Profile

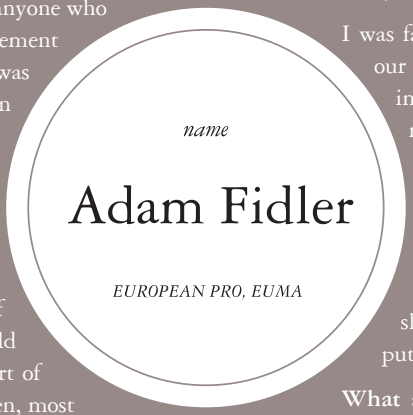
ADAM FIDLER

Can we start with a little background information? Where are you from?

My name is Adam Fidler and I'm currently the Executive Assistant to the Chief Executive of Salford City College. I have been in this role for just under four years, but have worked as a Board-level Assistant for over 10 years. I was born and bred in Nottinghamshire, England (for those of you who don't know Nottinghamshire, if I say "Robin Hood country" that might enable you to place it). I moved to Manchester, England, where I currently live, 10 years ago.

What is your background?

At a very young age I taught myself the skills of typewriting and shorthand, and excelled at those, and then went on to evening class, whilst still at school, to undertake examinations in those subjects. By the time I was a 14-year-old schoolboy, I had already achieved 100 words per minute in shorthand, and advanced level typewriting (I went to achieve 160 words per minute in shorthand – for anyone who has learnt shorthand, they will know what an achievement this really is). So, due to my office skills when I was young, I went into office work, starting initially as an Administrator/Secretary for a local garage, where I worked part-time for seven years. In addition, I did extensive work experience whilst at college during vacations, working as a secretary.



I then went on to university and obtained a degree in Business Studies. I always felt the combination of being a "graduate", coupled with my office skills would enable me to work as a "new style" Assistant, the sort of Assistant which is more common today. But back then, most Assistants didn't have a degree or they had degrees and didn't have secretarial skills. So, I was never out of work and by the time I was 21 I had worked in the auspices of "office work" in a variety of organisations, putting my skills to good use.

At 21, the day after I left university, I went to work for a well-known FTSE100 firm initially as a temp, and then as the PA to the Director of Communication at their Group Headquarters, putting me in contact with their Chief Executive and Chairman. I was very privileged – and proud – to be the youngest PA ever in the organisation, and the only male PA in their Group Headquarters. One particular PA taught me an awful lot – we are still very good friends now – and she later went on to be the PA to the Chief Executive.

I remained at this organisation for around five years before moving to Manchester and taking a two-year career break from being a PA, when I worked as a secretarial recruitment consultant, recruiting PAs for CEOs and Chairmen. I loved the job, but missed being a PA terribly, so I then left recruitment and worked as a PA to a Chairman of a property firm. After that I went to work for a global banking organisation as a Board PA before taking on my current role.

In 2007 I qualified as a teacher and taught part time – something which I still do to this day. My intention then was to become a teacher full time. But after an unexpected phone call, I obtained the role I have today, as PA to the Chief Executive at the College. I never anticipated working in education as anything other than being a teacher!

It's interesting for me to reflect that I made a commitment to myself many years ago – if I wasn't a PA to a Chief Executive of a medium to large-sized organisation by the time I was 30 years of age, I would leave the job altogether… luckily, I got my current job (where I work for the "number one"!) about a month before my 31st birthday. So, I did manage to become a PA to a CEO whilst I was still 30 – just!

How and why did you become an administrative professional?

I was fascinated to find a shorthand book in the loft of our family home that belonged to my great uncle. I immediately taught myself shorthand and then my mother said "You may as well learn typing now", so that was my next goal. I think at the time I probably was encouraged to be a journalist, but as I got such good jobs working as a secretary – and earned more money compared to my school friends who were doing paper rounds or stacking shelves in supermarkets – it just made sense that I put my skills to use.

What are the main changes to the profession that you have seen in your career?

I believe that the main challenges facing the Assistant of today are increased workloads, due to technology and automation (computers create more work, not less of it!); increased expectations on Assistants from bosses and organisations; and a continued downsizing of middle management and of administrative professionals.

The Assistants that remain in organisations today really have their work cut out. The job to me has got harder, not easier, in the last decade. I can just about remember when I worked as a secretary when we didn't use email. The job back then was more personal and more enjoyable – but probably not as diverse. Today's Assistants work under more pressure, they have more to contend with and they are often doing the job of their managers, or of middle managers – all for a smaller salary than their managers get paid! Their technical skills need to be second to none, not only with technology, but also their business acumen needs to be sound. On top of all of this, they have to be ambassadors for their firms, and excel in the softer skills such as the ability to deal with difficult

personalities. The job is a real challenge, and to that end I think that Assistants today need more training and development than ever before – continuous development and life-long learning are more important to the Assistant now than ever.

In many ways today's Assistants are business managers in their own right, and leaders. Many organisations would fail to run without their Assistants; despite this, most Assistants are under-valued or don't always feel they receive the recognition they deserve. But, with a strong self-belief, and the ability to take the lead on a diverse range of business issues, they really are at the heart of the smooth running of their organisations. For me, bosses will always need Assistants, especially those bosses at the top. The role of the Assistant is here to stay, albeit with increased responsibilities, more autonomy and broader "to do" lists.

You are very active as the European PR Officer within EUMA. What does this position entail and how did you come to be so involved with EUMA?

I applied for the role of European PR Officer very recently and was voted in by EUMA members at our AGM in Iceland in September this year. I had served as UK PR Officer for three and a half years, which gave me a sound understanding as a UK National Committee Member. The role now as European PR Officer means ultimately I have responsibility for the promotion and publicity of EUMA throughout 26 European Countries, overseeing a team of 20 PR Officers who sit in their respective countries. We are all volunteers; EUMA is a non-profit making organisation.

Working with the European Committee, my remit is to develop the EUMA brand, create PR opportunities to increase the membership of EUMA, and to devise a strategy to take EUMA forward and sustain the Association in the future. Business partnerships and collaborations will play a big part in the longevity of EUMA, and this is also part of my remit as European PRO.

You are a real advocate of what are seen by some as old-fashioned skills like touch typing and shorthand. Why are you so passionate about them?

It is my firm belief that any skill which enables today's Assistants to work more effectively can only be advantageous – to the Assistant and to their boss or organisation. So, the ability to use shorthand to take notes effortlessly, whether in meetings or from dictation, the ability to type quickly and accurately, whether for the huge volume of emails we receive today or when typing board reports, are skills that are still

in great demand. I have a favourite maxim which is: "you can take away my business studies degree, but never take away my typing and shorthand." I am proof of the pudding – my skills have always kept me in work.

We live in a society that is busier and the demands placed on Assistants are greater than ever before. So skills which save the assistant considerable time and effort make their jobs easier – and keep them in demand. I wouldn't be without my shorthand and I think that more Assistants, should they learn the skill, would see how useful it is. The same applies to touch typing. I can type at around 90 words per minute – you can't do that if you are a "two-finger typist", nor can anyone take notes in longhand at 100+ words per minute. So, I will continue to be passionate about two skills that may seem old fashioned in today's business world, but I have been commended by bosses for using them. Add to those skills a sound business understanding, a human brain (!) and lots of common sense and logic – and you have the hallmark of an outstanding Assistant.

It's a tall order being an Assistant today, and that requires a "tall order" in terms of skill set. But until computers, iPads and iPhones can match that skill set, then the Assistant, in my view, is here to stay!

What inspires and motivates you?

I am inspired and motivated by seeing the growth and development in individuals – hence my choice in training to be a teacher. To see a student's confidence grow, to see them achieve a goal they would not have thought possible previously and to help them realise their aspirations and ambitions is what drives me to do the work I do. Many of the skills I teach in my role as "Assistant Trainer Practitioner" are not only applicable to the role of Assistant but are applicable to life in general. That's why my PA courses talk about the law of attraction, visualisation and the logical approach to being an Assistant. These are all true life skills and if I can help other Assistants to believe in themselves or make positive career choices, then my work is complete. "What you give out you get back" is my philosophy on life, both in my personal life and in my professional life.

What has been the highlight of your career so far and why?

I suppose the highlight that springs to mind was when I was asked to be part of European Management Assistants, firstly as the UK PR Officer, and more recently as the European PR Officer sitting on the European Board. EUMA has created so many opportunities for me, from speaking to groups of PAs, motivating and inspiring others, and writing articles for magazines, including this one! I am extremely grateful for the opportunities that EUMA has created. EUMA has become a family, a sort of "home from home" and the people I have met through the Association, the contacts and networking, have been tremendous. I can't thank EUMA enough and all the PAs I have come into contact with since being part of this wonderful Association. If it weren't for EUMA then I am not sure my life would be fulfilling as it is today.

What are the main challenges facing the profession at the moment?

I firmly believe that Assistants need more training – before they go into the profession. For Assistants of today there needs to be more emphasis on the training of hard skills (such as computers or IT skills), coupled with development and stretching of the softer skills, such as how to "behave" at work, get things done and how to "manage" a boss or other members of staff.

The third element, if you will, is that Assistants today need to be business savvy – the true Executive Assistant should be a business support manager, and add value by freeing up management time in that they actually carry out work for their manager. The challenge with all of this is that the perception of secretary, PA and Executive Assistant is a little blurred. Those three roles are quite distinct in my understanding, but in many organisations, those roles have been lumped into one, and if managers don't understand those roles, they can't recruit successfully or provide adequate training and development to enhance the skills of those staff.

Assistants need to grasp every opportunity to learn and take charge of their own development – and to ensure their bosses and organisations understand what their roles are about and how their roles help the organisation to meet its strategic objectives. In one of my training courses, I regular say to PAs "Take the time to explain to your boss about the challenges in your role – he or she won't understand, why should they? So, it's up to you to provide transparency on your job and let people know what your job's all about."

Clarity of the role must come first, then understanding. Then, what will follow is more respect for those in the role of Assistant. Things are changing, but we still have a long way to go. Many people are still under the impression that no one employs a secretary or Assistant today – and that we've all been replaced by computers!

What advice would you give to someone just starting in the role?

My advice would be quite simple – do as much learning as you can before you go into the profession. So, learn your skills, your "trade" first, then you can hit the ground running. You will need to continue to learn and develop when you are in the job, but it's much harder to find the time to learn when you are in employment. So, spend the first two years in education fine-tuning your business knowledge, perhaps by undertaking a general business studies qualification – and do learn to touch type! It will save you so much time in the long run. But, above all, learn from people; ask questions, take time to listen and have an inquisitive mind. You can learn far more from networking, listening and talking to others than you can from books. Join an association such as EUMA, and the world will then truly be your oyster!

So, what's next for Adam Fidler? Where you do you want to be in five years' time?

That's a very good question, and one I think about every day. My ambition is to have my own business; I want to be my own boss. I am passionate about the role of the Assistant, their training and their self-worth. I undertake teaching and training part time now, and I hope to do more of that in the future. I already train for Pitman Training in the UK on my two-day Executive PA course, and regularly speak at secretarial events, promoting the profession and EUMA. I'd like to think there will be more of this for me in the future. I am proud to be a teacher and an Assistant – but my heart calls me to do more teaching. When this happens, and I am teaching, work to me doesn't seem like work – and that's where the harmony of one's life, both professionally and personally, really begins. The future for me is exciting, but I put this down to choosing one of the most rewarding career paths ever, where no two days are the same. And, that for me, is what being an Assistant is all about.