time and project management
- Appointment scheduling and meeting planning
- Travel planning experience
- Professional telephone presence
- Attention to detail
- Ability to follow up and follow through
- Ability to prioritize without direction all the time
- Good grammar and proofreading

Attitudes/Traits/Behaviors

- Flexible
- Ability to remain calm under pressure
- Self-motivated/self-starter
- Hungry to learn
- Anticipates problems
- Accountable
- Good listener
- Approachable
- Team player
- Positive, “can do” attitude
- Dependable

And there is more—way too many to list in this article so I have given you what I would expect as a minimum. Again, what is important to you based on your role and who you are as an individual?

During the Interview:

As a savvy executive, I’m sure you know several guidelines to interviewing. Use many of the same tactics as you would for hiring any person for your team. Additionally, seek a candidate who is creative in their approach to the interviewing process and an individual who learned about your organization prior to the interview.

Situational interviewing will be your best approach to determining the soft skills. Two and a half years ago, I changed my entire approach to my interviewing process for an executive assistant and have been extremely happy in my selection. My process included three pages of items. Below, I’ve provided a sampling of my list.

Situational/Behavioral:

1. Executive assistants must handle sensitive or challenging situations with savvy. Describe an example of how you managed a sensitive or challenging work situation well, and the outcome.
2. Describe a situation where your “focus on the future” as an assistant has had a positive outcome for your executive or your business.
3. Explain one way that you have either saved money or generated income for an employer.
4. A team member or executive approaches you with a suggestion on how to improve your performance. How do you react?
5. Your executive is out of the office and completely unable to be reached, and someone calls with a critical issue that must be handled now. What do you do? (Looking for an answer that says assistant would learn executive’s preferences/expectations in advance and make best decision, or defer to other executives within the company.)

Skills:

1. Demonstrate your proficiency in Microsoft Word, Excel and PowerPoint. (Looking for a portfolio here. Also, we might tell them in advance we are looking for proof of their technical skills prior to the on-site interview.)
2. Do you have a career portfolio, or anything that demonstrates your abilities?
3. What system do you use for follow-up on important items and time-critical tasks?
4. What system do you use for managing e-mails – yours and your executive’s e-mails?
5. What do you think it means to manage your executive’s calendar holistically?

Traits:

1. Office Dynamics is a progressive, growing training and development company focused on customer service, sales and a stellar professional image. Describe the scope of your job within a company like this.

2. How important is career advancement to you? What are some of the ways an executive assistant to the CEO could “advance” meaningfully within a company in order to enjoy job satisfaction long-term?
3. Tell us one way in which you’ve become a “value-added partner” for your current employer. (Value-added meaning just that – you’ve added value to your company.)
4. Define how you and your work impacts your executive’s success.
5. Say you’re having a “bad day.” How do you typically handle that?
6. How important to your success is building a network of professional contacts?

Possible tests:

(Grade them from 1 to 5 – one being least skilled, 5 being highly skilled.)

- **Speaking test.** This could be a three-minute speech on-site in which the person talks about him/herself, the honors and awards received, or whatever else we prefer. Demonstrates ability to present oneself as well as image.
- **Phone skills.** Have one of us call the applicant unexpectedly to see how s/he answers the phone.
- **E-mail skills.** Have one of us test e-mail skills by e-mailing applicant and asking a few questions, waiting for the reply to ensure it meets our standards.
- **Writing skills.** Submit one piece of writing (a letter written for executive, etc.) for review. (Also, send several of the questions above as an e-mail and request a response.)
- **Proofreading skills.** Give applicant a document riddled with grammatical and spelling errors and see how well (and how quickly) it can be fixed. On or off-site quiz.

Follow-up Interviews:

Once you select your top 2 or 3 candidates (or even only 1), you want to bring those individuals back at least twice; even a third time would not hurt. If possible. . .

- meet this person in a different environment, such as a restaurant for a luncheon. This way you can see how they present themselves outside the office environment.
- have 2 – 3 of your staff members meet with these individuals and give you their perspective.
- talk to the candidates on the telephone at least twice to gain a sense of how they present themselves on the telephone. Do they sound monotone? Professional? Enthusiastic? Like they just rolled out of bed?

At this stage, additional items you want to look for are diversity of past responsibilities and backgrounds. This person will usually be more well rounded. I like to know their involvement outside of work, any leadership roles, committee work, etc. This gives me a feel for how involved this person is and especially demonstrates that they are a person of action.

Stay Away From

I’ve seen my share of administrative and executive assistants over 36 years. Because I intimately know this profession, I recommend you stay away from anyone who. . .

- is late for the interview
- keeps changing times or day of their interview
- appears to lack confidence
- demonstrates any habits that annoy you!
- is only interested in how soon they can move out of the administrative profession
- does not smile and greet you with a handshake (they will do the same with your customers)
- looks like they are going to the supermarket, gym, or local nightclub
- submits a resumes that is:
 - sloppy
 - generic/cloned resume
 - filled with typos or improper grammar and punctuation
 - not formatted appropriately
 - incorrect verb tense or changes verb tense throughout the resume. You will have problems with this person using correct tense when corresponding on your behalf or representing your organization.
 - lack initiative and only show they are a “task doer”

You're Hired!

Once you've hired the right person, you want to do everything you can to keep that great assistant. This is a relationship you'll want to develop. Nurture your assistant by providing challenging assignments, supporting their training and development, and allowing him or her to join IAAP.

Joan Burge, a renowned author and administrative expert, has been a visionary for administrative training and development since 1990. One of the first to venture into the administrative training industry, she has become an international administrative expert, trainer, author, and consultant. www.OfficeDynamics.com

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About the Author

Joan Burge is known as the red-lipstick-wearing “Rock Star” of administrative and executive assistant training and a successful entrepreneur who created a unique niche in 1990 by founding a training company that would uniquely provide sophisticated, robust educational programs and information to administrative professionals. Joan is an accomplished author (8 books), professional speaker, consultant and corporate trainer.

She is the creator of: Annual Conference for Administrative Excellence™; World Class Assistant™ Certification course; Star Achievement Series® Certification and Designation course; 30+ customized workshops, 200+ educational videos, 150+ articles and nearly 1,000 blog posts for executive and administrative assistants.

Her company, Office Dynamics International, is a global industry leader which offers a broad range of solutions and provides high-performance, sophisticated executive and administrative assistant training and coaching.