

The Australian

Assistants in need of assistance

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- From: The Australian
- February 18, 2012 12:00AM



Jonathon McIlroy at the Executive Assistant Network office in Sydney. Picture: Dan Himbrechts

Source: The Australian

WHILE executives' careers, rewards and even personal lifestyles are continually in the spotlight, surprisingly little is known about the salaries, conditions, training and career pathways of their immediate support staff - executive assistants and personal assistants.

But the Sydney-based Executive Assistant Network, a national business and social organisation for EAs, PAs and similar business assistants, is determined to raise the profile of what it calls an "almost unknown" section of the professional workforce.

EAN provides conferences, training programs and a recruitment portal for its national membership of 3500 and it conducts detailed research and surveys into the role they play in business.

That research and surveying has led the network to claim assistants do not receive proper financial recompense for their work and face a lack of increasingly necessary business-tuned education and training programs.

This, it argues, is despite assistants playing vital roles in executive teams and claims they can increase an executive's productivity and effectiveness by up to 30 per cent.

The network's co-founder and director, Jonathan McIlroy, estimates there are about 40,000 assistants working in companies across Australia.

He says there are about 20,000 senior assistants who work full-time one-to-one with a senior executive and another 20,000 who work for up to three mid-level executives.

McIlroy says a recently completed survey of EAN members' backgrounds, the nature of their work and the terms and conditions of their employment has provided a much-needed profile "of this important, but neglected section of the professional workforce".

The survey spells out the gender-specific nature of the occupation - more than 99.5 per cent of assistants are female. This figure is confirmed by a female-male breakdown of the networks' membership.

And it finds more than 65 per cent of assistants have no tertiary qualifications, with only 17 per cent holding

undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications.

The survey claims the top eight employment sectors for assistants (in order) are financial services including insurance, professional services, manufacturing, health, communications, government, construction and resources.

Most assistants in these sectors (50 per cent) work for one senior executive and another 33 per cent work for two or three who are usually divisional heads or general managers.

According to the survey, the average age of the assistants is 39 and they earn an average salary of \$70,000 per annum plus superannuation. About 70 per cent enjoy a yearly bonus of at least 5 per cent of their salary. The majority (36.9 per cent) work up to 45 hours a week.

McIlroy is adamant assistants' earnings and conditions are "way out of kilter" with their ever-growing responsibilities and personal skills.

He says the research shows the most common responsibilities for assistants include the management of an executive's diary, inbox, teams, meetings, events, projects, travel and financials, along with staff recruitment and induction, networking with key stakeholders and business development.

McIlroy claims assistants have to be highly efficient and organised, loyal, discrete, concise, detail-focused, big-picture thinkers, flexible, innovative, inspirational, excellent communicators, problem solvers, leaders and motivators.

"Many of these tasks and traits are common to those that have been expected of all administrative assistants since the concept of secretarial assistants first came about and many have come about as a result of technological and management theory change.

"But far more often the assistants have gradually been taking on more and more of these areas of responsibility in a slow process of scope or responsibility creep.

"And they earn very ordinary salaries for doing more work than they have ever done. That is expected of them," he says.

McIlroy is equally critical of what he calls a "misguided and old-fashioned" attitude to assistants' training.

"I don't mean training in the sense of new computer programs. Assistants these days should be doing training courses in many management areas including strategic planning, project, financial and general management and industry awareness.

"And they also need to develop their emotional intelligence, self-awareness, self-mastery and emotional and communication skills. Their training should help them become more astute and business-savvy. That would be in the employer's and individual executive's benefit via increased productivity and efficiencies."

But Susan Heron, chief executive of the Australian Institute of Management (Victoria-Tasmania), argues assistants often hold their work fate in their hands.

She says many professionals feel their contributions and their skills are not being recognised.

But, she says, people are rewarded for the skills they bring to a job and the contribution they make to a company's bottom line.

"Many assistants are very good generalists in an office and they should look at defining their skills, efficiencies and corporate culture contributions very carefully and then pricing themselves to an employer," she says.

Heron says organisations often have training strategies to up-skill staff. "And assistants have an excellent chance to see what particular aspect of business they like and to move forward in companies.

"It's an invaluable opportunity. If they can see what they want to do they can talk to their employers and see if they will co-invest in training for positions in the areas they like," she says.

