

# Top 7 Qualities of the Ideal Executive Assistant

## Skills go beyond administrative BY MICHELE MEYER

**C**onfidant. Maverick. Gatekeeper. Miracle worker. When looking for an executive assistant, a healthcare exec lacks room—or time—for error. You need someone who'll weed out extraneous information and callers—without alienating suitors.

So how do you hire the best?

"During job interviews, ask what they're passionate about, career-wise and personally. Ask what changes they expect in the healthcare industry and what career setbacks they've had and how they coped," says Paula J. Caproni, PhD, author of "The Science of Success."

Caproni and other top recruiters and healthcare execs suggest seven traits needed in an executive assistant (EA):

### 1 **Spidey senses—seeing the big picture and anticipating the future—while working without supervision.**

Most likely, you're slammed with meetings. Great EAs take initiative, spotting issues before they arise and making recommendations, says Steve Courter, MBA, former CEO and current lecturer in management at The University of Texas at Austin McCombs School of Business. Their good grasp of your business comes from learning from coworkers at all levels.

**2 Pulling off the impossible.** Among their superhero powers, top assistants simply get it done. That requires resourcefulness, creativity, confidence, a vast and varied network, and true grit, says Caproni, also a lecturer at Michigan University's Ross School of Business in Ann Arbor. "People return their calls."

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AUTHOR

Former Aetna exec Paul Martino, now chief strategy officer and co-founder of VillageMD in Chicago, took a leap in choosing Tina Ciesielski, then general manager at an Elmhurst, Illinois, restaurant. "I was struck how customer-focused she was. That mattered more than if she was an Excel jockey."

When colleagues resisted hiring someone outside the healthcare industry, he gave her a tall task to accomplish before final approval: find office space for their fledgling firm. "She not only returned with a Power Point presentation of her top three choices, but she'd pre-negotiated leases, and recommended one—close to a metro stop, something I hadn't even considered."

Since promoted to office manager, she greets anybody who rings the doorbell, Martino says. "No matter what I request, she knows someone who can deliver it."

### 3 **Operating (almost) at light speed, with the agility to change gears easily.**

"Our world is very fast-paced, and what might have been important yesterday may not be vital today," says Suzanne Speak, SHRM-SCP, a Houston-based senior HR executive. "You need a multitasker who stays calm under pressure, no matter the deadline or complexity of the task."

### 4 **Having the people skills to handle big egos and disgruntled customers deftly.**

Your EA not only determines who is worth your time and what should land in your email or on your desk, but also has the diplomacy to do so without offending executives, customers, physicians, health plan partners, or company associates, Martino says.

In the healthcare industry, above all, your assistant needs to be able to discuss complex concepts with colleagues while simplifying mediacalese for customers, he says.

**5 Willingness to learn, grow, and doggedly pursue knowledge.**

Look for someone who demonstrates that hard work, not just innate talent, drives their career.

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— SUZANNE SPEAK, SHRM-SCP, A HOUSTON-BASED SENIOR HR EXECUTIVE

Speak recognized curiosity and an eagerness to learn in the EA she hired four years ago. “That mattered more to me than a background in healthcare,” she says. In the four years since, she’s taken the initiative to learn the business and become a Certified Administrative Professional (CAP) on her own time.

**6 Keeping a secret.** Discretion and trust are vital in the healthcare setting, says Dan Ryan, a Fellow of the American College of Healthcare Executives (FACHE) and president and CEO of Ryan Search in Franklin, Tennessee. “You don’t want to violate HIPAA rules, nor can you



risk competitors learning your unannounced plans.”

A trusted liaison also knows your weaknesses and fills those gaps—while keeping them confidential.

**7 Fitting in among C Level execs.**

EAs need to excel at written, verbal, and nonverbal communication, including how they present

themselves, make eye contact, and address others, Ryan says. “They cannot make mistakes, grammatical errors, or anything else that reflects negatively on the organization.”

And when they do err, the right hire informs you promptly and in full. ■

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