

Is it OK to handle personal arrangements for boss?

Question: We have several partners in our law firm who constantly ask administrative staff to do personal things, like shop online, wrap gifts, make personal travel arrangements, print personal photos, etc. As the administrative manager, I find this offensive.

Partners feel that admins should do whatever they're asked, since the partners have to stay 'billable.' I think it's disrespectful and promotes a 'master/slave' mentality.

Your opinions are appreciated. -- *Office Manager, West Palm Beach*

Comments

I believe as an Admin you should want to help in any way possible to elevate the mundane tasks our executives perform. However, If you are feeling disrespected by the task, you can simply let your boss know you may not have time to complete the extra projects. You can even say it may not be done in time. I have seen this work, the boss then says never mind and does it him or herself. Try it.

Posted by: Admin III | May 26, 2006 at 01:21 PM

As the admin to the President of our Division, I do a fair number of personal tasks to make his life easier. Perhaps it's an attitude thing. When he asks me to take on some personal task, it is always with the expectation that I can/will say no if I don't have time. And he is always very appreciative of the extra effort. As a result, I never resent his asking and almost never say no. My approach has always been that it's my job to make his life as free of paperwork and meaningless busy work as I can. Anything that I can do to free his time for more important tasks is time well spent. As a result, he knows how important I am to his success and rewards me accordingly.

Posted by: CJ | May 26, 2006 at 01:31 PM

It seems to me its an expected thing not a would you mind thing. If you feel you other admin staff would be reprimanded or fired if you don't do the personal things maybe you need to have a joint meeting with all the partners and discuss the situation on what is appropriate and what is not appropriate of the tasks for the admin. I personally don't find I am being put out if the Director asks me to do something on a more personal type note because I know I am appreciated and its helpful to him in the long run.

Posted by: Jo | May 26, 2006 at 01:43 PM

I feel like this is a personal issue with each administrative assistance. If she feels comfortable doing this, it should not be YOUR problem. Many professionals need their assistants to do these personal details for them due to shortage of time. I am sure that attorneys are extremely busy and often run short of time. I would rather work for a person who needs this service because it helps breakup the daily work routine.

My suggestion is: Each administrative assistance discuss with her partner if she/he is comfortable or uncomfortable doing their personal details and work accordingly. You are only the manager and it should not be your decision to make. You may not realize but in busy times managers needs strong assistants who are willing to "assist" them with their personal requests. Perhaps it should be written into the job description.

Anyone who is really uncomfortable or simply does not liking to perform those requests should really look for another job. There are MANY jobs where you are not asked to do personal details.

Posted by: | May 26, 2006 at 01:48 PM

I think CJ has the right idea. Do what you can to make his or her life easier. That will make your life easier in the long run.

When you are shopping online for the boss, take a few minutes and knock some things off your shopping list, too. When you wrap gifts, take it as some paid downtime for your brain. Dropping off mail or dry cleaning? Buy your own stamps and take care of yours at the same time and maybe take care of some nearby errands of your own.

I do understand the "billable" problem. Promotions and bonuses for your boss are based on those billable hours, and minutes here and there spent on these tasks take away from billable minutes.

A boss smart enough to work a nice year-end bonus is probably smart enough to thank you for making it possible.

Posted by: Elba | May 26, 2006 at 01:54 PM

I believe the role of an Admin, no matter at what level, is to "assist". My job is to do whatever I can to make my executive's job easier. If that means doing some personal tasks for him, I don't mind. I respect myself and if I ever felt that anything I was asked to do reflected disrespect to me or took advantage of me on the part of my executive , I would discuss it with him. Sometimes, the level of respect one receives directly correlates to the level of respect one demands.

Posted by: Pat | May 26, 2006 at 01:54 PM

I guess I have a different take on things than the rest of you. I assist the Vice President of a large firm and have never been asked to run a personal errand. Not that I would mind, but this in my opinion is unprofessional. I believe the admin's job is to assist there boss in anyway possible so they can remain billable, not manage there personal affairs. Doesn't make sense? I guess you'll have to remain accommodating, what else can you do?

Posted by: Willing & Able | May 26, 2006 at 02:09 PM

I guess I have a different take on things than the rest of you. I assist the Vice President of a large firm and have never been asked to run a personal errand. Not that I would mind, but this in my opinion is unprofessional. I believe the admin's job is to assist there boss in anyway possible so they can remain billable, not manage there personal affairs. Doesn't make sense? I guess you'll have to remain accommodating, what else can you do?

Posted by: Willing & Able | May 26, 2006 at 02:12 PM

It seems this is an issue about respect - and by giving the admins "personal" tasks the partners are not respecting the fact that they have enough "work-related" tasks already. My boss and I have a simple understanding. In terms of personal favors, if it is not something that he would do for me if I asked, he won't ask me to do it for him (and as the president of our company, I think that goes a long way). As it stands, I have taken care of personal matters for him because I believe in our mutual understanding - but I would never let myself be taken advantage of or be made a "slave".

Posted by: | May 26, 2006 at 02:13 PM

I think that the person asking the original question has some real concerns. I do a great deal of personal things for the person I support, and I don't mind doing them. However, this question raises a very good point. The owners of companies are often surprised by how many personal things are truly being done by administrative assistants. And many don't know the nature of these requests. Higher ups are sometimes not aware of this level of support. For example, if the assistant is supporting his/her person's entire household: daughters, sons, spouses -- and 90% of their time is consumed by personal errands and tasks (and this DOES happen, believe me!) then how much value is the *COMPANY* getting? Is that employee an employee of the company OR the person they support? How does one check abuses? Since I reside in both camps: Administrative and Management, I can see both sides of the coin. If I owned my own company, I'd have some concerns about abuses. I think there should be some safeguards, and this manager's concerns may be key to checking abuses.

Posted by: Joy | May 26, 2006 at 02:17 PM

I must say the only person I really agree with here is the writer and "Willing & Able". I do not think being asked to do personal tasks is professional on any level. What makes me laugh is most likely the person you're doing the personal task for isn't the one footing the bill.. is he? Your work time is not his dime and I totally don't agree with most people that answered here. I know the job of the Admin Asst is to assist, but not to print photos - who's paying for the ink? And if you as sent to drop off dry cleaning - are you getting reimbursed for mileage? Again, that doesn't come out of your bosses pocket does it. I think if these things came to light by the owners of the company, the asker may be the one looking for a new job in the end.

I totally agree with the writer of this problem - it does promote a 'master/slave' mentality.

Posted by: ARE YOU ALL CRAZY HERE? | May 26, 2006 at 02:35 PM

AMEN SISTER!!!! I have been working at a new job as an "Executive Admin." I thought I would be gaining new skills that would look good on a resume. Instead, I am asked to do such things as: pay personal medical bills, polish/clean an exec's office, and make coffee. I have done personal things for bosses in the past, but that was the exception, not the daily rule. It was a request not an expectation. After all, this is company time and I

believe it should be spent on company business. I got hired to be an admin., an assistant in the office. I agree it is unprofessional that they expect that kind of assistance. I applaud you that you see it as servitude. The admins. under you are lucky that they have someone looking out for them. Bottom line, it's company time so they should be working on company business. If they have free time and don't mind, what the heck.

Posted by: Mary | May 26, 2006 at 02:36 PM

This is tricky to answer. If it were me and it was the owner asking me to do personal errands and he was always thankful that I would go out of my way-- then I would be happy to do the errand. He is the one writing my paycheck. But in large companies I don't know how fair it is (not to you) but the company itself. If you added up all the errands and the time it took away from work it could get expensive. But the flip side is do these executives work long hours and dedicate so much of their time to the company that they do not have time to run their own errands? Then it may be a fair swap because I am assuming they are salary. So I guess if it were me I would talk to your supervisor so she can put it all in perspective for you, whether it is right or wrong.

Posted by: Jocelyn | May 26, 2006 at 03:12 PM

I as the assistant to the president of our company and I do perform some personal tasks for him but he is always appreciative. He makes sure that these tasks never take away from getting my other work done. He always accommodates me in some manner if needed. I personally enjoy the change of pace, sometimes getting out of the office to take a walk somewhere, etc. I think these tasks fall under the ever popular "other tasks as assigned" which appears on most of our job descriptions. My take on this has always been that "my job is to make his job easier". I am older and think that some of the younger folks coming into this profession see it differently. For me it is all about the respect my boss gives me and he pays me well for what I do.

Posted by: Linda | May 26, 2006 at 03:15 PM

In my experience the ones that have made the most requests that I do personal stuff for them are the WORST PRODUCERS. The two biggest offenders I can think of off the top of my head are guys who didn't have "time" to do mundane personal business but they had time to: sleep in the office, walk around and socialize, come in to work late and leave early, etc. I have done personal stuff for bosses in the past and didn't mind because generally they would give it to me when I had nothing else to do. But when they hand you their personal bills to pay (a job I hate doing for myself) while you can hear them snoring in their office, that is, in my opinion, chauvinistic arrogance and abuse of their position. It should not be tolerated.

Posted by: I can't believe the responses! | May 26, 2006 at 03:57 PM

I was asked to do a personal favor today and order a boss lunch and pick it up, which is downstairs. I didn't mind doing that because she not break in her day. She has been here probably 5 years and has never asked. She also asked me to do a personal favor and with the respect that this will not be the norm then I don't mind. Others have asked as well but again not the norm. As long as they say it is personal and know it is over and above my job description then I don't mind.

I think if it was the norm I would have a problem. As stated before it is the company that is paying you and I am sure the company does not want to pay for you running someones errands.

Posted by: Kenda | May 26, 2006 at 04:43 PM

When it comes down to it administrative assistants are, for the most part, taken advantage of and often not given the respect they deserve. I think most people will agree with me when I say that admins are what keep the office running smoothly. I have come to the realization that most bosses don't know how to do anything on their own and often "think" they are sooo busy. Which brings me to the task of doing personal things. My boss has asked me to print pictures from his personal camera, come to find out he doesn't know how to do it. Asked me to run out and pick up dry cleaning, because he feels he is too busy to do mundane tasks. All in all your bosses probably feel that an administrative assistant is a fancy title for personal assistant. I don't agree with it, but I'm sure it will be the same where ever you go.

Posted by: Kristen | May 26, 2006 at 05:19 PM

I also agree with Willing & Able. I do not think it's an admin's job to handle an executive's personal business those people are called personal assistants and they make about \$45/hr and receive unbelievable benefits. I've supported an exec and he's never asked me to run personal errands for him. If the job description calls for you to do personal things then no problem, but the company pays for you to assist with company related issues. Personal issues should be completed on his time not the company's. Are you allowed to run your personal errands on company time? Unless the company has included this in the job description and is paying you for it, then I say this is unprofessional and should not be expected. Also, ask the admins who are doing it. They maybe doing it because they want to if so, then let sleeping dogs lie. I wouldn't start anything. If they don't like it, talk to HR, get the job description, if it doesn't call for it then, I say talk to the partners and explain that the admins job is to support them in company related issues only. Personal issues should be their not the admins. Why should they be the only ones who go home to no errands?

Posted by: tee | May 30, 2006 at 09:52 AM

Oh my goodness! That's what I love about my job - is the break in monotony of my regular duties! I love to take care of personal business. But I would think it rather strange if I were asked to choose personal items i.e. greeting cards, clothes, etc. That should be their "taste", not mine. Anything to free my boss so he/she has more time to take care of business, including watering plants, getting lunch, taking to airport - I am willing to do as long as it is not my gas or money. I consider myself not just an Executive Secretary but also Personal Assistant. When my boss is a success, I am a success. And the boss I have now let's me know how much I am appreciated for all I do.

Posted by: Julie | May 30, 2006 at 11:04 AM

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Posted by: Julie | May 30, 2006 at 11:04 AM

I guess you and others who wrote have to decide whether you are administrative assistants who help your boss do his/her work or personal assistants who do their personal errands. Your job should be to support the boss in his/her work and not to be a "servant". I bet your billable hours boss makes at least a 6-figure income and you don't make even half. He/she can afford to have a personal assistant on their own dime. Why should you drive boss to airport when they can call a shuttle service & have it reimbursed on their expense account? Why should you select gift for spouse? The occasional request, like getting lunch for the boss is OK, the rest is not. When the boss is a success, I'm a success? Do you really want to live vicariously through the boss instead of having your own success?

Posted by: Anon | May 30, 2006 at 04:11 PM

Before work, after work, and weekends. That's when I do my personal errands and that's when any working American should do their errands, executive or janitor. If you're doing personal errands for your boss during work time then there is obviously not enough work of your own to do. You can talk yourselves into feeling good about freeing up your boss' time, but it's not right to do these things on company time. Back to the original problem and some of the suggestions, where do you draw the line of what's acceptable and what's not acceptable? Work should be done at work and personal items should be done on personal time. Just my opinion.

Posted by: I can't believe these responses, either... | May 30, 2006 at 04:18 PM

It took a while to read through all of these posts, but I am amazed that until the last one, NO ONE said that they were offended by the use of company time to do personal business. I think we all squeeze in a few personal things here and there, but I think it is odd that the personal chores would be handed over to an employee on company time.

No wonder lawyers get paid so much. They use billable time to give personal tasks to their staff. Such a bad example.

Posted by: Jodi | May 31, 2006 at 11:14 AM

I bet that every single respondent has done "private" work on "company" time. I once worked in an office where you had to use a pay phone in the hall to make personal calls, where every office supply down to the pencils had to be "signed out" from the office manager, and where you had an "identification" code to use the copy machine. Those days are long gone. Most of us have used company time for personal business; we have used the copy or Fax machine for to copy & send personal documents, make personal phone calls (if we don't have cell phones), etc. it's just that most of us do this infrequently and most of us are not expected to be personal assistants to the bosses. I wouldn't be surprised if the managing partner (top dog) at the law firm uses his/her admin for personal support and the rest of the lawyers follow this example. It's up to the individual admin to make appropriate arrangements with the boss without jeopardizing her own position. I would start by politely refusing the most onerous personal assistant jobs by saying: do you want me to postpone the business-related

work I'm doing for you?

Posted by: Anon | June 01, 2006 at 06:08 PM

Wow, this issue sure is a hot topic! I think that, as a rule, admins should not be expected to do personal tasks for their bosses. I believe my job is to do what I can make my boss's "work life" easier, not his personal life. I think my job should only include work-related tasks. However, there are occasional exceptions to this rule (if I notice him working through lunch, I might offer to run out to pick up some food for him). He always appreciates my offer, but has never asked me to do anything personal for him.

Also, I think the attitude a boss has when making a request can make all the difference. That's the "master/slave" mentality that the original poster mentioned. I would be much more willing to do an occasional favor for my boss if he asked nicely and expressed appreciation afterward. But if someone wasn't treating me with respect when making the request, I would definitely resent it.

Sounds like it's time for the original poster to have a discussion with the owner of the business to make a decision about what is expected of the admins in the office.

Posted by: Lisa | June 02, 2006 at 01:38 PM

I am a personal assistant and yes at times it can get crazy. One day I had to get my bosses glasses repaired at a store in the mall, he needed them for a business trip that evening, - while they were being repaired, I bought myself an outfit - sometimes it is to our benefit!!

Posted by: Nancy | June 02, 2006 at 02:13 PM

My comment is: if you had to explain the related expenses required to accomplish the personal tasks (ie. fuel, toner, paper, etc.) to the IRS...what do you think they would say? I get paid a very good salary for my expertise as Executive Assistant not Personal Assistant. These are two very different job titles and descriptions. My relationship with my boss is as professional as it can possibly be. He would never ask me to take care of his personal business (no matter how busy he is) because he understands the difference between the two jobs. Personal Assistants exist for a reason. I realize that companies come in all different sizes and have different needs. Until Admins discontinue including personal tasks in their repertoire, they will be expected to perform those tasks by countless bosses. The bottom line is this...if you have a problem with performing personal tasks for your boss, you should talk with the boss. No doubt, once you start performing personal tasks, it is very hard to put a halt to it. I still think the key is to communicate your feelings about it to your boss. I know my job description states nothing about performing personal tasks for the boss or anyone else for that fact. Good luck.

Posted by: Unbelievable | June 02, 2006 at 05:33 PM

At my old job, the CEO had me take his shoes to the shoeshine stand every Friday. The founders and VPs were horrified at this apparent display of disrespect but my attitude was this: A) It saved him from having to do it himself so made his workday more productive (my time cost less than his); B) it got me out of the office once a week and except in January, I enjoyed the 3-block walk each way; and C) it showed him that I was willing to be a team player, which was super important to him, and consequently, I think he actually respected me more. Or maybe I was delusional on that last one! :)

Posted by: | June 04, 2006 at 02:45 AM

I experienced a personal request recently. I'm a blue collar secretary and work for a crew of men and the Director as well. I found it offensive when the Director requested that I run his toiletry bag from his office to the men's restroom to save him a walk up the stairs, is that laziness or what? After twenty years of being an administrative assistant, I've run personal errands just to get out of the office or stay buddy buddy with the boss, but now I take the request personal and offensive. I'm too busy to run even the smallest of errands and I was hired to be an admin not a wife.

Posted by: Tired of being taken advantage of | June 16, 2006 at 12:19 P