

# The Big Secret

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In an extract from her new book, *Joan's Greatest Administrative Secrets Revealed*, Joan Burge details her top tips for being an outstanding assistant

I am often asked, “What is the secret to being an outstanding assistant?” There is no one big secret that will make you a star assistant; there is no single thing that you can do to be a star. To be a star assistant you have to do 101 things well! That includes everything from handling phone calls to managing emails, planning travel, arranging meetings, keeping your leader organized and on time, making decisions, being solution-driven, taking the initiative, employing excellent communication skills to direct issues to the ‘right’ person and keeping your executive updated on what’s going on in the office.

I understand this is a tall order and can be intimidating. Remember, I was an executive assistant for twenty years and I worked in twelve different companies in five states. It was not unusual for executives to expect me to deliver my best work. That does not mean I did deliver the very best every day, year after year. I certainly committed to doing my best and giving my best. But life happens, and it happened to me and my family during those twenty years.

One thing, though, is that when I knew I wasn’t performing at my optimum I talked to my executive about it. I didn’t want my executive to think I didn’t care about my job or my work. I assured my executive that I would get back on track. Do you know what? My executive was always understanding and supportive.

So how do you—how did I—do 101 things well? Here are a few ideas to get you started.

- **Master your craft.** Don’t ever assume you know everything and you do it to the best of your ability because you will never seek new ways and new answers. You will get into a rut and eventually become obsolete.
- **Pay attention to the details.** This is a vital component of your role. As they say, “The devil is in the details.” That has been proven to me



many times over the years, even as a CEO and business owner.

- **Write things down.** Do not assume you are going to remember every little thing you have to do, or your executive tells you. Whether you are getting information from a caller or visitor or coworker, make notes. It's very hard in this age of distraction and interruption to remember everything. If you are a star assistant, you will capture information like crazy!

- **Listen.** This is probably one of the strongest skills you can employ. When you listen, you catch the details. When you listen, you get a fuller picture of what is going on. Listening reduces errors, rework, and frustration. When we fully listen—and I mean fully—we are absorbed in the moment. We listen with our mind.

- **Ask other assistants about their best practices.** I loved working with other assistants who knew more in certain areas than I did because they made my life easier. When I worked at Coppertone in Memphis, Tennessee, there were two great assistants who sat on either side of my cubby. Yes, it was noisy and drove me crazy sometimes, but there were more benefits than negatives to having my peers close to me. Each of the two assistants was smart in different areas. Plus, both had been working at Coppertone for a while, so they showed me the ropes.

- **Study.** There is no way around it. If you are going to shine in 101 areas in this profession, you need to keep up with what is going on in the profession. Thank goodness times are much different today for assistants than 30 and 40 years ago. The information available to you for your chosen profession is astounding. My company alone offers more than 100 courses for assistants, has published more than 1500 blogs, produced 250 educational videos, 300+ articles (as of this writing), hosts webinars and conferences, and this is my fifth book for assistants!

- **Read everything that crosses your path.** It really doesn't take that long. I realize it is difficult because we have volumes of information available to us. You do need to be selective. The idea is that when you read about a variety of

things, you become more confident. You are in the know. I have always been an avid reader of interesting subjects and especially anything related to the business world. Nowadays, I read in little chunks because I simply am too busy. That might be a good practice for you. Just take a few minutes here and there throughout the day at work and at home to read.

- **Practice, practice, practice.** How do you think athletes make it to the Olympics? How does someone win on "Dancing with the Stars"? Why are certain football or basketball players in such high demand? Because they are really good at what they do. The only way for you to get great at the skills you need to be a star assistant is to practice over and over. Before you know it, that 'thing' will become a part of you. It's like when I started professional speaking and training. I didn't know what I was doing. I was scared to death. I just kept speaking in front of groups (small and large) over and over. I kept working my craft, which led me to being hired by Fortune 100 companies.

- **Stop and look at the big picture.** In order to see the 101 things you have to be good at, you need to take a break. What percentage of time a week do you run on autopilot? If you are like most workers, it is often. You have a job to do, deadlines to meet, and an executive to please. Commit to taking breaks at least once a day to see the big picture of the projects, tasks, and action items you touch or need to touch. Then try to see beyond those to what others might expect of you and how various pieces connect.

- **Create processes that work and stay with you until something better comes along.** The first step is to find processes that work for you because then you will be more apt to stick with them. There are many good processes available today but if you will not stay with them because they're not in your DNA, then don't use them. For example, while there are several digital apps or tools for tracking 'to do' items and follow items, I find my very best follow-up system is still the 43-hanging file folder system. It never fails me.

- **Work efficiently.** Two definitions of efficiently are: 1) in a way that achieves maximum productivity with minimum wasted

effort or expense. 2) in a well-organized and competent way. If you do something efficiently you do it productively and quickly. That makes good sense because assistants have a plethora of tasks and assignments thrown at them. When I was an assistant, I was not a big chit-chatter; I had way too much to get done in my contained 40-hour week. That's not to say I never worked over 40 hours because I certainly did. Times are different and you actually have more challenges because of technology distractions. You have IMs popping up in your face; social media news; your kids or partner texting you; and possibly an open-office environment. Therefore, you have to consciously work at being efficient.

- **Focus.** I will never tire of talking about being focused. If you have been a follower of me for a long time, you know how I feel about the importance of focus. This ties somewhat into the previous bullet-point idea. This is where you can really stand out and shine. The ability to focus is a skill. It is a skill that requires practice and conscious attention. I strongly urge you to develop this skill. It will help you in both your professional and personal life.

- **Do tasks that you don't necessarily like to perform.** As an assistant, you are required to wear many hats and fulfill many functions. I didn't always like some of the things I had to do when I was an assistant, especially assignments involving numbers or mundane tasks. But I did them anyway because I knew that was what great assistants did and they did it without complaining.

In today's business climate you have to be versatile, flexible, and adaptable. And you must always keep yourself marketable. You were not born to be ordinary. You need to learn how to demonstrate your worth in ways that matter and stand out from the crowd by being both future-focused and grounded. That is the big secret.

#### about the author



Joan Burge is known as the red-lipstick-wearing "Rock Star" of administrative and executive Assistant training. Joan is an accomplished author, professional speaker, consultant and corporate trainer. Her company, Office Dynamics International, is a global industry leader which offers a broad range of solutions and provides high-performance, sophisticated executive and administrative Assistant training and coaching. For more information visit [www.officedynamics.com](http://www.officedynamics.com). Receive Your Free "Clarification of Tasks" assessment. Download at [www.bit.ly/clarificationoftasks](http://www.bit.ly/clarificationoftasks).

Joan's latest book, *Joan's Greatest Administrative Secrets Revealed* is available at [www.OfficeDynamics.com](http://www.OfficeDynamics.com).

