

The Vanishing Executive Assistant? My Response

by [Chrissy Scivicque](#) | Jan 23, 2020 | [Admin Advice](#)

Last weekend, the Wall Street Journal published an interesting (though highly controversial) article titled, “[The Vanishing Executive Assistant.](#)”

And WOW, did it cause an uproar in the admin community! I’m pretty sure that was the author’s intent so, well done...?

This is my response to that article and my defense of the Executive Assistant role. Admittedly, I am biased. As a proud former admin and EA, and a current [trainer for the administrative community](#), I have a unique vantage point. I am deeply invested in this profession; my research is based on my experience and that of the THOUSANDS of admins I’ve worked with/for over the past decade.

So clearly, my mindset as I approach this conversation is entirely different from that of the journalist who wrote this article.

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The erosion of jobs that gave women without college degrees a career path happened in dribs and drabs but is as dramatic as the manufacturing decline

Rachel Feintzeig

The author goes on to share some data that, upon first blush, looks rather daunting for EAs. The graphs show a clear and steady decline in jobs and stagnant wages for *administrative assistant and secretarial jobs*.

However, there's an important point to note: The data makes no distinction between Administrative Assistants and Executive Assistants.

As I've pointed out in the past, there is a big difference between these two roles. For reference, this article provides more context: [**Administrative Assistant vs. Executive Assistant: What's the Difference?**](#)

[**Bonnie Low-Kramen**](#) also discussed this discrepancy in her response to the article, posted on LinkedIn:

The Dept. of Labor has yet to add the job category 'C-Suite Executive Assistants' so there are thousands of professionals not accounted for. I know this because I serve on a Task Force to effect this change. We were told the DOL will make their next revision in 2024.

Bonnie Low-Kramen

In direct response to this article, [**Lucy Brazier**](#), a leader and advocate within the admin community, has commissioned her own piece of global research to better understand the real numbers. Hopefully, the resulting report (scheduled to be made public next week) will provide a more comprehensive view of the data.

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world, it's this: You can find data and anecdotal evidence to support any point you want to make. So, I take it all with a grain of salt—and encourage you to do the same. Gather information from a variety of sources, check it against your own common sense and experience, and determine what you believe to be true.

Are administrative roles, generally, on the decline? I think it's reasonable to believe this is true. I've seen it time and again: fewer admins now support more people. Jobs are being consolidated and many admins report that they are now responsible for the work that used to be distributed among 2 or more people.

This is not a surprising turn of events for those of us familiar with the field. In fact, it's one of the reasons why **administrative training** is more necessary than ever. We need admins to be working at peak performance levels to keep up with the ever-increasing demands.

At the same time, we need to advocate for changes in the model. The one-to-one relationship that existed in the past isn't necessary or realistic for all executives in all organizations. But asking one person to support an entire team of 50 is also not realistic.

However, this article contends that Executive Assistants are also falling victim to this trend, and I just don't know that this is true.

The author cites a number of reasons for this supposed decline which, on the surface, appear reasonable. But, in my opinion, they don't hold up under scrutiny. Take a look.

1. Executives are tech-savvy, self-sufficient and independent, so they manage a lot of their own administrative needs.

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I argue that this might be true for some younger, less experienced executives. But for those who have spent a few years in leadership, and have really evaluated the best use of their time and the value they deliver to the organization, it's a no brainer to delegate these items to an assistant. They understand that administrative tasks are a distraction; it's not what they're paid to do.

If this is, indeed, a trend that has impacted EA employment significantly, I feel certain there will be a backlash and the trend will head the other direction as these executives gain a sense of how truly inefficient and ineffective it is to handle their own admin.

2. Executives don't want to "manage" another person.

The author cites a manager who was relieved to not have an assistant, as it was just another person to manage. This statement highlights one of my own biggest areas of concern: When executives do not know how to leverage their administrative staff, they fail to use them to their fullest potential. All too often, someone is promoted to an executive level and suddenly "given" an assistant. Learning how to leverage an assistant takes time and effort. Like all workplace relationships, it's an investment—but again, seasoned executives understand that the return is well worth it. A strong assistant is a true business partner. He or she doesn't need to be "managed" in the traditional sense; the assistant actually helps "manage" the exec!

I believe it is the assistant's responsibility to train executives how to leverage them. Explain what's possible, offer options, and ease them into it one step at a time. As a quick example: Many execs would never dream of having an assistant help manage their email inbox. But, if you present it in the right way, and suggest taking

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long, the assistant is handling the flow of information in and out of the inbox, saving the executive (literally) *10+ hours a week*.

3. Administrative tasks are now automated and Artificial Intelligence will make many more obsolete.

Yes, some administrative tasks have vanished thanks to technology and some portion of the remaining work will no longer be necessary in the future. This is a great thing for both executives and assistants. Off-loading the straight-forward work to computers is smart; it leaves *people* with more time and brain power for the real work—and there's plenty of that.

If EAs don't have to deal with the basic stuff like answering phones and filing paperwork, they can devote greater energy to the big stuff that has a real impact—things like process improvement, problem solving, project management and relationship building. The more technology gets involved, the more availability assistants have to be used as true business partners, not just task runners.

I'm certain there were similar concerns when the first personal computer appeared in the office. With every wave of new technology, there will always be an outcry that humans are no longer needed. Technology is certainly contributing to the reduction in the number of general Administrative Assistant roles, but I believe the impact to EAs is different.

4. Virtual/remote and outsourced workers are replacing onsite staff.

The article also cites the growing trend to leverage virtual/remote or outsourced staff instead of onsite staff. I think this is true across the board for all roles; I don't see it impacting EAs in a disproportionate way. And once again, it's not a bad thing

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of benefits for both the executive and assistant. It creates a new global employment market, in which the executive can live where he or she chooses and still have the entire world open to them when seeking an administrative partner—and vice versa.

What this all boils down to is this:

The administrative field is evolving, just as it has been for more than a century. But it's not going anywhere. The EA role, in particular, is a unique position that can't be replaced with technology; it can only be enhanced.

If the field is shrinking, it's also advancing, which means more opportunity for those who remain.

The bigger question (and to me, the more interesting one) is this: How do we stay relevant?

How do we evolve, as an administrative community, to keep up with the changing needs? How do we continue to elevate our skills and enhance our performance given the challenges of the modern workplace?

These are the questions I seek to answer in my work. They are the questions I am passionate about exploring, and the questions that get my training participants jazzed. We all intuitively know that things are changing. When we work together, the future doesn't feel so daunting. In fact, it feels *invigorating*.

Articles like this one in the WSJ reflect a deep misunderstanding of the administrative field. It should be a reminder to all of us that we have a lot of work to do to help people understand the value of administrative work as well as the

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Joan Burge, CEO of Office Dynamics, also has a great response to this article, which [you can read here](#).

I'd love to know your thoughts on this topic! Please leave them in the comments below!

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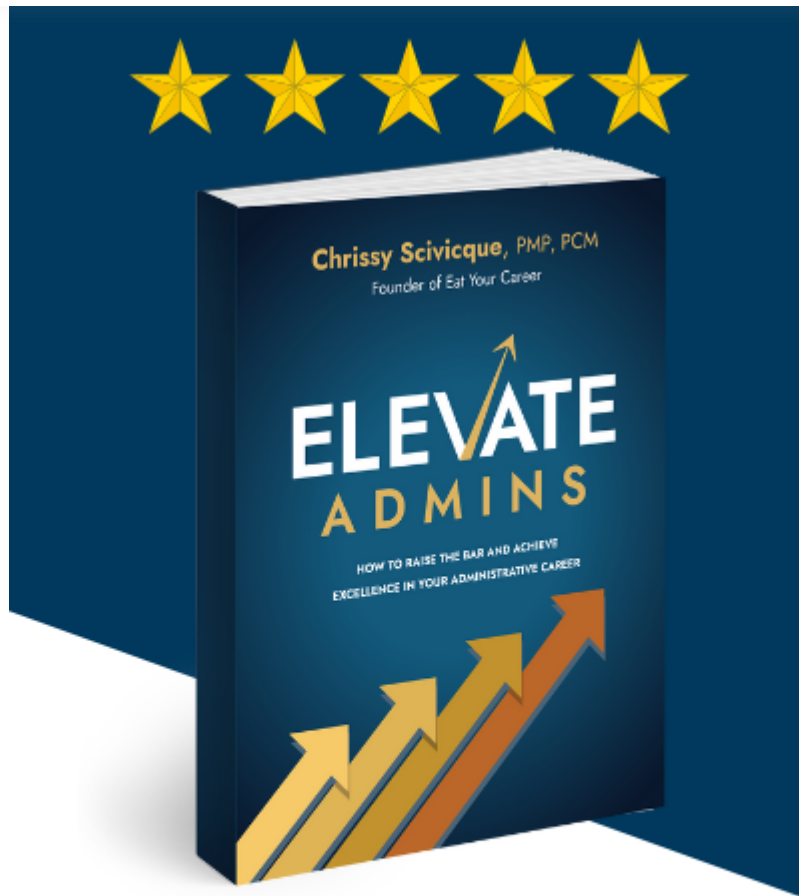
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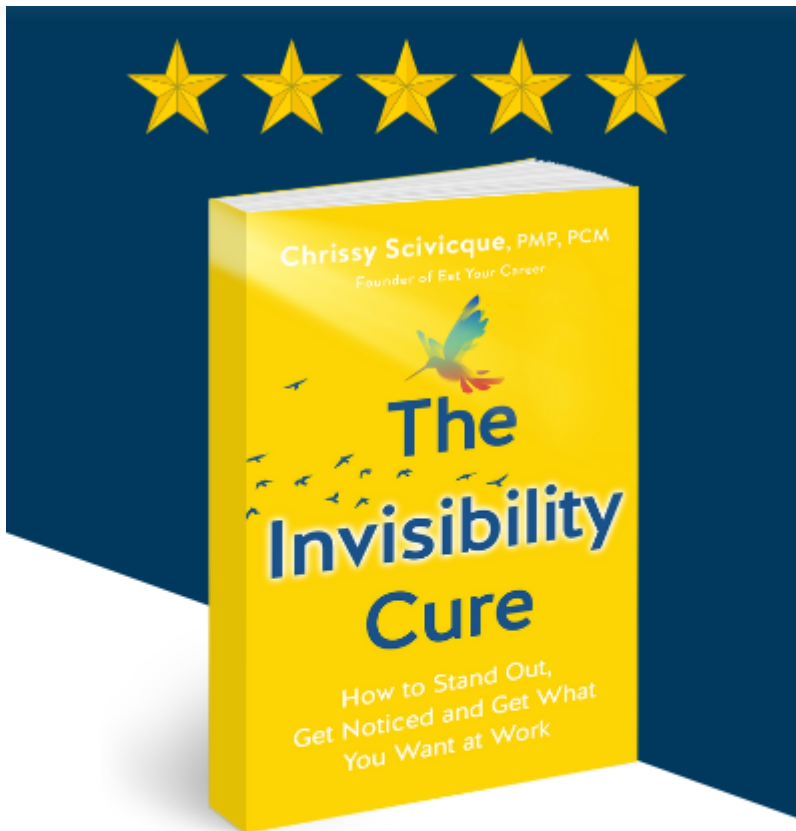
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