

In 1870 Sir Isaac Pitman founded a school for shorthand writers to “professional and commercial men” and, originally, the school was for male students only. In the 1880s, with the invention of the typewriter, more women began to enter the secretarial field, and since World War I, the role of secretary and PA has been primarily associated with women. Today, this trend is being slowly reversed.

“Out of the 1,114 candidates we’ve registered in the last 12 months, 46 are male,” says David Morel, Managing Director of Tiger Recruitment Ltd. “These days top PAs do much more than just the traditional typing, diary organising and travel arranging duties. They get involved with the business, work on key projects and, in some cases, make decisions in the boss’ absence.” This means better career prospects and higher earning potential for all PAs, yet there is still a stigma attached to a male doing what is traditionally perceived as a female job. The male PA is still relatively rare, but we’ve talked to five of them to ask about their experiences.

Yin vs. yang

First of all, they don’t find working in a ‘female’ role difficult. In fact, they don’t perceive themselves as working in a ‘female’ role at all. Nor do they think they have an advantage – only when pressed, they admit they perhaps stand out because there are still so few of them in the UK compared with other countries. “I deal with many other male PAs to heads of galleries around the world,” says Adam D’Arcy, PA to a female art consultant.

There’s hope for the UK, though. Adrienne Marks, Personal Development Coach at The Awareness Zone, believes the traditional roles of female PA/male boss are being reversed, for example in local and national government. “Also, with more and more women running their own businesses or large departments, gender specific employment will soon become a thing of the past.”

Because they don’t believe gender should be an issue in the PA role, our PAs are reluctant to name those of their attributes that are typically ‘male’. “Although men do tend to behave more assertively than women, appear more logical and less emotional,” says Adam Fidler, Executive Assistant to Principal and Chief Executive at Salford City College and National PR Officer for European Management Assistants UK (EUMA). “And I don’t worry about what somebody has said and don’t over-analyse things.”

However, when asked about typically ‘female’ attributes of a good PA, the men are virtually unanimous in naming multitasking. “This is something I’ve had to learn,” says Matt Rose, PA to Head of Strategy & Change Management and Head of Risk & Control at the Bank of America, “I think it comes more naturally to women.” They also highly rate good listening skills and relating to people in a sincere and caring way, as well as intuition.

Whether these are male or female attributes, a good PA needs to possess them all, irrespective of their gender. “If you’re a good PA, you’re a good PA. Period,” sums up Peter, a male PA with over ten years’ experience who is currently supporting a female boss.

The male PA vs. the boss

Stuart Lang, Associate Director with specialist recruiter Parker Wells, believes that some employers may choose to employ male PAs precisely because they are male. “Generally, people are judged on merit but because these men ‘went against type’ to become a PA, they are perceived as very committed to the role.” Adam F calls himself and others like him ‘career PAs’ and adds: “We’ve had to work hard to prove we are just as good as, if not better than, the female PA.”

Matt Built, who’s currently supporting celebrity hairdresser Errol Douglas part time, believes his bosses have always thought him more dedicated because he hasn’t got “that whole family thing going, where I’d want to get home to see the kids.” One may suspect a male boss is more likely to hold such views, just as some male bosses think male PAs understand business better than their female counterparts. “I’ve noticed the same manager talk differently to me than when they talk to a female PA,” admits Adam F.

Still, it appears that female bosses are more open to employing a male PA, perhaps because they like “having a guy to unload onto as they know nothing’s taken personally,” says Peter. However, being a male in a ‘female’ role can have its disadvantages, too, especially in the testosterone-fuelled environments of some law firms and investment banks. “An Alfa boss, male or female, can look down on a male PA,” says Stuart. But then they probably look at female PAs in exactly the same way. However, there are big career paths to be had for someone who is willing to strike out and go against social stereotypes. “With experience and time, PAs can move to managerial roles, for example in big organisations which employ a secretarial manager to oversee a pool of secretaries and PAs,” says Stuart.

The male PA vs. the female PA

Fellow PAs make assumptions, too. Every time Adam F joined an organisation, the female PAs presumed that he had no secretarial experience, that he couldn’t type or do shorthand, and that it wasn’t a role he had chosen to be or stay in. “Also, I’d say female PAs sometimes find us a little threatening” he explains. “Having said that, being a male in a female dominated world means that I’m often made a fuss of!”

Male PAs can be perceived as a threat by their female counterparts when the going gets tough and there is a lot of competition for the top jobs. “A woman might find it much harder to accept losing out on a potential new job to a man rather than to another woman,” says Adrienne.

The male PA vs. the rest of the world

Some men outside the profession – particularly the older generation – don’t understand why a man would choose this role and sometimes voice their incredulity in unexpected ways. “One gentleman said to me ‘I met another male PA once, do you know him?’” recalls Peter.

Fortunately, none of our male PAs has experienced sexism or prejudice because of the role they fulfil. “Perhaps just the odd raised eyebrow but this is at the bottom of the list of the things I concern myself with!” says Peter. “I think we have a long way to go to attract more men into PA work. The stereotypical image of the female PA still seems to dictate the market,” sums up Adam F. ■



A case of an early starter

Adam Fidler learnt his first PA skills at an early age. “When I was 11, I found an old shorthand textbook in our loft. It belonged to my great uncle, an administrator with the police. I was fascinated that you could write in squiggles and read it back, so I learnt it. Then I learnt to touch type and by the time I was 14, I could shorthand at 100wpm and got RSA Stage I typing. Whilst my friends did their paper rounds, I was temping as a Saturday administrator in a local garage.”

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