



ON THE CLOCK

# Paying \$400,000 for an Executive Assistant? Do-It-All Aides Are Pricier Than Ever

Wealthy executives are shelling out six figures for sophisticated aides smart enough to handle complicated tasks yet humble enough to take on tedious ones

ELIZABETH RENSTROM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



*By Callum Borchers*

August 4, 2022

In the penthouse of society, there is a crisis: no one to charter the jet, too few aides with the versatility to navigate earnings reports along with the wine lists and, for heaven's sake, who is going to scoop the Papillon poop?

The labor shortage afflicting many businesses is also disrupting the affairs of ultra-high-net-worth individuals for whom the old lament—"good help is hard to find"—has seldom been so true. In search of executive assistants equally adept at preparing for board meetings and managing housekeepers and chauffeurs, many are asking staffing services to recruit for a loftier title: chief of staff.

It is a job that demands a rare combination of competence and humility. One agency told me about placing someone who holds a Ph.D. in a role that involves high-level administrative work—and fetching coffee. The going rate for such overqualified aides is about \$200,000 a year in major cities such as New York and Los Angeles, staffing specialists say; those with records of making the busiest lives simpler can command as much as \$300,000 or even \$400,000 to meet their bosses' every need.

“They’re willing to pay those salaries, but it’s really all about them,” says **Teresa Leigh**, whose firm scouts top-tier assistants for the über-wealthy.

With great pay comes great sacrifice. Some hires quit within 72 hours, **Ms. Leigh** says, owing to the unpredictable schedule, endless to-do list, rigorous travel and sense of loneliness that can set in when someone is close to, but distinctly separate from, an elite class of people.

**Ms. Leigh** says she tries to get employers to agree to limits on what the people she places can be asked to do. Serving martinis like a butler or cleaning dog doo off a roof deck—real requests from clients, she says—fall outside a chief of staff’s duties, in her view. Just about anything else is fair game.

Several factors combine to create a frantic market in which do-it-all assistants are extra pricey, and ripe for poaching, according to those who do these jobs or earn commissions (sometimes 30% or 40% of an aide’s salary) by filling them.

Certain secretarial tasks once performed by executive assistants, like answering phones and shuffling papers, can be automated or digitized. That has led to a steep drop in the numbers of these positions, but those that remain are increasingly advanced, says Michelle Reisdorf, a Chicago-based district president at the professional staffing firm Robert Half.

Multimillion-dollar earners, always highly mobile, are even less tethered to offices in the Covid age. They want right-hand helpers who can dart from professional to personal matters with ease, and with the utmost discretion. (Nondisclosure agreements are standard.)

Shortly before the pandemic, Alyssa Ahkuoi left an executive-assistant job that included ordering stationery and stocking the office fridge with Diet Dr Pepper, the boss’s favorite. She now works remotely as a senior executive assistant at Upwork, a freelance network, and is free from such menial tasks. She says she feels more like a business partner to her executive, offering input on certain projects, and she outsources shopping to Amazon and Instacart.

Could she ever go back to the occasional tedium of aiding someone in person?



PHOTO: ELIZABETH RENSTROM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“I don’t think so,” says Ms. Ahkuoi, 29.

Finding millennials and Gen Zers to replace aging assistants is proving a challenge.

“I’ve heard younger people say to me, ‘I would never do what you do,’” says Tiffany Maughn, a 51-year-old executive assistant to the chief executive officer of a consulting group. “It’s almost like they don’t understand working in a service capacity for another human being. As long as it’s legal, as long as it’s safe, there’s really never a ‘no.’”



PHOTO: ELIZABETH RENSTROM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Ms. Maughn has aided executives and wealthy families for more than two decades and says she takes pride in making bosses she admires happier and more efficient. She describes a career path that is alternately exhilarating and humbling.

There are yachts and parties and times when she feels like a confidante and senior adviser. There also have been scoldings for spelling errors, 3 a.m. phone calls and hands-and-knees attempts to fix leaky faucets in vacation homes.

She recalls one episode in which a former employer chastised her and two other assistants, each of whom made more than \$150,000 a year, she says, for putting bananas in the refrigerator, instead of on the kitchen counter.

Ms. Maughn says she hopes to retire with her current boss, though she’s often invited to interview for positions that would pay \$200,000, plus a bonus. Becoming a chief of staff—what she describes as “the holy grail title of executive assistants”—could take her earnings to another level.

Yet it is a title without a clear definition or, sometimes, any meaningful difference from the role of an executive assistant.

Well, there is one big difference. Stephen Candland, managing partner of the Private Staff Group, says clients are paying premiums of 45% to 65% over the salaries of executive assistants, which can push a chief of staff’s compensation well above \$300,000.

The label conveys importance, he adds, and is an increasingly popular way to woo candidates with advanced degrees or professional experience in a particular industry.

Marta Baranowska says she was elevated to chief of staff after several years in a recent job but left in search of a new challenge. She would like to try serving European royalty. Living in London for now, she possesses a diplomat's cosmopolitanism (five languages) and ability to be firm yet friendly. ("You should never ask a lady about her age," she replied when I made a standard reporter's inquiry.)

In truth, she's accustomed to answering personal questions while interviewing, such as whether she has children or other family obligations that might divide her attention. The corporate world's human-resources policies don't always apply.

Nevertheless, Ms. Baranowska says it is a good time to be in her line of work.

"I get head hunted a lot, especially this year," she says. "The salary is great, you get to travel the world, and you learn a lot."

Write to Callum Borchers at [callum.borchers@wsj.com](mailto:callum.borchers@wsj.com)  
Copyright ©2022 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.  
Appeared in the August 4, 2022, print edition as '\$400,000 For an Executive Assistant?'

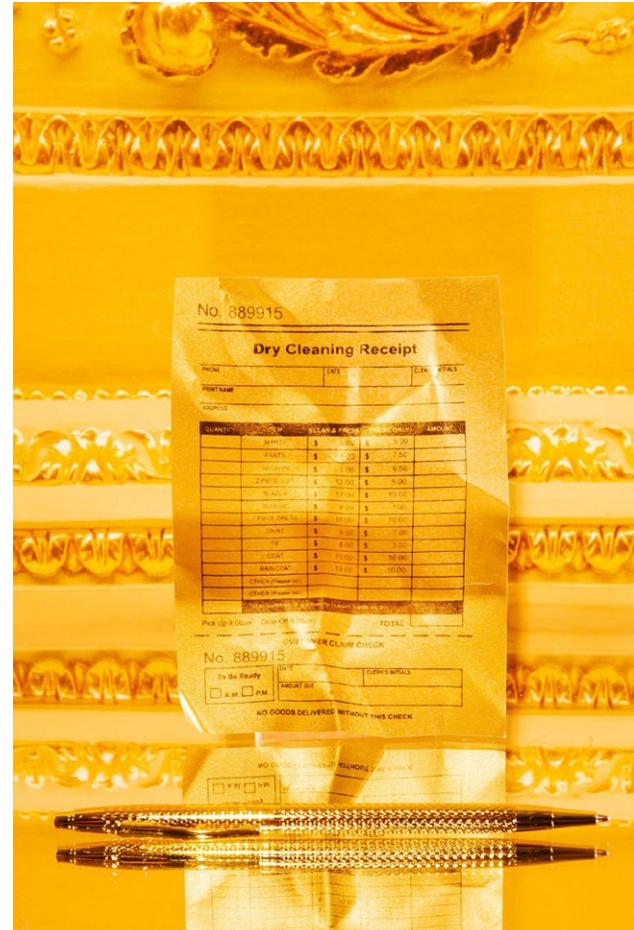


PHOTO: ELIZABETH RENSTROM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL