

Give PAs a chance

Three months ago, Jane* was on cloud nine. She had landed a well-paid job as personal assistant to a successful television producer, based in stunning offices in W1. "I can't tell you how excited I was," says Jane, a film and television studies graduate with a secretarial diploma. "My previous job was a £30k role as second PA to a nice but dull insurance man."

Mr Television was offering a role in her dream field and a tidy £40,000-plus salary. But Jane crashed back down to earth on her very first day. Although the boss had been described in the job advertisement as "demanding", at interview she'd found him charming, if a little eccentric (he'd asked whether she had ever taken part in a séance). Her first encounter with him at work, however, lasted all of two minutes. "He called me in and barked, 'Look, my ideal PA would say two or three words a week. We're not going to chat. I'll just let you know if you mess up'," she recalls.

Coping with her boss's personality proved to be by far the trickiest part of the job. "PA duties per se aren't rocket science, but he expected me to pick up exactly where my predecessor left off. Of course this was impossible, and I got so many terse emails from him in my first few days I thought I was for the chop," she says.

It is a scenario that David Morel, managing director of St James's-based Tiger Recruitment, might recognise. Tiger places candidates in some of the most demanding PA roles in London. "There's sometimes an unrealistic expectation that a PA will be up to speed from day one, but there's always a bedding-in period," he says. "Bosses need to give new PAs a chance – it's something we have to be quite firm about with clients."

Jane's new boss also operated at a radically different pace from the insurance man. "The volume of work he generated was phenomenal. I felt his previous PA must be Superwoman."

According to Morel, these sorts of demands go with the territory when you're working for a successful boss. "These people have got where they are by being brilliant delegators. And entrepreneurs have an uncanny ability to work with minimal sleep."

Another Mayfair-based secretarial recruitment consultant, Tessa Meadows-Smith, director of RMS Recruitment, agrees that pressure is to be expected in a role paying £40,000-£60,000. However, like Morel, she says that bosses can alarm their PAs with seemingly impossible expectations. "A problem we're getting now with the advent of Blackberries is PAs getting buzzed all night by their boss. A PA might be up all night booking flights and so on."


While practical secretarial skills are fairly straightforward, matching PAs to highly successful, often complex, characters can be tough. "Secretarial recruitment is much harder than say, IT, which is all about technical skills. We have to find personalities that click," she says.

In her experience, creative bosses are the most demanding. "Interior design, for example, is renowned for it – I think because attention to detail goes with the job."

One of Meadows-Smith's clients insists that his biscuits are laid out in a certain way with his cup of tea. She says that while some PAs would find this intolerably fussy, or even demeaning, others would relish the opportunity to please their boss. "One might think, 'I didn't go to law school for this,' whereas another might say, 'I respect this person, they are a genius, and I want to keep them happy and productive'."

Morel thinks the key to a harmonious boss-PA relationship is for boundaries to be respected, but says these fall in different places depending on the individuals concerned. He recently placed a candidate who was asked to do house cleaning. She refused and the boss apologised for asking.

Are some bosses so difficult that no candidate should be expected to work for them? Morel thinks not. "We deal with people who shout and scream but that's just their way



DEMANDING BOSSES CAN EXPECT TOO MUCH OF THEIR PAs, ESPECIALLY AT THE START OF A JOB. THAT'S WHY IT'S VITAL TO ESTABLISH YOUR BOUNDARIES QUICKLY, SAYS GRACE MCCANN

of doing business, and we can find PAs for whom it's water off a duck's back."

But Jane decided that her boss was making her utterly miserable, and left to temp and look for a new job. "This time I'm avoiding ads that say 'demanding' or even 'creative'," she says, "in case it's another boss who wants a workaholic mute for a PA."

* NOT HER REAL NAME.