

EA/PA

SUMMIT 2016



What does it take to be a **successful EA?**

Three well-recognised EAs share
insights into the tools and
strategies that have helped them
get to where they are today...





It's no secret that the role of the EA is constantly changing. With every new innovation in technology, shift in business strategy or change in the broader economy, the EA of today is required to bend to meet every curve, yet stand straight and firm to push through hurdles.

What's more, the role of the EA is also interwoven with management and leadership tasks. Planning, coordination, project management, effective time management, strategic decision making, resilience and hands-on skills are all part of the role of the EA of the 21st century.

In an age where effective senior management leadership is reflected in the role of the EA, what steps can EAs take to remain versatile, flexible and up to date with new technology and trends?

Ahead of [EA PA Sydney 2016](#), we caught up with three award winning EAs – all who have very different career paths and backgrounds – to find out the strategies and tools they have used to get them to where they are today.

Don't be afraid of the unknown: challenge yourself by trying new things



Denise joined Arup as EA to the CEO/Chair of the Australasia Region in 2004, and looking for an additional challenge, put her hand up to organise their Australasia Region Forum every two years.

The forum brings together 120 of Arup's most talented high level leaders to drive the strategic direction of the company, share knowledge, celebrate success and progress, and to network.

Below, Denise shares her advice for other EAs about the skills and tools that are needed to organise events like a pro and the importance stepping outside of your comfort zone can mean for professional and personal development.



What advice would you give to EAs when it comes to managing events (large or small) effectively?

“Every two years Arup has been hosting what we call the Australasia Regional Forum (ARF) for their top leaders. I have been involved in organising the forum since I started as EA to the CEO at Arup and I’m now coming up to organising my seventh forum.

The advice I would give to EAs when it comes to managing an event successfully, would be to start by building a core team with the right skills. Give your team members accountability and responsibility so they are proud to be part of the team and want the event to succeed as much as you do.

The next step would be to divide the event into smaller projects for your team and let team members choose which project they would like to work on. This provides autonomy for your team and also allows you to make joint decisions as a team.

If things aren’t going in the right direction, influence and diplomacy is essential to steer your team back to where you and the management team would like them to be. I can’t emphasise enough the importance of a strong, committed and happy team when it comes to organising events.

Every ARF I have organised since 2004 has had a ‘wow factor’ component, each which have come out of ideas tossed around by the team. It is great to see admin coming up with great ideas that blow leaders away.”

What are some of the major lessons you’ve learned throughout your journey so far?

“I’ve learned a great deal about human nature and I’ve developed many people and influencing skills. I’ve learned a lot about how I work best under pressure and how to push through the really hard yard.

I’ve learned the importance of being honest with my team about how hard the process is going to be that it is not all going to be all fun and involves hard work.

In the weeks before the ARFs it is not unusual for me to work a 68 hour week. At our Singapore ARF in May 2015, I worked a 98.5 hour week – which was tough. You need to make sure you have the ability to keep going until you walk back into the front door of your own home. For me, adrenalin is the key to helping me achieve this, as well as loving what I do.”



What types of leadership skills are required to excel above and beyond the role of an EA?

“Being a great EA is about relationships. It’s more important than anything else. Leaders lead people, but if you don’t build good relationships with people, they won’t follow you. I believe a truly good leader doesn’t drive people and doesn’t get them to follow, they walk with them along the journey.

My boss and I have built a great relationship to a point of trust where we can say whatever we need to without fear or favour and that is a powerful place to be. For me, that is the thing that has allowed me to excel in what I do: relationships with people.

When I’m finding things really tough, I have a little mantra I have used for many years. I say to myself: get over it and get on with it. To me, this mantra is something that keeps me going, keeps me focused and pulls me out of those times when I think I can’t do something or I feel like giving up.”

Build your own network to increase your influence



Tania joined ASFA in September 2015 as Executive Assistant to the CEO. Prior to this role, Tania worked at Arup for approximately six years as Personal Assistant to the Australasia Region CFO and Company Secretary.

Tania has over 13 years’ experience working as an Executive / Personal Assistant to some high level Executives within some globally recognised organisations.

Below, Tania provides insight into some of the biggest challenges she has faced in the role of EA throughout her career to date and the strategies she has used to overcome these challenges, with a particular focus on how to go about finding a mentor to help you evolve in your role.



What are some of the biggest challenges you've faced in your experience as an EA?

"The first would be working with different managers who each have different management styles. There is a lot of flexibility required around working with different people because not everyone is the same.

The other challenge would be helping people understand the value an EA can provide, because the role has changed so much in the last decade or so and getting that value across to people can be difficult at times."

What tips can you give to EAs to help them keep up with the changing role of an EA?

"Willingness to learn is a big thing. If you're not willing to be flexible, then it is difficult to keep up with change. Networking is another important tool for any EA – both internally and externally.

I think a lot of people think it is purely the external networking that is important, but within any organisation building an internal network with colleagues is extremely important.

For me, it has also been invaluable to find a mentor. A lot of the time the work EAs do can be quite isolating and depending on the size of the organisation, it is not always possible to have a person internally that you can go to and run things past and know that things will be kept confidential.

Getting tips and ideas from a mentor as to what is happening in the market and what other EAs and PAs are doing helps as well."

How can EAs actually go about finding a mentor?

"In my previous role I actually had two mentors. One was a colleague internally (she was our EA to our CEO) and I really admired what she had done and what she had achieved in her career and that's why I chose her.



In regard to my external mentor – who is still my mentor – I met her at an external networking event and after we started talking, I was really inspired by her journey in her career so I asked her to mentor me.

Having spoken to a lot of EAs and PAs out there, I know sometimes it is difficult to approach someone and ask them to be your mentor. But a lot of the time the person will feel really honored that you have asked and most people are very willing to share their experience and knowledge.”

What skills have been most important so far throughout your career to get you to where you are today?

“Firstly, my willingness to learn. I am quite passionate about EA/PA roles and I also care a lot about where I’m working, regardless of the industry. You can always learn from everything that you do. This is not just a job for me; it is a career which I am passionate about.

The ability to get on with people at every level of the business is very important and great communication, in particular with your boss, is essential.”

Remaining resilient throughout career change



Nic is currently the Personal Assistant to the General Manager, Brand & Marketing and General Manager, Distribution & E-Commerce and is responsible for providing the highest level of administrative and personal support enabling the senior leaders to focus on business growth, developing relationships and positioning the team for success.

Over his 6 years in aviation Nic has been part of the frontline team as a Flight Attendant before moving to head office where he has supported members of the senior leadership team for the past 18 months.



Most recently, Nic was Runner Up in the 2015 Executive PA Magazine Awards in the category 'Up and Coming PA of the Year'.

Below, Nic explores the key steps he took to progress in his career and how he utilised new and existing skills to adapt to a new role.

Can you provide a brief overview of your career to date?

"I began my career as a flight attendant with Virgin in 2010. Previous to working as a flight attendant, I worked in business administration where I completed a Business Services Scholarship, but despite this, my first job was in retail management.

My role as a flight attendant was frontline and I loved it. I worked in this role for about four and a half years until I had an injury at work which made me reassess my career options because I could no longer fly.

I loved the company I worked for, so I started looking for other jobs internally at Virgin Australia that might suit me. Based on my business administration scholarship, I had the opportunity to take on a developmental opportunity in our Head Office. When I was in the Head Office I was working with the Chief Customer Officer and his EA who I shadowed and learned a lot from. It really gave me the opportunity to realise that my skills from flying were very well translated into working in Head Office in being organised, having effective communication skills and working to strict deadlines. The opportunity then came up to support two General Managers – so I applied, they took a leap of faith on me and I have been in the role ever since."

What skills have you learned throughout your career that have been most important to get you to where you are today?

"A lot of my skills have been transferable through the different roles I've had, whether it is retail management, flying or working in the office. An EA requires the ability to adapt, to be self-motivated and demonstrate flexibility when working in diverse and ever changing team structures.

One skill that has been most important has been the ability to develop dynamic relationships. This skill was key as a flight attendant – whether it was with hundreds of different passengers or fellow work colleagues who I may have only worked with once, we still needed to work cohesively together. This skill translates into the role of an EA because Executives and their EAs need to have a harmonious rapport with each other based on trust and respect, given the close working relationship that comes with the job."



When transitioning into the role of EA, what strategies did you use to do this effectively?

“It was a matter of diving in head first and taking on any challenge that was presented to me with enthusiasm. Working hard and being committed to doing a good job was also important which made it easier. But it was definitely the relationship I built with my Executives that was key to how I’ve been successful in my role. For example, before I landed the role as EA, I had been working alongside the Executive’s and GM’s, so we had already built that relationship which I think made the transition easier.

I think that learning from others and the other EA I was shadowing was important, as well as being able to interpret the needs of executives and doing the best to support them. My understanding of the importance and nature of our business has also allowed me to assist my Executives with their conflicting priorities and on occasion without their guidance.”

What are some of the biggest challenges you’ve faced in your career to date as an EA? How have you addressed or overcome these challenges?

“Our business operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year and I think the exciting thing is that you can’t predict everything. There are challenges that arise day to day but they’re not like the day before. You have to be prepared to be a leader in responding to those changes and challenges. I think this is where I have been able to develop resilience, which has helped me to rise to challenges in this area of the business. No matter what the outcomes, I learn from these and analyse how or why it happened and how to make it better.

The role of an EA is also challenging in the sense that it is not just a 9-5, Monday to Friday job anymore. The role sometimes requires you to work outside hours and if you are comfortable with that you set manageable expectations with your Executive.

But to cope with these hours you need to have support in your personal life too. In my case, my partner is a Flight Attendant, so he understands that sometimes I may need to work odd hours. It is important to have support from others to help you manage the work/life balance or someone who you can bounce ideas off who is not always your Executive. On the flip side, it is imperative that you have a close partnership with your Executive so you can support each other both professionally and personally.”



If you're interested in learning more about the skills and strategies needed to excel and evolve in your role, join Nic, Tania and Denise at EA PA Sydney 2016.

For more information visit www.eapa.com.au or call +61 2 9229 1000 or email enquire@iqpc.com.au



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