

Move on up to HR

In smaller organisations, where there is no dedicated human resources function, responsibility for personnel matters all too often falls to the PA. So what HR duties are today's PAs getting involved in? What are the challenges involved? Are they duly rewarded for it? And do they get the training they really need?

We asked our readers what sorts of HR tasks you are taking on and the results revealed enormous variety. Many of you are responsible for areas of admin like holiday requests, timesheets and expenses, while others get involved in the whole remit - employment law, staff selection and recruitment, and staff retention and development. Some of you even got in touch from bigger companies to say that you are finding your role increasingly overlaps with HR.

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Geoff Sims, managing director of Hays Secretarial, points out that a recent winner of the Times Crème PA of the Year award (sponsored by Hays) was Lisa Rogers, who works for an advertising firm of about 70 staff. "Not only is she involved in the recruitment of 50% of them," he says, "but she was recently responsible for designing a management development programme with outside suppliers. What's more, she delivered this training programme. Her role was cradle to grave in terms of HR."

The good news is that most of you relish the stimulation that HR adds to your role. "I'm learning new skills and developing into another role as there is now

another PA in the office, so I have PA support myself - although I still retain my executive assistant duties," said one of you. "It's good as it's giving me a much broader work experience than most PAs would have," voiced another.

There are challenges, however. One of you said, "It means that I'm often aware of something negative and am unable to share it with anyone else." Meanwhile, another PA reported a common objection, "I have been given more and more HR duties, but I don't get paid any more."

One of you explained, "Mine is the sort of company where you're expected to take on whatever tasks are given to you and to do them at a high level, and then receive a fairly standard pay rise each year. There's no structure which allows for working towards a particular pay increment by taking on new duties."

Another said, "My bosses argue that HR is an integral part of my role and that it was listed on the original job description. That's why they say they won't pay me more."

"It's true that we do see HR mentioned in more and more job descriptions for PA roles," says Janine Parry, head of marketing for Reed Employment. "But in other cases, PAs decide to take on HR duties of their own accord. It makes them a better resource."

Not surprisingly, there has been a surge of interest among PAs for courses that teach the basics - or more - regarding HR. These courses are run by organisations like the Chartered Institute of Personnel and

More and more PAs are taking on HR duties. Is this a positive illustration of how they are becoming increasingly recognised for their wide ranging skills and competencies or it is leaving them overworked and underpaid? Or both? Kate Hilpern reports

Development (CIPD) - the CIPD Certificate in Personnel Practices being one such example. But don't expect your bosses to offer it to you on a plate. "I wasn't offered it, but requested it," was a typical response from our readers about an HR training course. But without fail, those of you who had done one were pleased you had.

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One of you pointed out that you might need to start off small: "I went on a brief two-day course but I now have approval from the board to train fully and gain an HR qualification which I will start in the new year." Vanessa Robinson, manager in research and policy at the CIPD isn't surprised. "For many, a short course will be the starting point to go onto a more professional HR qualification."

She adds, "There are a lot more courses than many PAs realise which enable you to ensure you have the right skills and competencies to carry out HR duties. PAs tell us they feel much more confident having done such a course."

Parry concludes that increasing your repertoire of skills and responsibilities is never a bad thing, although you must be careful not to become overloaded with work as a result of your new-found talents.

There are other risks too. If you are in charge of keeping up with employment law, for example, be warned that it is changing rapidly at national and, more frequently, at European level. Alyson Pellowe,

founder of HR consultancy People Vision, who has trained over 600 PAs in how to take on HR duties, advises PAs to swot up on employment legislation as quickly as possible. "For example, employees are entitled to receive the minimum wage plus four weeks' paid holiday a year and must receive itemised pay statements - all of which should be safeguarded against the employer's insolvency. The notice period of any employee also laid down in law, as are the requirements for redundancy pay and the right time off to look for another job in a redundancy situation."

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Equal opportunities legislation is also far-reaching. "In addition to the recent ruling on age, employees cannot be discriminated against on the grounds of gender, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation, disability or pregnancy. And pregnancy itself attracts certain other rules and regulations - maternity leave and pay, paternity leave and pay, and parental leave. Employees are also entitled to leave in other situations, including jury service or other public obligations."

These are just a few examples, she stresses. You don't need to know every intricacy of every employment law, but if legislation comes under your remit of HR duties, you do need to be aware of areas in which the law applies to prevent you getting into a potentially difficult or expensive situation.

Pellowe adds that recruitment can also pose challenges for PAs. "Recruitment is often a hand-to-mouth occupation. When a vacancy arises it is filled as soon as possible. But ideally, you should take a more strategic approach and align recruitment with the overall business goals, to make sure you have the right people in place to deliver your long-term plans."

The average direct cost of replacing a member of staff is estimated at £2,500. The indirect costs, including the time spent recruiting, inducting and training add considerably to the bill, says Pellowe. "So it's essential that the selection decision is the right one."

When it comes to interviews, she stresses, it's not just the candidates that need to put a lot of time and effort into preparing.

Despite the challenges and risks involved in adding HR to your to-do list, however, those that embark on their wider role in an informed, educated, updated and dedicated way have the enormous satisfaction of significantly reducing an organisation's risk and enhancing its value.



TOP TIPS FOR PAS FACING HUMAN RESOURCES RESPONSIBILITIES:

Be prepared:

As one of the friendliest faces in the office it's not surprising that people will ask you for HR advice. Become a walking company handbook and familiarise yourself with common procedures. Establish a good relationship with the HR team so you know who to pass on any specific queries to.

Manage agencies well:

In smaller companies HR staff can be a bit thin on the ground, and you might find yourself taking on recruitment responsibilities. Keep agencies in line by issuing a clear brief. Tell them how many CVs you want, when you want them and the budget available.

Write it down:

Creating an information booklet is invaluable to new starters. But don't just list vital health and safety procedures and disciplinary policies; include where to send expense forms and useful internal phone extensions. Recommending places for lunch is a great friendly touch.

Use your diary skills:

Set up appraisals and training well in advance. And don't be afraid of being firm with the boss - discourage last minute time changes as you will be the one dealing with a disgruntled employee who's been keeping the time free for weeks.

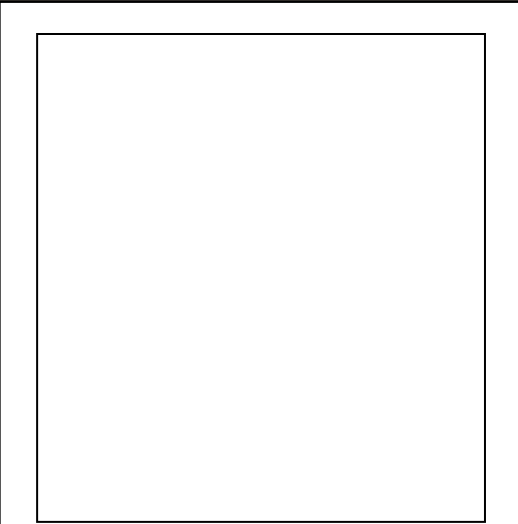
Add to your reading material:

Flick through a HR magazine once a week and take on board any news - particularly any new law being passed that might affect those who come to you for advice.

Access help when you need it:

There are a growing number of helplines that PAs can call on for answers to specific questions - for example legal helplines run by employment lawyers.

Alyson Pellowe, founder of HR consultancy People Vision



Caroline Chislett started out working as a PA for Protocol Education but has ended up doing a number of HR duties.

"I was initially employed as PA to the chief executive. I was asked to add HR duties to my role when it became clear that some of the 160 staff were taking advantage of the fact that our company wasn't recording when staff took time off sick or went on holiday. I was asked to set up a system, which I did using spreadsheets. I now send over a form to each line manager every week and they send it back listing the number of staff who have had time off and why. Absence has decreased since then because it is monitored.

I enjoy the extra challenge this HR role brings to my job. I also like the fact that it's had a tangible effect on company performance. But it does take up a lot of my time as there are 16 UK offices and six overseas offices. That's a lot of managers, many of whom I have to constantly chase for forms. My other gripe is that I'd like to be recognised for what I do - not necessarily paid more, but a thank you can go a long way."

