

## TODAY'S WORKPLACE

A DBJ SPECIAL REPORT

# The power behind the throne

***Executive assistants provide invaluable backup for top company leaders***

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Staff Writer

GREATER METROPLEX—They've been called the power behind the throne, the gatekeeper to the executive office and the glue that holds a company together.

Often they read top executives' e-mails even before they do and make crucial decisions in their absences. And, as their bosses' first line of business support, they often have wide-ranging duties and responsibilities that go far beyond the traditional secretarial role.

All of which adds to the potential power and influence of the executive assistants who work closely with company leaders

Now, more than ever before, the importance of the executive assistant's role is being recognized. As a result, they are being given increasing opportunities to apply their expertise and offered more scope for professional development.

Through the 1990's top administrative professionals expanded their work place roles in response to new technology and the changing needs of business, according to the International Association of Administrative Professionals, a Kansas City, Mo.-based trade organization with 40,000 members in varying administrative fields and roles.

Many of today's executive assistants have degrees and experience that would have been unheard of for someone in their position in decades past. A 2002 survey of IAAP members, for example, found that 33% hold at least a bachelor's degree, up from 15% in 1992.

With the changes in qualifications and duties comes a decline in the use of the word "secretary" to describe some of these positions. The term appeared in the job titles of 59% of IAAP members polled in 1992, but in only 19% in 2002.

Although duties vary, the position of executive assistant spells opportunity for those who rise to the occasion.

Barbara Fahey has served for 15 years as executive assistant to Dallas businessman Bruce Leadbetter, CEO of Sponsor Investments L.L. C. and a former investor in aviation and hospitality among others.

She's worked closely with Leadbetter on various projects.

"I've learned so much through the different projects we've worked on," Fahey said. "I've met a lot of exciting and wonderful people. But the best thing is the trust Bruce and I have in each other. I'm privileged to do this job."

Trust is important, because Fahey handles Leadbetter's personal finances well as business-related financial dealings.

"He always treats me as one of the executives," she said.

In fact, Leadbetter named Fahey as chief financial officer of one business venture, a Colorado casino. She went through the background check required for that industry and was instrumental in checking out the project's investment potential.

"That's one of the biggest perks—that he gave me that opportunity," she said. "I couldn't ever top that."

In general, being an executive assistant is considered a plum role because "everyone knows to come to you to find out what's going on," says Fahey, who owned her own executive suites business before joining Leadbetter.

There's no doubt that executive assistants' roles have evolved, said **Kim Zoller**, principal of Image Dynamics, a Dallas-based firm that handles leadership development and other training needs. When someone seeks an introduction to a company, the approach often is made not through the president or CEO but through the executive assistant, she said.

"Everyone knows if you can get the assistant on your side, you'll have a good relationship," Zoller said.

Appreciation of the role has grown to the point that executive assistants have their own professional organizations and are frequently offered professional development opportunities.

"Companies want to keep them with the company—and happy," Zoller said, adding that although most executive assistants are women, there is a wide range of ages, experience levels and backgrounds.

It also raises a company's profile to offer networking opportunities for administrative personnel, said Tara Hurley, executive director of Executive Women International, a Salt Lake City-based trade group that began in 1938 as Executive Secretaries Inc. It's a company-based organization with 3,500 member firms and offers an informal opportunity for

executives to network through their assistants, Hurley said.

Texas chapters are among the largest in the trade group, she said. If an executive at a member firm needs a professional service or some other business referral, they will often call on their executive assistants to locate a match from within the group, Hurley said.

"Their role has changed to become more of a trusted adviser," she said, High profile Staffing Services of Dallas has been placing executive assistants in top jobs for 17 years.

There's no doubt that the executive assistant's role has evolved and broadened, requiring more resourcefulness, said Bronwyn Allen, company president.

"It's not typing letters or taking dictation. It's more project management and facilities management," she said. At the same time, an assistant also takes on many of the duties an executive's wife handled in the past, such as coordinating car repairs or medical appointments.

Specific industry knowledge is also at premium now, said Patty Brown, Staffing manager for High Profile. Experience in the legal or real estate industries is important for many executives assistants and salaries run commensurate with that experience, sometimes exceeding \$60,000, she said. She's recently filled two positions where an MBA was required.

Business acumen goes hand-in-hand with political savvy for the successful executive assistant, said Tammy Sharp, who supports the president and CEO of VHA Inc. She is also office manager of executive administration for the Irving-based company and oversees two executive assistants. It's a team effort to ensure that the important positions are always covered, Sharp said.

"When you work with someone at that level, you represent them, field things and serve as the gatekeeper," she said. "It's a lot of responsibility, but also fun to see the way things run and why the company works."



**ZOLLER:**  
Roles have evolved.

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