

Virtual Assistants ... PAs, EAs, AAs or Secretaries?

What is the difference between a Personal Assistant, an Executive Assistant, an Admin Assistant and a Secretary? I thought I knew – after all, I’ve been using these terms for years – but it’s not altogether clear. I’ve tried asking my PA to explain. She says “it’s easy” and then I get progressively more confused as she runs through the details.

Perhaps you have the same problem ... or, perhaps it’s just me?

Anyway, I decided to get to the bottom of it. I’ve Googled it, asked PAs and secretaries and distilled their explanations down to a few lines. It may seem obvious reading it, but having a comparison helps.



Virtual Assistant (VA)

The answer, I now believe, starts with understanding the term Virtual Assistant. It’s a relatively new term, invented to describe someone who can assist you with a multitude of administrative tasks remotely – via the internet – using information and communication technology.

These “administrative tasks” in fact cover all of the possible tasks that any PA, EA or AA might undertake, except the ones that require a physical presence such as greeting visitors and providing refreshments. It’s a convenient umbrella term, no more than that.

We also hear specific terms such as Virtual PA and Remote Secretary. These are just another way to describe the PA and Secretary roles that are being executed via the internet. In trying to be more descriptive, these terms can lead people to believe something else is happening, but it’s not, it’s just describing a PA or a Secretary at the end of the day.

So, if you want to know what a VA actually does – or potentially can do – you have to understand their “real role” capabilities ... are they a PA, EA, AA or Secretary?

Personal Assistant (PA)

PAs have been around since the industrial revolution, as a backbone of British industry, keeping business owners, executive and managers operating as efficiently and effectively as possible.

The primary role of a PA is to manage their bosses’ time. They will manage their diary, schedule their day, screen incoming calls and filter their email, generally helping them to juggle the demands of a busy job. They will also do their typing and take care of organising meetings and events, booking travel and accommodation, and managing their itinerary for overseas trips.

In smaller businesses, a PA to the Owner will often perform “front office” duties for the business, dealing with customers and suppliers. They may also act on behalf of their boss and make decisions within certain boundaries, taking on some limited managerial responsibilities.



Executive Assistant (EA)

The PA role has developed and expanded over recent years. Large firms used to appoint their high flyers work as PA to the Chief Executive to gain experience of running the company, but now we see this more frequently in smaller firms. These PAs are referred to as Executive Assistants.

EAs will carry out most of the tasks of a traditional PA, since their primary duties are still to manage their bosses' time, to help them to be as efficient and effective as possible. However, an EA has greater responsibilities than a PA, and will have managerial or executive status.

The EA will often act on behalf of their boss, helping them to carry out his/her duties. They may act as proxy in their bosses' absence, standing in for them at meetings or sending communications on their behalf. They may also attend management meetings, brief junior managers and provide "executive input" to projects, negotiations, recruitment and other important business matters.

Secretary

A Secretary generally operates at a lower level than a PA, with less responsibility and status. They may support an individual manager or a group of managers, with a similar aim to help them to be more effective, but the relationship will be less personal, the role less "front office" and the tasks more administrative. A Secretary is often more of a "back office" support role.

The primary role of a Secretary can vary. If the job focus is supporting a manager, then they may manage their diary, book appointments and organise travel just like a PA. However, if it's about providing administrative support then they may spend most of their time typing documents and general correspondence, preparing spreadsheets, reports and presentations.

Administrative Assistant (AA)

An Admin Assistant role is not about providing personal support. The job focus will be on business process admin and general office admin – all "back office" work. There may be some overlap with the administrative side of secretarial work, but it will be the more routine and mundane aspects.

The tasks that an AA will perform will vary depending on the department they work in. If they are supporting Sales they may type quotations, process orders or prepare sale reports. If they are in Purchasing they may place orders, deal with supplier queries or prepare reports. General office tasks might include data entry, printing, mailing, scanning, copying and filing.

I hope this helps your understanding of Virtual Assistants, it has mine!

If you would like to find out more about Office Lifeline's [Virtual PA](#) or [Admin Services](#), you can contact me on 01926 659 120 or via email at denis@office-lifeline.co.uk.

About the author

Denis Pelych is a professional Management Consultant specialising in e-business technology and practice. He spent many years with IBM Consulting Group and went on to establish [The National B2B Centre](#) at Warwick University. He is now a Director of [Viretec Consulting](#) and [Virtual HQ Solutions](#), and both businesses help people to exploit IT and the internet to the full.

