Setting professional goals as an administrative assistant

With mile-long to-do lists and new requests constantly coming their way, busy administrative assistants may balk at the idea of taking time out to set goals. Putting off this valuable activity, though, does a disservice to themselves and the organizations they serve.

Administrative assistants play a huge role in office management. Thus, the time they spend reflecting on how they can improve their own performance or help the business operate better can yield significant results. Achieving their goals could ultimately save the company time or money, increase the efficiency of office operations, or perhaps raise the satisfaction level of staff members and clients.

Setting career goals works toward an administrative assistant's long-term success and satisfaction. Continuous professional development keeps skillsets relevant, making the employee more valuable to the company and setting the stage for possible advancement. If a worker decides she would like to pursue a different administrative assistant position with another organization, her accomplishments make for a stronger resume. Employers love lifelong learners and workers committed to seeing through specific goals.

Coming up with professional goals for administrative assistants and executive assistants

Once an administrative assistant has decided to set goals, the obvious question becomes what types to construct. The answer depends heavily on personal interests and career development concerns as well as on what might best support the employer.

Clear goal ideas come easy for some administrative assistants and executive assistants. Maybe mastering PowerPoint has always been a "someday" thought. Or, perhaps struggles with bookkeeping routinely remind that developing greater proficiency would make that administrative task go much smoother. Whatever comes to mind is worth exploring.

Those needing some inspiration might turn to their most recent performance review. Are there areas where scores could be improved? What constructive feedback does the comments section contain?

Other fruitful ideas may occur from sitting down with your manager or the executive you support. Don't just spring this on someone, though. Schedule a structured planning session. Knowing in advance that you want to discuss setting professional goals allows the person to truly think about the issue rather than simply providing miscellaneous thoughts off the top of his or her head. This leader also may be able to tell you what the company is willing to pay toward fulfillment of your goals, such as seminar fees or tuition reimbursement for credits leading to a bachelor's degree. (Consult human resources for further information.)

Job descriptions for higher positions at your company or job ads posted by other organizations can serve as inspiration for career goals. Examine requirements for positions to which you someday aspire, and evaluate how you match up. Knowing what skills or education to gain to increase the likelihood of a dream job becoming a

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reality makes excellent goal-setting material!

Common areas from which to formulate performance goals

Though each individual will construct her own specific goals, administrative assistant positions often possess similarities. Thus, people frequently pull their goals from similar basic categories, such as:

- Acquiring or improving hard skills (such as becoming proficient at Excel)
- Becoming more organized
- Managing time better
- Meeting deadlines consistently
- Increasing efficiency or productivity
- Saving the company money
- Improving office culture or morale
- Identifying priorities
- Reducing mistakes
- Attending to details
- Communicating more clearly
- Understanding the needs of leaders, staff, and customers
- Demonstrating greater professionalism
- Contributing to company objectives (such as reducing waste or promoting diversity)
- Networking regularly

How to set SMART goals

A reader of the above list may shake her head in agreement that an item is something that resonates with her.

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The challenge becomes figuring out how to reach that desired outcome. Wanting to become more organized, for instance, is admirable. But what exactly does becoming more organized mean?

Vague, undefined goals rarely get accomplished. People don't know what they are supposed to do, so they often don't do much of anything. There isn't engagement with a plan and the pride that comes with making steady progress.

To turn lofty notions into action, experts often recommend using the SMART goal method. Each letter in SMART stands for an important element of successful goal-setting: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.

Specific

Getting specific about what you want to accomplish turns a general notion into a tangible goal. It turns vagueness into answers to "W" questions (who, what, where, when, and why). If a friend told you he made a New Year's resolution to get healthier, you'd congratulate him, but you might not be sure what he means. Yet if he said that starting next week he is going to exercise every other morning and add a vegetable to each dinner so that he can lower his cholesterol level to under 200 by his yearly physical in April, you would look for him at the gym and hand him your broccoli casserole recipe.

Measurable

Effective goals are measurable. They define where you are vs. where you want to be. You don't have to guess if you are on the right track to successful completion because the proof is in meeting the metrics. Breaking the goal down in this manner makes it feel more doable. It also keeps the goal-setter motivated by seeing evidence of accomplishment. Measurement methods may be quantitative (such as costs cut, time saved, or products produced) or qualitative (such as positive client feedback).

Achievable

Aspiring to greater heights is noble, but an entry-level worker does not become a CEO overnight. Evaluate where you stand in relation to what you want to accomplish. Is the goal attainable based on your skills, knowledge, and experience? If not, break it down into smaller, more achievable goals. Reaching too high and failing leads to frustration, while staying reasonable builds confidence.

Relevant

Why is the goal important, and how does it relate to the larger picture? Someone setting goals in order to improve as an administrative assistant should make sure what she chooses to pursue actually will help the company or her own career. While learning to sculpt may be interesting and certainly worth doing for one's own enjoyment, it is unlikely that current or future employers will see that activity as strengthening your administrative assistant resume. Aspiring to pass the next level of a Microsoft Office skills assessment, however, likely will be useful to career development.

Time-bound

Goals should have a time frame for accomplishment. Creating these boundaries brings a sense of urgency. The odds of procrastination or letting goals drag on increase without specifics on what will be accomplished by when.

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SMART goal examples

Finally, as you ponder your own goals, it might help to see a few examples of SMART administrative assistant goals in action:

Goal: I want to improve my written communication skills.

Specific: My direct manager noted on my last performance review that the meeting minutes I type up are often disorganized and distributed too far after the event. I want to establish consistency in their format so team members can find information easily, and I want to get notes out within 24 hours.

Measurable: During the next two weeks, I want to research digital note-taking software. By the start of next month, I want to settle on a minute-taking template that I find effective and easy to use.

Achievable: I'm already adept at using an iPad, which should be to my advantage when taking digital notes. I have a strong LinkedIn network of other administrative assistants, and I can ask them for template recommendations.

Relevant: Everyone in the organization who receives the notes will benefit from a standard format. They will know where to turn to immediately to find the information most pertinent to them, which saves valuable time.

Time-bound: By the time of my quarterly review, I will have exhibited marked improvement in this administrative skill as witnessed by consistently handing out organized meeting notes within the span of a day.

Goal: I want to improve my chances for a promotion.

Specific: My senior colleague Alice is retiring next year. I want to move up to her position. I would earn more money, and the work would be more engaging. Event planning is an important element of the role, though, and I lack experience in that area. I need to boost that facet of my administrative assistant resume over the next few months through formal training and informal observation.

Measurable: I will complete an event planning course through a local college during the winter semester. Also, since Alice annually plays a large role in the company's holiday toy drive, I will sign up for the committee and ask if I can shadow her.

Achievable: The pandemic has increased the number of online courses colleges offer, so I can complete the event planning class from home rather than trying to get to campus after work. Also, I'm entitled to $300 for professional development each year, so I can submit paperwork to human resources to pay for the class.

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Relevant: My company will need to fill Alice's position. Presenting myself as a qualified candidate could save them the time and expense of recruiting, and it is a good career opportunity for me.

Time-bound: Two months before Alice's scheduled departure date, I will update my resume to include a section on event planning. I will submit it to human resources and to our direct manager. This action will let them know of my interest, and if they select me, it will allow some overlap to learn things from Alice before she leaves.

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