

Focus report PA of the year

Dinner party gibe provides PA with recipe for success

An innocent remark stung Louisa James into winning the UK's top award, says **Jenny Knight**

With no idea about how mobile phone apps worked, Louisa James could have been forgiven for shrugging her shoulders and looking the other way when the idea for Jamie's 20-Minute Meals came up.

Instead James, PA to Tara Donovan, the managing director at Jamie Oliver Limited, took on the task of project managing the new app. "I had to understand something about apps and the new digital world," she says. "It was a baptism of fire but so exciting. I worked to manage a small team to create the app and get it on to the market. My job was to make sure the developers got the content, recipes and video shots on time and on budget. I loved it."

James has seen it become one of the most popular paid-for cookery apps and now she has been voted the country's top personal assistant.

Her prize for winning the Hays and The Times PA of the Year award is a five-night break for two in Prague, supplied by Portman Travel, and a place on the PA Retreat, a residential training programme for PAs run by Castalia Coaching & Training. James, 35, of Wandsworth, London,

secured the top spot by showing energy and enthusiasm and by expanding her PA role into management and leadership, according to the judges.

Geoff Sims, managing director at Hays PA & Secretarial, says: "In the judges' view Louisa is an accomplished and professional PA with talents and enthusiasm that put her above the rest and make her an ambassador for the job. She told a friend at a dinner party about taking responsibility for the Jamie Oliver application and the friend asked: 'How come you are doing this stuff when you are only a PA?'"

"That sort of comment is like a red rag to a bull. It motivated her to show people what PAs actually do, how they give real value when working closely with bosses. Taking responsibility for the meal application was quite a different achievement for a PA."

Entries were up by 60 per cent this year and Sims and fellow judges Susie Barron-Stubbley, managing director of Castalia, Gareth Osborne, director general of the Association for Personal Assistants, and Laura Richardson, last year's winner, agreed that standards were also higher.



Baptism of fire: winner Louisa James, left, with her boss Tara Donovan, managing director of Jamie Oliver Limited

Sims adds: "This year there was a lot of debate among the judges because the shortlist was so strong. I also had phone calls from people who were not shortlisted, wanting feedback on why they hadn't succeeded so they could try to do better in coming years. These are not the actions of timid people but of committed professionals with a business-like approach."

James says: "I was shocked and thrilled when I realised I had won. I feel so honoured to be chosen as the PA of the Year. I give my all to the job and to be recognised like this is a wonderful feeling. People often do not realise the huge impact PAs can have in an organisation. I've been

here for six years and my role has completely changed."

Second place went to Christopher Juliff, diary, visits and events manager to the chief executive of the NHS. The

passion for developing a PA network in the North and support for her boss. Barron-Stubbley says: "The finalists showed that PAs are moving away from a traditional role into taking on much greater management responsibilities. The winner demonstrated that. She has pushed the boundaries."

The competition was tougher this year because a presentation and personal interview with a question and answer session was introduced. Osborne explains: "For the judges it was a tough decision and we argued into the night. Louisa has taken the PA role to a very high level and her boss is mightily supportive of her. We met some very capable individuals."

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judges praised Juliff's passion for his career, expertise and attention to detail in a high pressured environment. In third place was Zara Dyer, PA to the managing director at Liverpool Football Club, who impressed with her

executive assistant. She says: "Business needs are very different so the employer must look very carefully at what they require. But always there must be a mutual trust between an executive and a PA. It is down to chemistry, because they must like each other. My own PA sometimes has to pull me back or push me to do something and I have given her authority to do that."

Laura Richardson, executive assistant to the chief executive at Elecon, won last year's PA of the Year award, and is another of this year's judges. "The ability to keep information confidential is really important at executive level," she says. "The least hint that the candidate is gossipy will filter them out. PAs must also be proactive. They don't always have the luxury of asking the boss because the boss may be travelling or too busy. Instead, the PA must have the ability to make decisions and then defend them."

"Executives want a PA to manage their lives, not just ordering flowers but taking control of their diary and being

able to trust that their time will be spent on valuable things instead of meetings that could have been delegated. Some people think of PAs as the mouse in the corner but they have to be confident and be able to make things happen. PAs need to bear in mind the strategic business goals that must be achieved and do their bit to see that they are achieved."

Interviews for the job tend to be long and searching because the perfect PA has to combine almost contradictory qualities. They must be confident and outgoing but also calm and helpful. They must master detail and follow instructions to the letter, while also being able to make their own decisions. They must be pleasant and easy-going, while being able to demand perfection from others and not being tempted to whisper bits of confidential information to friends and colleagues.

Small wonder that these paragons are highly valued by those they support.

JENNY KNIGHT

How men are keeping up with Miss Jones

PAs are attracting more males to their ranks as they take on greater responsibility, finds **Jenny Knight**

Once the preserve of women, an increasing number of men are becoming personal assistants as the job evolves into one with greater responsibilities including line management, dealing with budgets and decision making.

Sean Steel, 26, who is one of two PAs to the chief executive of Chartis Europe, the insurance company, planned to join the Civil Service. After taking a two-year RSA diploma in administration and secretarial procedures, however, he accepted a job as a secretary in a small pensions firm, armed with a typing speed of 65 words a minute and teeline shorthand.

He says: "I worked my way up through the ranks, then I moved to Chartis Europe where I have an organisational role that I thrive on. The chief executive is a very busy man and wants to make the best use of his time, so my job involves heavy diary management."

He hopes that more men will take up PA jobs and adds that he has never experienced prejudice in his role. "I have been welcomed by the women I work with."

Laura Richardson, PA of the Year 2010, says the role has expanded considerably from the "take a letter Miss Jones" days. "PAs often have budget



Sean Steel has entered the traditionally female preserve of the PA but has been welcomed by the women he works with

and line management responsibilities. They are trusted partners. I came from a marketing background and I would not have wanted a PA role if I had not known that there would be a wide range of tasks. If you show initiative when you are working for a senior person, you are ideally placed to take part in high-level projects."

During the recession the PA market retracted but demand has picked up

again. One change is that PAs increasingly are expected to provide good value for money. Over the past year many companies have made redundancies so now PAs often have to work for more than one person. Their role has also diversified into areas such as finance and marketing.

Geoff Sims, the managing director of Hays PA & Secretarial, says: "The PA has evolved from a secretary who

arranges meetings and makes tea into a real business partner. Technology has played a major part by making the world a small place. PAs now have a lot more responsibility for decision making and are expected to be able to work with spreadsheets and PowerPoint presentations. Being a PA is hard work but it is an ideal job for people with ambitions."

Some highly rated PAs have rela-

tively few academic qualifications but others are graduates. The Association of Personal Assistants has worked with Middlesex University Business School to set up a BA in business administration for personal assistants and a master's in management for personal assistants. A doctorate programme is expected to follow.

Christopher Juliff, 47, the diary, visits and events manager for Sir David Nicholson, chief executive of the NHS, says: "The work of the PA has changed and new technology means that the fact I cannot do shorthand and do not type so well is not important."

"I take care of Sir David's personal arrangements and arrange travel and hotels but the dominant part of my role is more strategic. I have to be aware of the organisation, how it works and the objectives. I am like a spider in the middle of a web making sure things do not overlap, that everything is pulled together and co-ordinated."

Juliff, a politics and history graduate who moved into the PA field at the Department of Education after being deputy manager at a job centre, was runner-up in this year's PA awards.

He says: "At the job centre there was a staff of more than 20 but one of the frustrations was that you would arrange meetings and people failed to attend. When working for a minister, what you arrange happens. People cannot jump quickly enough. In many ways working for Sir David is stressful but actually getting things done is a massive compensation for me. The NHS is the biggest organisation in Europe and I am incredibly busy."

Easing the loneliness of long-suffering assistants

The life of a personal assistant can seem isolated at times. Typically they work alone to support their boss and often have to manage without being able to seek advice or exchange ideas with anyone. *Jenny Knight writes.*

Strict confidentiality also means that PAs have to hold back and be discreet when other staff are gossiping.

So these vital employees can feel part of a team and share best practice, larger organisations are setting up networks of PAs. Hays, the recruiting experts, for example, won the *Executive PA* magazine award for Employer of the Year for the support and guidance it gives to its own PAs.

Personal assistants at Hays meet one another during training sessions, lunch-

time get-togethers and talks on subjects such as career development and building confidence. Giving them an opportunity to talk to other PAs within the company means that they are able to exchange tips and expertise.

Geoff Sims, the managing director at Hays PA & Secretarial, says: "More organisations are now awake to the value of the PA and support them by offering continual personal development programmes, by encouraging PAs to network and by setting up networks within the organisation."

"We champion PAs in our organisation. If a PA has to organise a conference, it saves time if they can talk to someone who has already done it. The more companies encourage the

advancement of their PAs the better for the company."

Co-operative Financial Services (CFS) is another organisation where action is taken to reduce the loneliness of the personal assistant.

Amanda Pickering, the leadership support co-ordinator at CFS, says that after the firm merged with the Britannia Building Society a meeting was called of all 43 PAs. She found that most PAs did not communicate with their counterparts. Each was concerned with their own business area and some felt isolated.

"We found that by talking to one another they could do their job better. We looked at best practice and introduced monthly meetings to talk about

what was happening in the business areas, issues and problems."

Pickering also launched "lunch and learn" sessions, with guest speakers from within the organisation and from other companies.

"This helps the PAs to network and learn from one another," she says. "We invite PAs from other companies with which we have a relationship to talk about their roles and challenges. The chief executive's PA also organises quarterly coffee mornings so the PAs can chat and meet colleagues. This year we are thinking of introducing a charity event for the PAs."

"These meetings also help their development towards taking more senior roles. We also provide buddying,

mentoring to give support and advice as well as coaching. I have found that PAs are now proactively helping one another. The networking has created a sense of camaraderie and pride.

"People used to say, 'I am just a PA', but they are getting to understand the impact their actions have on the business. Through colleague engagement they feel they are adding value. This makes them more confident and helps them to show more initiative. They also enjoy their jobs more."

PAs can share knowledge with others in similar jobs by joining organisations that help them to build professional networks, such as the Association of Personal Assistants and the European Management Assistants.

The winner who is talking her way into management

Since winning the Hays and The Times PA of the Year award in 2009, Anuszka Elland has become a regular speaker at events and last year went to Dubai to address a conference on executive PA excellence. *Jenny Knight writes.*

Elland, 30, says: "Winning the award was absolutely fantastic. I felt so honoured to be shortlisted and nominated by my boss. To receive that recognition for the work you do is brilliant."

"It made a huge impact on my professional life and has given me a lot of opportunities. It raised my profile in my organisation and I was given a recognition award by the chairman."

Elland joined the NHS in 2006 as a temp before becoming PA to Kate Davies, the strategic director of the county drug and alcohol action team for NHS Nottinghamshire. Davies is now assistant director for equality, diversity and human rights and Elland's role is developing into that of project officer combined with her PA duties.

After winning the award she took a nine-month public leaders course and last June was made a trustee of MoMo Helps, the charity set up by the late Mo Mowlam, to provide easy access to funds to "plug gaps" for recovering drug users and the families of disabled people.

"My administrative experience and skills in organising and co-ordinating events help to raise funds," Elland says. The leaders course is designed to increase diversity on public boards.



Elland wants to set up PA networks

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