

The Assistant Manager – a Key Factor of the Managerial Team

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Abstract: The new economic context, marked by the crisis and by radical transformations of the labor market, generates the need for more and more sophisticated skills for the assistant manager. That is because the efficiency of the secretarial activity implies both strategic skills and complex abilities, starting from knowledge about the specific activity of the company/institution where the person works as assistant manager, to connected areas such as: management, marketing, human resources, brand communication, company's culture etc. Whether the manager changes his job together with the "boss", or the boss is changed and he is bound to adapt to new conditions, a strong team spirit between the manager and his assistant is one of the most important elements that contribute to the productivity and efficiency of the both. The loyalty to the boss and to the company where he works, his adaptation capacity, his competence and his professionalism make the today's assistant manager a key factor of the managerial team. The essence of the assistant manager job consists in making more efficient the managerial activities, namely, to make it respond to the expectations expressed or not of the manager, or even to anticipate them.

Keywords: assistant manager, team spirit, professional performance, informational technologies, types of managers, interpersonal relations.

Along with society's global changes, we are witnessing a series of transformations in the labor force. Recently, new jobs appeared and the ones already existent have gone through multiple transformations, firstly, thanks to the new computer and

communicational technologies. The secretary profession is one of those jobs that in the past 20 years have met significant transformations. Some of the reasons for these changes are:

- Introduction of office equipment and automatic data processing, with

- impact on new tasks (charts, graphs, data base etc.);
- Development of Internet, Intranet and other software;
- Development of team work;
- Total or partial informatization of the administrative processes (reservation of the travelling means, sitting and conference rooms, collective planning etc.);
- Externalization of certain parts from the old institutions;
- Cultural and social diversity (appearance of multinational companies);

A poll made by a team from Office Team (France) in a number of countries from Europe (Belgium, France, Czech Republic, Germany), regarding the changes considered opportunities for the professional development of assistants and secretaries, show that 32% of the interviewees mentioned the *adaptation capacity* as the first of the essential qualities for a successful change, following: initiative (22%), autonomy (18%), diplomacy (15%), loyalty (13%).

The new technologies efficiently "secretarize" a part of the manager's activity, and through the access to information, contribution to taking decisions, the secretarial activity also gains a managerial connotation. As prof. Mircea Malita was saying, *it is easier to find an expert or a strategist than a good secretary.*

The introduction of new notions and competences from connected fields like: communication theories, public relations, branding, marketing, management, publicity, human resources management etc. calls forth for a new profile of the secretary/assistant manager, in the context of our integration in the European Union. Thanks to the changes generated by the communication

needs of the different corporations, the secretariat takes over a series of attributions of HR and publicity, functioning as interface of the company's image and its management in relation with important clients, partners, but also with producers and media.

Taking into account the fact that the secretary/assistant job is more and more complex, the selection process is not simple (because of the polyvalence of the skills and necessity to keep the job as long as possible). The new communicational technologies can replace a secretary? This is a question we hear often. The answer is no, it cannot replace it, but they can transform it: the traditional secretary disappears in front of a secretary that knows very well all the communicational and informational technologies. Today, the computer can be set to "speak" with the persons that call, but this cannot diminish or clear off the interlocutor nervousness. Also, the computer cannot keep a secret if more than one person knows the access password. No matter how much the technology will evolve, we don't think it will ever be invented a device or robot to show tact and diplomacy (characteristic to the secretary) in front of a nervous or hurried client. His traditional role of information "adjuvant" will always exist, but he will carry his role with the help of instruments like: electronic agenda and messages, data bases, Internet, Intranet etc.

Regardless of the way the institution is organized (firm, company, governmental or non-governmental organizations etc.) any manager or director knows how important is to have a trustable assistant. More and more managers wonder where and how they can find a motivated, ordered, serious, responsible and well trained person.

Traditionally, the assistant manager is recruited from the graduates from an economic or technical faculty, if these have the necessary qualities and aim to become managers. Today we can also talk about a graduate from the Department of Managerial Assistance and Secretariat, part of the Faculty of Letters. This department forms secretaries and assistant managers with higher studies, that respond to the requests and needs of the new institutions. After finishing the studies they have knowledge in the field of management, secretariat and managerial assistance, law, they know well one or two foreign languages, they have skills in using the computer, in communication etc. It is true that they lack experience, but they have the necessary theoretical and practical knowledge. We consider that, with regard to the peculiarity of every institution, in order to easily integrate the graduates from such a department have to be helped only to know better the organizational culture, the managerial values and policy. It is very important that every manager know to better "exploit" the assistant's knowledge and skills. We want the manager of our times to have the capacity to discover in his assistant those qualities and skills that better valorize him.

The manager of a company was saying that, participating to the interview in order to recruit an assistant, he realized that the respective person was having more knowledge than those necessities for a simple secretary. It would have been a waste to hire that person as a secretary, he was saying, because she wouldn't have felt good in that position and even he, as manager, wouldn't have benefitted from all her knowledge. Then he decided, because he was having

two departments (communication and marketing) to hire her for one month as an assistant manager for the two departments. At the end of the trial period he saw that the person was having better results in the communication department. After only four years, said the manager, the person who was hired as assistant manager arrived at being general manager of the respective department.

If 25 years ago, being a secretary was meaning a life somehow trouble less, under the wing (figuratively and literally) of the boss, a life in which the requests was the boss's morning coffee, newspapers, some correspondence, the telephone, but most of all protecting the boss against the inconvenient visit of different solicitors, things are different today. This image perceived by the "public eye" as risible disappeared almost entirely, thanks to the high degree of professionalism, thanks to the communication skills, as also thanks to the adaptation to the new business context. It is necessary to say that this job was for men only until the beginning of the 20th century, when the civil rights denied to women for centuries began to be promoted. Today the statistics show that the majority of the secretarial functions are held by women. The sociologists explain this by women's disposition for details, greater capacity to obedience and a higher emotional intelligence coefficient.

What does being an assistant manager means? Some say it is a more evolved secretary, others say that assistant manager is only a better denomination for the old secretary. Those who wish to respond correctly to this question have to be aware of the

everyday more alert and complex business environment. To this question we can answer that the assistant manager is the "right hand" of the manager, the interface between the manager and the employees, partners and external collaborators. For an assistant manager this job means more than answering the phone, reading correspondence and receiving guests. In fact, those who worked and work as assistant managers know that his job is as complex as an executive position, when it is done with dedication and responsibility.

Knowing the values and the organizational climate, the client management, the business etiquette, dealing with the classic and electronic correspondence, knowing the time management, planning the work agenda, organizing the business trips and meetings etc. are the manager's expectations from his assistant. Many consider that, even though it is not a life job, it develops professionally and personally the employee, offering many opportunities. The assistant manager function is seen as a starting point in career. The access to information from the business environment, relations outside the company, growing capacity to analyze and operate with information, development of the common sense, knowledge of the organization business model etc., all are opportunities of the assistant manager for his future career. Today more and more managers admit: a competent secretary/assistant is gold. Managers are everyday busier and their agenda becomes scanty. The solution is not another agenda, but a competent person to help him, to better organize his time, to create all conditions so that he "the boss" can take the most appropriate decisions.

What is the secret of an efficient collaboration manager-assistant?

The manager and the assistant have to form a team, with rights and obligations from each side. It is essential for them to think, plan and act as a team. Their work is hard to divide. As the success of tennis players at double depends on the ability of each to anticipate the other's strike to complete and synchronize to it, so the manager and the assistant have to collaborate in order to develop the team strategy. The manager's actions are also the assistant's, and they have the same aim. For example, a report has to be written: the director conceives, the assistant elaborates it. The only purpose of their action is to present a report, but it was made with the contribution of the both.

Also, the assistant manager is representative for the public image of a company or institution: the way in which he behaves, communicates, dresses, talks about the respect towards himself, towards colleagues and towards the external collaborators. The image of the company and of the manager is closely related to the way in which the assistant communicates and expresses his messages; is the first person with whom the others get in touch (and we all know the cask savors of the first fill). Not once we heard or thought: "if the assistant looks and talks like this...what to say about the boss?" And we shouldn't forget that today the image is related to our sensibility, intelligence and ideology and that we deserve to be called an image civilization. In the same time, it has to be a mean of attraction; the office has to look as a hospitable and efficient place. There is a Romanian saying: "the man blesses the place". It is true and perfectly valid also in our case. The office

where the assistant/secretary and the manager work has to be a true "shop window" of the company; it has to be a pleasant and comfortable place. The way their office looks influences both their behavior and the ones who visit it. The environment can be a first condition for the professional performance. That is why their office has to be functional, esthetic and efficient, in an ergonomic way.

The essence of being an assistant manager consists in "efficientizing" the manager. The assistant has to meet the daily commitments and changes together with the manager and their team. When can we talk about a successful professional relation between the manager and the assistant? When:

The assistant and the manager are a team;

- The assistant anticipates the manager's needs; the managers appreciate when, for example, the assistants take over the everyday correspondence or obtain beforehand information on a certain project;
- The manager supply the assistant the necessary information in order to solve certain tasks;
- The manager gives power of decision to the assistant, under conditions he accepts (and the other managers have to be informed about it);
- Their relation has to be more a collaboration;
- The manager is efficient and focused on responsibilities;
- The assistant thinks in a managerial way, anticipating certain situations and resolving them before they manifest (only in this way he will be part of the managerial team).

The assistant manager has to know the typology of his manager (responsible controller/micromanager, responsible trainer, responsible collaborator etc.) in order to understand his reactions and to adapt to his behavior. Communication is very important. Many times the assistants say: "I don't understand what he wants from me and I cannot adapt to his requests". The assistant has to adapt to the requests of his boss for a better collaboration. But the question is: do the managers adapt to their assistants? The answer is yes, but for both the cases patience, time and diplomacy is needed from the assistants/secretaries.

Let us see the following situation: *Andreea works for a multinational company and she has a new boss who is Italian. She knows very well Italian and English, but, for the first time, she works with a foreign boss. She wonders how she should behave, what the exigencies of the new boss would be, taking into account that he knows neither the company nor the Romanian characteristics. Here are some advice: to have a positive attitude, receptive to change; to find out a few things about the boss (if he came alone or with the family); not to be afraid of him; she knows better the employees and the external collaborators; she doesn't have to hurry in showing him the files and make copies before he asks for them; not to forget that she is his assistant and not his "servant"; she doesn't have to "bother" him with too many information, but the boss has to find on his desk every morning the files he needs; to ask him from the beginning what are the priorities and the requests, in order to arrange her agenda; if he wishes to know better all the procedures of the company she has to inform*

him accurately; the assistant has to inform the manager about her tasks; if she manages well with the tasks, her boss will leave her full freedom (autonomy) to continue in solving tasks.

In a company there can be a few executive directors. The assistant manager has to understand the role of each member of the executive and to take part to the well being of the company. Many times, the success of the managerial team is in her hands.

The relations manager-assistant have to be based on respect and mutual help, confidentiality and loyalty. Also, the assistant has to make sure all the information passed to the executives are exact, so that they don't have to verify all documents; to be capable to diplomatically respond to each phone call, and the executive has to trust him about keeping confidential all the information related to the company.

Globally, the economic crisis influences the companies' behavior in relation with the employees, producers, business partners, and the volume of negotiations is bigger. The present crisis brings different situations for the managerial team to solve, financial, but also psychological, and overcoming them depends on the managerial team's skills to communicate, namely, to negotiate (the assistant manager is also part of this team).

Let us imagine a situation that proves the important role of the assistant in the managerial team: *A message sent to the director general of the bank X (with subsidiary also in Romania) taken by his assistant, announces that in all subsidiaries in Europe there will be a reduction in staff of approximately 1000 employees. The news was to appear in the newspapers*

all over the world. Even though Romania is not directly affected by these reductions (because of the small number of subsidiaries) the information would surely have created panic in the subsidiaries, and even more between the clients. Unfortunately, the director was on leave and he was to come back only in a few days time. What should the assistant do in this case? He decides to call the director to make sure he also received the information. The director says he knows about the situation because he had received the information by e-mail. He also said that he will come back the next day to hold a press conference. After the call, the assistant communicates to the press that the next day the director will hold a press conference, talks with all the subsidiary directors, announcing them about the director's action and tells them that the bank won't be affected by the crisis (the number of the employees being minimum). This was an example by which we wanted to prove that by being prompt the assistant solved a situation that could have lead to serious consequences.

To conclude with, we can say that today's secretariat is complex and it develops continuously. Also, the assistant manager has a well defined role in the managerial team and no matter how much the technology will evolve, we don't think there will be any device or robot to replace the assistant. The assistant manager, that professionally evolves by continuously bettering his performances and that advocates for a quality work, will always be a key factor of the whole managerial team. Behind a successful manager there is always an efficient assistant. Consequently, we don't have to only identify the persons who would suit for a job of assistant manager, but to train them at university and post-graduate level.

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