

# Why no robot could fill an executive assistant's shoes

 By [Auguste Coetzer](#)

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It takes a special person to be the executive assistant of a senior manager or director at a large or small company. It is a complex job that leaves no room for mistakes. In a world where artificial intelligence is increasingly taking over jobs and making them redundant, good executive assistants need not worry: it is unlikely that there will be a robot that can be a perfect executive assistant.



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An executive assistant is the highest level of secretary and is honoured this month as we celebrate Secretaries' Day. The name secretary comes from the Latin word, *secretum*, that was used to describe someone who worked at the royal court and was a trusted confidante who could be relied on to keep a secret. The role of an executive assistant is exactly the same today: someone who can be trusted and respects the confidentiality of the office.

Traditionally, this important position has been the domain of women, especially since the Second World War when women had to step up and take care of the administration since the men were away at war. Today the pendulum is swinging with more men entering the profession again.

However, whether the executive assistant is a woman or a man, they all need the same attributes to be successful. Certainly the two main attributes are emotional intelligence and attention to detail. Executive assistants deal with many people from all levels internally and externally daily. Therefore they must have emotional intelligence and the skills to read emotional cues and body language to handle interactions in a non-offensive manner.

Executive assistants have a rare perspective on the company that few others share. This is why trust is paramount and why they can act as a sounding board for executives to give them pointers or something to note for the next board meeting.

Attention to detail is part of the requirement for executive assistants to see the big picture and gather the foundational knowledge needed to provide valuable insights for executives. Executive assistants need to know what the challenges are in the workplace, what should be changed, who the biggest competitors are and who the team players are. An executive assistant can never not know something about the company and its people and, at times, are the chief information officer as well.

This attribute goes hand-in-hand with resourcefulness, to get the job done, no matter what it takes. Negotiation skills are important to get things done. Another attribute that matches resourcefulness is to keep calm under pressure. The executive assistant only gets pressure from the top and has to assimilate it and get results when it is passed on. The buck stops with the executive assistant.

Prioritisation and organisational skills are also important for this cog in the company's wheel. The executive assistant is the gate keeper for the executive and has to limit distractions and ensure the most pressing issues get attention. This is also where organisational skills help to develop systems that save time in the office.

However, the gatekeeper must not become an obstacle or kill deals. You are not a jail manager, but a conduit for the most important issues in the company.

## **Common mistakes and how to avoid them**

The most common mistakes executive assistants make, especially when they are new in the job, are misreading corporate culture, not building bridges with other executive assistants, not asking enough questions about tasks to be completed, never saying no, taking on too many tasks and speaking out when they should keep their lips sealed.

The mistake of misreading corporate culture can be avoided by building knowledge about the company, while building good relationships with other executive assistants is part of networking.

Executive assistants are expected to get everything done in time, but this can only happen if she or he is absolutely sure of what needs to be done and how it should be done. This information can only be gathered by asking penetrating questions until everything is clear.

The inability to say 'no' to more work could be avoided by doing just that: saying 'no, I cannot do this'. Executive assistants should remember that they are not in the position to make friends. They should have good relationships with everyone, but must draw a line to avoid being taken advantage of.

Speaking out about confidential company matters loops back to being trustworthy. Good executive assistants do not gossip, allude to trouble between board members or entertain friends with juicy stories about executives. Trust and confidentiality are probably the most important determining factor in being a successful executive assistant.

This is why robots can never take over the job of an executive assistant. The future might hold fewer positions for executive assistants, but the ones available will require more of the person to fill these big shoes. Executives will always need another human to be there.

## **ABOUT AUGUSTE COETZER**

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