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Image of Ideal Personal Assistant in Flux

By Lena Smirnova

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A little older, potentially less attractive and possibly male. This functional, though less glamorous, profile of the personal assistant of the future was presented to a slew of perfectly coiffed and well-dressed women at the Personal Assistant Congress, held by The Moscow Times Conferences on Tuesday.

Instead of being merely secretaries who can speak another language and type quickly, next-generation personal assistants are also expected to become industry experts and occasionally offer business advice to their bosses, said Olga Yelina, development director at Adecco Group Russia.

"This is a person who must not only provide administrative support to the manager and complete his personal errands but also someone who is expected to tune in to the business processes of the company and support some business functions of the manager," Yelina said.

The average age of a personal assistant is increasing from the 20- to 25-year-old range

to between 28 and 35 years old. This person tends to have a more stable personal life and is open to long-term work commitments.

One of the key reasons why this revised profile is valued is that managers want to decrease the turnover of people who know corporate secrets and personal details about them.

Expat managers may have an especially hard time trusting their assistants because of the myths about Russian sneakiness, said Alina Yashukhina, personal assistant to the board chairman of Zurich Insurance Group.

"Expats in particular think that Russians are hard to understand. They don't speak our language. They think that someone is always trying to cheat them," Yashukhina said.

Svetlana Dyachkova, personal assistant to the board chairman of business management firm Novard, interviewed five shareholders and found that the security of commercial information was one of their top concerns when they hired new staff. The group has already had two instances of disclosure of commercial secrets by workers, both accidentally and intentionally.

But Dyachkova said such cases rarely involve personal assistants. Not by coincidence, one of her presentation slides showed a menacing, sword-bearing bride from the movie "Kill Bill." Though she wasn't wearing a yellow motorcycle suit, Dyachkova insisted that she would not relay any of the boss's secrets even for a box of chocolate.

"Personal assistants are usually suspected [in these cases] because there is this myth that this is a person who knows everything, that it's a frivolous profession. A young woman is sitting, painting her nails and can blurt out anything," Dyachkova said. "But when people come face to face with a personal assistant, they understand that this is a real wall."

Although personal assistants are expected to become more business-oriented, that does not mean they will be freed from their traditional responsibilities: putting out fires at the office and catering to their bosses' whims.

Yekatrina Kostenko, an executive assistant at Procter & Gamble, recalled the time she had to rummage in the lost-and-found at a dry cleaner to find her boss' missing tuxedo belt. Another time, she had to dispatch a courier from Domodedovo Airport to the hotel room where her boss had forgotteb his passport.

Kostenko said that over the years on the job she had learned to keep a "magic box" of urgent items, including pantyhose, instant glue, an umbrella, nail polish remover, thread and a shoe sponge. And this approach is something every executive assistant can benefit from, she said.

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