MEET THE NEW MIDDLE MANAGER: TODAY’S ADMINISTRATIVE PROFESSIONAL

Research conducted by the American Society of Administration Professionals (ASAP), which includes data from the Administrative Professionals Conference (APC), finds the role of today’s administrative professional has changed significantly in recent years, creating challenges for admins and the organizations that employ them.

Today’s administrative professional is not the “office worker” of yesteryear. In fact, “she” is not the administrative professional of five years ago. Increasingly, the job is held by a man.

However, the shift in responsibility and required skills is the big news.

“My own role has grown from more general team and management support to more of a business partner. Over the past couple years I have been empowered to make certain decisions on my own. Having strong business management and project management skills seem to be the direction more roles are moving towards,” says Jeni Tocol, a business administrator at Microsoft, the world’s largest computer software maker.

Traditional clerical skills are still valued and utilized on the job, but it’s not uncommon for today’s administrative professional to have responsibility for project management. She or he may also serve as the office tech front line support. And often an administrative professional has significant financial responsibility.

Indeed, when it comes to business expenditures, administrative professionals increasingly have authority. APC attendees’ purchasing responsibility across all categories, including approval and authorization, nearly doubled from 2008 to 2013.

“In today’s business, administrators are taking on roles more similar to a management level employee. In addition to their clerical and office management skills, they are required to manage budgets, give business presentations, be innovative with business solutions, and are more frequently required to have some type of a college degree,” says Lisa Luckey, an administrator with consumer goods giant Procter & Gamble.

There is also new emphasis on teamwork. In the past, an administrative professional reported to and interacted most frequently with one manager. Today, she or he may still have one official boss but is more likely to interact regularly with a team—and may even supervise the team.

“More and more often admins are expected to take leadership roles. They are supervising peers, spearheading projects,” says Shellie Franklin, an administrative coordinator at world-renowned Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center.
The shift from assistant to a managerial role has happened relatively quickly. In 2008, only 7 percent of APC attendees held non-traditional admin job titles; most were assistants. Five years later, in 2013, more than 22 percent of APC attendees held titles like manager and project coordinator.

Make no mistake: These are not symbolic titles.

“The admin professional is being utilized to manage projects, manage direct reports, and even make decisions on behalf of their executives on a more routine basis,” says Jen Bogle, an administrative assistant at The Kroger Company, one of the world’s largest grocery retailers.

And with or without a title that accurately reflects the job function, the role has changed.

“We are no longer the 9-5, type a memo and answer the phone secretaries we once were known for. We are now the business partner to the executive and teams we support in which most cases is assuming the role of project manager and chief of staff,” says Christopher Whibley, an executive assistant at Elsevier Inc., a leading provider of health and science information.

But why the shift, and why now?

**DRIVERS OF CHANGE**

The role of the administrative professional has been impacted by three drivers of change: the recession and its aftermath; evolving technology; and an improving economy.

**The Recession and its Aftermath**

It’s worth recalling how the fallout from the Great Recession took its toll on organizations. The economy lost 8.4 million jobs in 2008 and 2009, including many middle manager positions.

Yet, even as the economy began to show signs of improvement in 2010, manager jobs did not rebound. In fact, for 2010, “managers” was the occupational category with the biggest job losses, according to the National Employment Law Project, a non-profit research organization, which tracked job gains post-recession.

Other research from the National Employment Law Project suggests managerial job growth has remained slow. The majority of new jobs created through 2012 were in lower-wage occupations, in other words, not managers.

There has been a lot of talk about organizations making do with less staff, which has become the new reality. Redistribution of work hasn’t only affected remaining managers. In many instances, flatter
organizations have meant administrative professionals have taken on greater responsibility.

This change is also reflected in the job candidates organizations are seeking to fill open admin positions.

“The requirements for administrative jobs have expanded in recent years and this shows there’s a trend towards employers seeking versatile administrative professionals who can ‘wear many hats’ within an organization,” says Robert Hosking, executive director of OfficeTeam, a Robert Half company and leading staffing firm specializing in placing office and administrative support professionals.

**Evolving Technology**

At the same time, increased use of technology, including mobile technology, and the proliferation of social media, has placed new demands on organizations.

Constant connectivity has created a need for more frequent communication. It has also accelerated decision-making, resulting in a more dynamic and faster-paced work environment.

Social media has added new dimensions to the mix, making it almost a mandate for organizations to maintain communication on multiple channels with the world at large.

Navigating this changing technological landscape requires time, effort, and know-how. Not surprising, organizations are turning to administrative professionals for assistance—and hiring new admins with attention to these skills.

“A strong understanding of Microsoft Office applications remains in demand, but businesses are also starting to seek administrative professionals who are familiar with social media,” says Hosking. “In some cases, support staff may be involved in monitoring and responding to customer feedback on sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google+.”

**Improving Economy**

Social and mobile technologies have contributed to a faster-paced work environment, but so has an improving economy.

Amid fierce competition, organizations are positioning themselves, often with limited managers, to take advantage of growth opportunities.

“As the economy improves and workloads rise, companies need staff who can thrive during change and who are adaptable enough to jump in to help even if it’s outside their traditional job description,” Hosking says.

That staff includes multi-skilled administrative professionals, and there appear to be no shortage of job opportunities for these individuals in the foreseeable future.
BY THE NUMBERS

Approximately 7,894,100 people were employed as administrative professionals across various job categories in 2012, the most recent year for which data is available from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). A net increase of 12 percent in administrative professional jobs across these categories is projected for the 2012-2022 timeframe.4

Perhaps not surprising, the largest increase, from a percentage standpoint, 39 percent, is projected in the medical field, as changes in health care place greater demands on medical practices and other providers of health care services.

As might be expected, salaries vary greatly from position to position, depending on employer size and geographic location.

Even so, the 2014 Salary Guide from OfficeTeam5 suggests an overall positive trend with regard to pay. OfficeTeam’s year-over-year salary projections 2014 vs. 2013 for 62 administrative professional positions average slightly above the 2.9 to 3 percent projected for jobs across all industries in surveys conducted by Towers Watson,6 Buck Consultants,7 and Hay Group.8 On average, administrative professionals can expect to see a 3.3 percent salary increase in 2014.

As far as salary increases, administrative professionals are faring slightly better than coworkers in other jobs, which is good news, given that in recent years admins have assumed greater responsibility.

But the question remains: Is today’s administrative professional prepared for today’s admin job?

NEED FOR SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

One of the strengths of today’s administrative professional is industry knowledge; nearly 92 percent of APC 2013 attendees have been in their current industry for five years or more.

However, 38 percent of admins have been in their current role for three years or less, suggesting a need for skills development.

Be that as it may, a recent OfficeTeam survey of HR managers in North America finds that less than half of organizations, 46 percent, currently offer or plan to offer subsidized training for administrative professionals in the next 12 months.9

In addition, ASAP research finds that although administrative professionals may have organizational support, seeking training often falls to them. APC attendance was self-initiated by 37 percent of administrative professionals; only 12 percent of admins attended the conference at the suggestion of their manager, HR or training department.

Meanwhile, when it comes to technical expertise, there’s no disputing it’s a job requirement—and that a training gap exists.
A recent ASAP poll asked administrative professionals what percentage of their workday is spent using Microsoft Office applications. An overwhelming majority of admins, 85 percent, spends between 61 and 100 percent of their workday using the software.

Nevertheless, when ASAP asked admins to rate their level of expertise using Microsoft Office applications, only 13 percent say they view themselves as expert—despite the fact that many admins are considered the office tech guru.

An APC survey finds administrative professionals use a wide range of technologies and platforms, including collaboration and communication tools such as FaceTime, Skype, and SharePoint, among others.

“Technology has become such a focus of our world; it is critical to keep up,” says Sarah Meineke, an administrative assistant at Procter & Gamble, who acknowledges that she’s among those seeking training on “how to be the ‘go-to technology guru’ of your office.”

There appears to be a widespread need for such training. Another ASAP poll asked administrative professionals about their primary method for learning a new technology, whether software or hardware. A majority, 58 percent, says they teach themselves, while another 10 percent say they search online.

Social media expertise is also lacking.

“Much advertising is done through social media, yet we don’t really know what’s out there, let alone how to work with it on a day-to-day basis,” says Meineke.

And she is not alone. A survey of APC attendees finds slow adoption of social media among administrative professionals: While 48 percent are on Facebook, only 28 percent are on LinkedIn, only 11 percent are on Twitter, and 15 percent don’t use social media at all.
Providing Training

ASAP research strongly suggests that today’s administrative professional, who has assumed middle-manager responsibilities, is striving to rise to the challenges of the position.

However, in order to more effectively contribute to the organization—and further its bottom line—the bottom line is she and he could benefit from additional opportunities for skills development.

Attending conferences geared toward administrative professionals, like the Administrative Professionals Conference (APC) and other events which feature a broad spectrum of training sessions on a variety of topics, is one way for an admin to expand her or his skill set. Indeed, a survey of APC attendees finds 94 percent of admins attended the 2013 conference for training.

Joining a professional association, like the American Society of Administrative Professionals (ASAP) or other organization, also offers opportunities for skills development. ASAP, for example, provides its members with an array of resources, including articles, webinars, online training, a mentoring program, and more.

For employers concerned about the cost of training, it’s important to note that many training opportunities for administrative professionals are available at low or no cost. ASAP membership, for example, is free.

(Endnotes)

1 Economic Policy Institute: http://stateofworkingamerica.org/great-recession/
About the American Society of Administrative Professionals

The American Society of Administrative Professionals (www.asaporg.com) was established in 2005 to provide year-round, on-line, professional development, training and resources to address the changing roles and demanding responsibilities of Administrative Professionals and Executive Assistants.

Membership to ASAP is free and includes access to articles and columns focusing on business skills and career development, the popular monthly FastTrack newsletter, and “Learn It in a Minute” videos. Members also have access to hundreds of on-demand training courses and webinars. Additionally, ASAP members have the opportunity to participate in a prestigious certificate program, the Professionals Administrative Certificate of Excellence (PACE).

There are currently more than 45,000+ ASAP members in North America and around the world.

About the Administrative Professionals Conference

The premier annual training event for administrative professionals and executive assistants in the US, the Administrative Professionals Conference (APC) provides essential training to strengthen skills, improve productivity, and increase value to their bosses and organizations. Now in its 22nd year, the APC has helped to advance the careers of thousands of admins from thousands of public, private, and government organizations by equipping them with the knowledge and expertise to adapt to new technologies, increased workloads, evolving roles, and expanding responsibilities.

Categories of training at the APC include: Office & Digital Technologies, Project & Task Management, Management Skills, Leadership, Interpersonal Communications, and Career Development.

About the Executive Assistants’ Summit

The Executive Assistants’ Summit (EA Summit) is an exclusive program developed to meet the unique training needs of Executive Assistants who work directly with senior executives, including the CEO, COO, CIO, CFO, President, Managing Director, EVPs, and SVPs. It takes place concurrently with the annual Administrative Professionals Conference.

The American Society of Administrative Professionals (ASAP) has produced the Administrative Professionals Conference since 2005 and the Executive Assistants’ Summit since 2013. The association and events are managed by global media company Diversified Communications.