

Tomorrow's CEOs in the Corner Room

Executive assistants are no longer involved in just executing the CEO's strategies. Today, they co-author and even conceptualise companies' growth plans—and aim to get into the hot seat soon



:: Mallni Goyal

N Srinath is the current managing director and CEO of Tata Teleservices and Tata Teleservices (Maharashtra). Mukund Govind Rajan, currently managing partner of Tata Capital Private Equity, headed Tata Teleservices (Maharashtra) till May 2010. At a time when the 90-plus-company Tata Group is looking to induct a fresh set of younger leaders onto the board of holding company Tata Sons, the likes of Srinath, 48, and Rajan, 43, will have crucial roles to play in assisting Ratan Tata's successor in the decades ahead.

Srinath and Rajan did stints at a range of companies that constitute the highly diverse Tata ecosystem before going on to head vital group businesses. Before that however, both traversed the same common ground at the beginning of their careers. Both were executive assistants (EAs) to chairman Ratan Tata.

Say hello to the CEO's Man Friday— and Saturday and Sunday. The EA has been around for a long time now—the Tatas inducted EAs as early as the 1960s. But it's only now that more and more companies are hiring EAs. And an EA's role has come closer to the core.

Earlier, an EA's job largely focussed on providing input or following through plans and decisions taken by the CEO. Today, they do that and much more. In a global world with a business empire that is geographically dispersed, complex and is growing rapidly, EAs play multiple roles. They advise CEOs on potentially game-changing decisions involving expansions, acquisitions, new projects and top-level hiring. For those with a busy social calendar and speaking engagements,

EAs write speeches, prepare background notes and presentations. They are supported by secretaries (see box *A Facelift for Ms Fonseca*).

The secretariat of Wim Elfrink, chief globalisation officer, Cisco Systems, would be a good example to understand the support today's CEOs need to function efficiently. Elfrink, a board member and among the top three senior executives at the \$40-billion-plus global networking giant, is based out of Bangalore, away from the headquarters in the US. He has three verticals of staff to assist him. Chief of staff Matthew Smith works closely with him on business matters, and is assisted by two other staff. Sharan Varma works with US-based Felicia Trammel and three others to manage Elfrink's calendar, logistics, travel and invitations. And the communications

Why EAs are Important

Managing hyper growth: Businesses are growing at a frenetic pace. Indian entrepreneurs need help from smart young executives to manage and keep up with the growth

Seeding new business: Most Indian promoters are exploring new businesses and are keen to exploit emerging opportunities. EAs help vet, incubate and seed new businesses

CEO's eyes & ears: Managing a business that is spread across multiple sectors and different countries. EAs become the bridge between the chief executive officer and his senior team

Groom successors: Many companies, especially large MNCs, pick up their smartest young executives as EAs to groom new leaders. The stint provides a valuable exposure

Support CEO's engagements: With busy social calendar, EAs help in writing speeches, making power point presentations and preparing background notes and agenda for crucial meetings

Wim Elfrink | chief globalisation officer, Cisco Systems

'They understand my aim & make it possible'

THE SECRETARIAT

- Managing business: Matthew Smith, chief of staff, along with two others
- Managing engagements: Sharan Varma works with US-based Felicia Trammel and three others
- Managing communication: Two senior executives prepare briefing documents

HIS GOLDEN RULE: Secretariat must stay cool in difficult situations



Wim Elfrink (clockwise 3rd), at a meeting with his secretariat—chief of staff Matthew Smith, senior EA Sharan Varma (left) and assistant Amblika Sukumar



team, staffed by two senior executives, prepares briefing documents and guides him on what and how to communicate. "They understand what my goals are. It is they who make it possible," says Elfrink.

An EA often wields enormous influence and is a quasi CEO—or a potential one. And the brightest lots are picked for the position so that the boss can get a good look at the prospect and also allow the high-flyer to witness up close what it takes to occupy the hot seat.

EA to CEO

It's a career path that is common not just at the Bombay House, the headquarters of the Tata Group. Rajan Anandan, Google India's head, was Michael Dell's EA in the US in 2004. Sanjoy Chatterjee, head of Goldman Sachs India, EA to K V Kamath when he was MD and CEO of ICICI Bank. Aadesh Goyal, global head (HR), Tata Communication, was an EA to Sam Pitroda in the 1980s and he helped draft a letter on technological collaboration that was exchanged between the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the German chancellor Helmut Kohl. N Chandrasekaran, CEO and MD of

Arun Maira

Member, Planning Commission, started his career as an EA to Sumant Moolgaonkar, chairman of Telco in the 1960s

'My EA stint gave me unusual exposure at a young age'

In late 1960s, working with the Tatas, I was picked up by Sumant Moolgaonkar, chairman of Telco (Tata Motors now), as his EA. Barely had I settled, when JRD looking for an EA too wanted me. There was a little battle there. But Moolgaonkar won. He told me "you might think it is a step down here but you will benefit as this will give you hands-on experience, unlike the chairman's office."

My first job was to work closely with a senior executive of Tata Sons to set up business in Singapore. It gave me an unusual exposure at a young age. Soon I moved on to Telco to help set up its Pune operations. At times when I doubted myself, my boss would tell me: "You are not going there to teach, but learn. Just go and do". As his EA, I was asked to sit in an

office close to the boss, which was earlier used by a very senior executive. Someone asked me: "Do you know how old you are and how long you have worked and who you are replacing." I was stunned and requested my boss to move me to another room. He said: "This is not about you Maira, it is about the task that needs to be done."

Later, as a business head, I was used to sharing my thoughts with Moolgaonkar even when not his EA. In meetings, I would express myself more freely than other seniors. He sensed my superiority complex because of my access to him. He put me in place, even publicly, once saying: "You should first rub your nose on the shop floor."

(As told to Malini Goyal)



A Facelift for Ms Fonseca

Secretaries may not dictate strategy, but they're as indispensable as executive assistants

Way back in the 1980s, celebrated cartoonist Mario Miranda, then working with the Times Group, was asked to lend some comic relief to the ostensibly dense pages of the *Economic Times*. Miranda's response was Miss Fonseca—a ballsy, buxom secretary but, contrary to the stereotype, not a vacuous, woolly-headed bimbo. Half-a-century later, secretaries to CEOs are still epitomes of efficiency. Just that jet-setting CEOs, their packed days and technology have brought about a lot of changes in the way they do their jobs. For example, think email and not shorthand. And as the boss' role gets more complex because of the larger and more diverse ship he is captaining, the secretary too has to lend an able oar. While she will never be involved in strategy and decision-making the way an executive assistant (EA) is, but she is as dependable—and most often indispensable.

"When she's on vacation my life is hell," says Raman Roy, founder of Quattro BPO of his secretary Shalini Saigal. "It's difficult for me to exist without her," adds aviation entrepreneur GR

N KARASIMHA MURTHY



Infosys' Kris Gopalakrishnan with his secretary Sudha Mahesh

Gopinath. The 'her' in case you are wondering is his secretary of six years, Cecilia John.

For many secretaries, managing chunks of the personal life of the CEO is an integral role, although there are the likes of Infosys' S Gopalakrishnan who draw a line. Janmejaya Sinha, chairman, BCG Asia was the best man at the wedding of his secretary, Quency Fernandes.

Secretarial pay has improved considerably. A secretary to a CEO of a large MNC bank can have an annual CTC as high as ₹50 lakh. But even secretaries' salaries for mid-range companies are better now, averaging ₹4-8 lakh.

Many rise to the post from humble beginnings. AG Panduranga, NR Narayana Murthy's long-time secretary at Infosys, started as a mailroom boy. Today, he is one person Murthy relies on whenever he is stuck, no matter which part of the world he is in.

India's largest private employer, TCS, was EA to S Ramadorai, former MD & CEO of the company for two years (1997-99). Soon after, he went on to handle marquee clients like GE, and was promoted as head of global sales.

EAs today are virtually embedded in a company's core strategy and help the CEOs keep abreast of the latest market trends. Consider Abhishek Shah, 27, EA to UTV Group CEO Ronnie Screwvala, who keeps track of UTV's new media initiatives like music. "My key challenge is to keep thinking young; my target group is 15-34," says the 54-year-old Screwvala. Shah reports into Zenobia Tamboli, the senior EA, who manages Screwvala's secretariat. EAs are virtually the alter egos of the boss and are privy to critical information. Tamboli has "a parallel line to all of Screwvala's emails".

Rajesh Dhuddu, EA to Quattro BPO founder Raman Roy since 2006, incubates new ideas and businesses, and is often the link between Roy and the senior management. Roy remembers his stint at Genpact in the 1990s where his EA would largely do research and follow-ups on his instructions. Dhuddu plays a far more critical role, he is Roy's sounding board and can push him to rethink a decision or an issue if he feels the need.

CK Ranganathan, CMD of Chennai-based personal care marketer CavinKare, has hired Sruti Venkataraman (24) as his EA. In the last decade, as the company expanded into new businesses like foods and restaurants, its revenues grew ten-fold to ₹1,000 crore. To help manage this growth, Sruti shadows him in all strategy meetings. She's the link between him and his direct reports.

Every Monday, Venkataraman spends an hour with the boss, reviewing the week gone by and planning the one ahead. "He [the CEO] asks for my views on different things; he also asks for my opinion of other executives," says Venkataraman.

Indeed, along with contributing to strategic brainstorming, another core function of an EA is to provide feedback on the world outside the CEO's tower—the world of employees. Sanjay Singh, vice-president (public affairs), Tata Services, was EA to Jamshed Irani in the 1980s, when Irani was the deputy MD of Tata Steel. "As an EA, I was one of the major conduits of information to the boss," re-



Ronnie Screwvala | CEO, UTV Group

'Zenobia is my anchor. She has a parallel line to all my emails without exception'

HIS SECRETARIAT: Zenobia Tamboli, Abhishek Shah & Khyati Varma

HIS WORLD: Being a creative company, he has to cut through hierarchy for brain-storming sessions. Shah works closely with him on new initiatives. Tamboli & team provide strong secretarial & business support

HIS GOLDEN RULE: The CEO office has to set the pace for the company

EAs are smart executives with an outstanding track record. But it is their ability to understand their bosses and bond with them that set good ones apart

calls Singh. With 78,000 workers there was a huge gap between the knowledge of senior executives and the workers that had to be managed.

In charge of the Jamshedpur city administration, Tatas also had more than just business to manage. "I made the biggest difference in managing people and their expectations. Being the EA, I knew exactly where the power points in the organisation were,"

says Singh.

Being close to the power centre, EAs wield great authority. "I remember there would be times when I would walk into a meeting with business heads who reported to my boss, and everybody would stand up," says a former EA to a CEO of one of India's largest business conglomerate based in Mumbai, who does not want to be identified. "It's a power kick but it is also a role that can be misused like hell," she adds.

All this makes the task of picking a EA crucial. A great track record is a given. It is how well they understand and support their boss' needs is what holds the key. Beyond qualities like energy, passion and intellect, perhaps more crucial is the ability to bond with the CEO and win his trust. Chemistry is important in a job that is as much about skills as it is about managing relationships at multiple levels. EAs need to have "good anticipatory skills".

Sanjay Jog, HR head, Future Group, remembers hiring an EA for founder Kishore Blyani. The candidate was an MBA and then working with the Bharti Group. When Blyani met the candidate, Jog says, the boss asked nothing about work but plenty about family and background. Blyani then told Jog: "Chemistry *jamega*." The EA is on board, the chief is content, and the crew in the corner cubicles goes about its task of growth and value creation with renewed gusto.

SHOME BASU



Raman Roy | CMD, Quattro India

'Their job is to make me look good'

HIS SECRETARIAT: EA Rajesh Dhuddu and secretary Shalini Saigal

HIS WORLD: A pioneer in the BPO business, his calendar is packed with business, social and industry engagements. Often things can change suddenly. Dhuddu keeps track of the business, is the link between unit heads, is Roy's sounding board for new ideas and prepares his speeches etc. Shalini manages his calendar, travel, appointments and dinners

HIS GOLDEN RULE: To keep in mind that their views matter. They can influence.

—Additional reporting by Nandini Raghavendra, Sarah Jacob, Sangeetha Kandavel and V Balasubramanian