

Moneymakers

FIVE QUESTIONS
WITH MELISSA FORD

It takes leadership to be an executive assistant

The role of the office secretary — now executive assistant — has evolved a lot since a California woman created the Executive Secretaries organization in 1938.

Some still call themselves secretaries, though the preferred term is executive assistant. Many of the roles are the same, but there is more to being a CEO's right hand than knowing shorthand, said Melissa Ford, president of the Houston chapter of the group, which changed its name to Executive Women International in 1977.

The name change reflected the changing roles of its members. Ford is an executive assistant to the boss at Houston-based DX

Service Co., and the Houston chapter, EWI's largest with 154 members from 97 companies, is a big tent, including business owners, executives and one man.

Executive Women International (EWI) will hold its annual meeting in Houston Thursday through Saturday.

Ford sat down with Houston Chronicle business reporter Brad Hem to talk about the evolution of the position, its importance to a company and the group's secret contact list.

Q: How has the role of an executive assistant changed over the years?

A: As I always say, we do a lot more than type, file and answer the phone. Originally that's what secretaries were hired to do. You were the subservient one, and you were expected to serve your boss. As women have entered the workplace more and become more involved in businesses, we've gotten more responsibilities. We're more on the management side than we used to be. It's different because the times have changed. A lot of executives are more self-sufficient than they used to be. Most of these executives use their own computer, which means they generate some of their own documents. They e-mail. When Lucille Johnson Perkins



KAREN WARREN: CHRONICLE

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decided that we needed an organization, she was still wearing gloves and hats and being proper and serving. That's not at all what we do anymore. We fly on corporate jets now. We're involved in budgets now. We still type, file and answer the phones.

It's just a lot broader now than it was.

Q: What other skills or training are common among assistants now?

A: Leadership, No. 1. That is part of what

EWI is all about. We have leadership training in different forms. EWI believes leadership can and must be taught. Everyone possesses leadership potential, and there are stellar examples of leadership within EWI. Did I ever think that I could be president of the largest chapter of EWI? No way. And just from being a part of EWI and networking with different women, some of them who own their own businesses, that feeling is just no longer.

Q: Is it difficult to join EWI? How do people become members? Do you ever reject people?

A: I don't like the word 'reject.' We have had people interested in membership that we've said no to. We have a pie chart of members' different fields, and we're always after the right mix. For example, we have a lot of hotel members right now, so we're not recruiting new hotel members. We look at our pie chart and see where are we heavy, where are we light? Membership is by invitation only. If you ask to join, we take the request to the membership committee. We have a roster of members that's distributed to everyone in our organization. That's kind of a valuable piece of information. We're always very wary of

someone who says 'Hey, I want to be a member of EWI.' Well, are they just looking for our list? Do you want Mr. CEO of CenterPoint's address?

Q: Reporters are taught early on to always be nice to our sources' assistants because they control the schedule, which messages get passed on and which calls get through. How much of a gatekeeper are you?

A: I personally am pretty well 100 percent a gatekeeper, and so are most of our members. We're in a position of trust. Anytime someone has a complaint, they think they need to speak to the head man. It takes a lot of patience, a lot of tact. You can't hang up on people. You can't cut people off. That crosses over to that leadership training we've had, because it teaches you how to deal with difficult people.

Q: Would a boss still ask his assistant to go pick out a birthday gift for his wife?

A: I've got a friend who just took a brand new job working for a very prestigious person, and one of his questions was 'How are you at the grunt work?' Well, the grunt work has really changed. A lot of it can be really fun. Can you get on my jet, fly down to South Texas and pick up my dog? I don't know about you, but that sounds OK to me.

We don't do a lot of serving coffee in our white gloves anymore, but of course, if your boss has someone in his office, just because you're human, you're going to ask if you can get them something to drink.

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AARP applauds companies

■ S.C. Johnson wins as best for workers over 50

By AMY HOAK
DOW JONES NEWS SERVICE

CHICAGO — With brands like Shout, Windex and Scrubbing Bubbles under its name, S.C. Johnson & Son certainly should be one of the cleanest companies to work for. But on Tuesday, AARP acknowledged the company for a different reason: Its policies and practices that make it the best workplace for those over the age of 50.

The Racine, Wis.-based company placed No. 1 on the 2007 AARP "Best Employers for Workers Over 50" list.

Reasons included the company's flexible work arrangements, generous health benefits that include an on-site medical center, financial benefits and retirement-planning tools. The company provides lifelong learning courses, said spokeswoman Kelly Semrau.

"A third of our employees are 50-plus" and many of them have worked at the firm for years, Semrau said.

No. 2 on the list was last year's winner, Mercy Health System, based in Janesville, Wis. According to the AARP, the not-for-profit provides a variety of alternative work arrangements, which include opportunities for nurses to work at different facilities or departments and seasonal work programs that allow employees to take leave while maintaining their eligibility for benefits.

Third on the list was First Horizon National Corp. in Memphis, followed by San Diego-based Scripps Health and Muscatine, Iowa-based Stanley Consultants.

The only Texas workplace to make the list was the University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, at No. 40.

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