



Six steps to overcome challenges facing the Modern EA

It's no secret that the role of an EA and PA is a complex one. As today's workplace continues to evolve, EA's are expected to confidently tackle the challenges associated with working in a demanding and fast paced environment.

So what exactly are the big challenges facing EA's and PA's in today's business world and more importantly – how can they be addressed and overcome?

Ahead of the upcoming [EAPA Summit](#) in Melbourne, we spoke to Kaye Hodge, Executive Assistant, Centre for Learning and Research in Higher Education at the University of Auckland and Dimitra Zographos, Senior Executive Assistant at URS Corporation Australia, to get to the bottom of **the six biggest challenges** facing EA's and the strategies needed to deal with them.

Challenge 1: Dealing with 'change'

Kaye Hodge: The first challenge which comes to mind is the reality that we are all faced with changing workplace environments and in particular, the changes which may be introduced to our specific role. Today's tough economic climate continues and I believe that this is one of the key contributing factors towards a marked change which is being signalled when it comes to the EA and PA role in the current professional administrative industry. Whether that relates strictly to the public or private sector arena, there has been an increasing awareness of a fresh interest shown to the very nature of our roles and in particular the requirements and responsibilities assigned to the EA and PA position.

For example in the past many EA and PA roles matched job descriptions identifying the tasks and responsibilities assigned as sole administrative support to a Director/Manager/Head of the Company, Organization, Team, Centre or Department. In today's current climate an approach favoured is for an EA & PA role to support not only to the senior staff member /or management team, but to work effectively in such a way that sees the engagement of this role at a far greater level of involvement by offering a wider degree of support to staff members involved in specific projects or processes.

Solution: It's all about your approach and attitude

Kaye Hodge: How you approach any type of introduced change is absolutely vital. The best advice that I can offer you, is that change may well provide you with many challenges and uncertainty, but what is important to remember, is that it can also offer you personally the opportunity for your continued career development and ultimate success.



In times of uncertainty we can all become a victim of our own limiting beliefs and allow a negative mindset to take shape. The step forward with this is to replace these with positive affirmative beliefs that allow you in this process to see positive outcomes. With acceptance of changing circumstances and well-considered focus upon working within your own 'circle of influence' about what can be achieved, growth will follow. There is a real need to recognize throughout this period of change the importance of approaching this change with great flexibility.

Your best asset as an EA and PA in a nutshell at any circumstance, is that you truly want to be known as someone who can absolutely be relied upon in times of change.

Challenge 2: Managing a Big Load/Work Life Balance

Dimitra Zographos: Managing the workload is one of the biggest challenges we face as an EA, particularly if we support more than one executive. Conflicting priorities among executives can make us feel fragmented, especially when last-minute changes occur. We typically manage not only our own time, but the business schedules for those we support. Frequent interruptions are common and we sometimes struggle with work-life balance. Many executives work long hours and some have the expectation we do the same. In addition, we can struggle to find the time to communicate with our bosses during their busy schedules.

Solution: Ensure clear simple, procedures are in place and a good communication strategy

Dimitra Zographos: Having a very good relationship with the people we support and excellent organisational skills are very important not only in managing a heavy workload, but being appreciated that we also have a life outside work. Being able to communicate helps with prioritising work, meet deadlines with minimal stress and our work load not to be underestimated. Ensuring clear, simple procedures are in place makes a world of difference – i.e. being included in an email only when clearly you need to be aware of what is going on or you are expected to action. This is very helpful when you are looking after multiple calendars and diaries. Being given notice where possible with travel plans. Being diplomatic and creative with the limited time available, to connect at least once a day, either on the phone, email or in person. This ensures everyone is on the same page and reduces stress and time wasted unnecessarily.

Challenge 3: Time Management

Kaye Hodge: It is absolutely true that our effective management of time continues to be a challenge we all face on a regular basis. For Executive and Personal Assistants, there is a huge amount of juggling that takes place at the coalface, as we simply respond to doing whatever it takes - just to get the job done.

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Solution: A commitment to change and commitment to action

Kaye Hodge: You can train others and improve your own time management through better planning, prioritizing and delegating by having:

- An awareness of our environment
- An understanding of ourselves
- Identifying what we will change about our habits and attitude

We can make inroads towards more effective management of time. The most important message to you is that time management starts with **your commitment to change** – followed closely by: **your commitment to action!**

Challenge 4: People Issues – Dealing with difficult people

Dimitra Zographos: The EA is the person to whom managers, employees, vendors, clients, board members and visitors come to when they need something. In some cases, we have to deal with people who are difficult, have a bad attitude, or those who see us as a subordinate whom they can bully. We must be able to assess difficult situations, and then communicate assertively and clearly, while maintaining confidentiality and good working relationships.

Solution: Be humble, empathise and listen.

Dimitra Zographos: The most important thing to remember when dealing with difficult people is to humble oneself, empathize and listen carefully. You are then making the other person feel comfortable and they are less likely to be defensive. It is useful to include an empathetic response by including ourselves in the picture. Putting ourselves in their shoes helps to build rapport, open the communication channels and work a way forward.

Challenge 5: Communication – Communication – Communication

Kaye Hodge: In the fast paced environment which we operate as an EA and PA there can be an element where at times communication in our workplace can be overlooked. Our EA and PA strength of communication is vital! Excellent communication supports excellent results.



Solution: Learn what communication style works best for you and your boss

Kaye Hodge: Communication with your boss and the staff of your organisation needs to be clear and precise – there is a priority on the time you spend with your boss. Ensure you cut to the short version and deliver what is absolutely considered – the need to know information!

Work out the best style of communication for you both. The most critical factor is to establish with your boss the best form of communication which matches the preferred daily routine. The key aim is to avoid the ‘left hand – right hand’ scenario and at the same time provide the assurance regarding any important developments with a definitive outcome.

Challenge 6: Dealing with Ambiguity

Dimitra Zographos: Management should be able to communicate, bring clarity to their team and make decisions on the best available information, however somehow this does not always happen and we often have to deal with ambiguity. Being able to effectively deal with this ambiguity is very important in our roles to ensure things run as smoothly as possible on a daily basis. We effectively have to cope with change; wear different hats quickly and comfortably; decide and act without having the total picture and confidently handle risk and uncertainty.

Solution: Develop and maintain positive workplace relationships

Dimitra Zographos: Having a very good relationship and rapport, as much as possible with all stakeholders; your boss, chairman, board, your boss’s direct reports, other EAs and anyone else you can think of that is part of your professional world. This enables us to have access to a whole lot of information from various sources and given most of our roles are the anchor to most senior executives we are in a position to use the information effectively to minimise ambiguity, not only for ourselves, our bosses and the wider circle of people we work with.

Kaye Hodge and Dimitra Zographos will be presenting alongside Colleen Lansdell and Narelle Matthey-Aickin leading an interactive panel discussion at the [EAPA Summit](#) Melbourne 2014, to further explore and debate the challenges facing EA’s.

For more information visit www.eapa.com.au or download the agenda [here](#)

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