

SHERRY COOPER IS “A DYNAMITE PERSON.” Besides being one of Bay Street’s top economists and leading soothsayers, she is, in the words of Trudy Verkaik, fast-paced, kind and “wonderful to work for.” Verkaik should know—she’s the executive assistant who plans Cooper’s time, fields her calls and gets her to more than 200 presentations a year, with slides in hand, a special meal waiting and a route mapped out all the way to the podium.

In the rarified atmosphere of Bay Street’s executive floors, one suspects that having a Trudy Verkaik is—more than a seven-figure bonus or drop-top Porsche 911 Carrera—the most coveted of status symbols. Verkaik is about five feet, five inches tall, with naturally curly and subtly highlighted hair. She comes across as all warmth and congeniality. But if she agrees to take you on as a boss, she will micromanage your life right down to the hypo-allergenic pillow you will be resting your weary head on in a far-off hotel room after the latest dog-and-pony show.

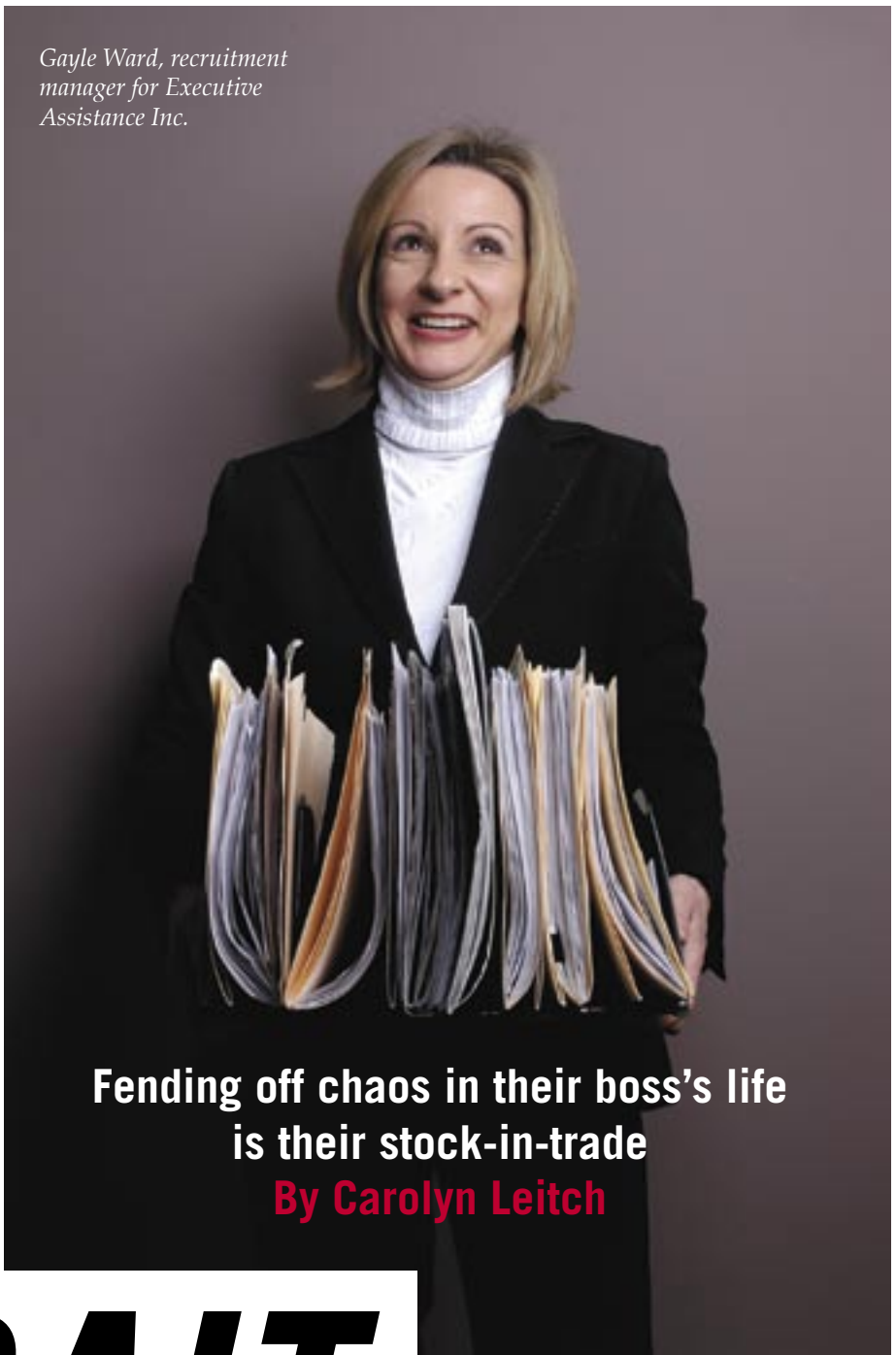
“I do anything that makes their lives easier,” she says of the executives she has served over the past 30 years or so. Verkaik doesn’t have extensive formal training for this role, aside from a few secretarial courses after high school. Nor does she believe you can learn these skills in college. She earned her credentials working for successively larger companies in the mining industry. As her former boss Greg Wilkins rose through the ranks at American Barrick Resources Corp., Horsham Corp. and TrizecHahn Corp., she not only learned how to operate in the mining and real estate worlds, but she also organized his life on the circuit as a race-car driver—a few times cheering from the stands.

As Cooper’s assistant at BMO Nesbitt Burns Inc., Verkaik sees her role as strategist, confidante and fixer. Verkaik describes how she colour-coded Cooper’s schedule so that her boss knows at a glance what she’s supposed to be doing (pink for travel, coral for writing time, blue for meetings and yellow for presentations). “We can’t have any glitches,” she says.

Savvy executives know that they risk seeing their working lives descend into chaos if their EA is not up to the task. That’s why they will go to such lengths to find the right one.

For this, many turn to Ann Binsted. She matched Verkaik with Cooper, as well as placing many of the star EAs on Bay Street. Binsted, who started in the business as a summer temp herself, founded Executive Assistance Inc. in 1994 when she recognized that her eye for picking talent could

Gayle Ward, recruitment manager for Executive Assistance Inc.



Fending off chaos in their boss’s life is their stock-in-trade

By Carolyn Leitch

PORTRAIT OF THE EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT

become a lucrative niche.

Binsted looks for women who are efficient, reliable and organized, with top-notch computer skills. A lack of small children, of course, is not a prerequisite, but it does mean the candidate has more time to devote to her boss. However, the ability to stay quiet about hostile takeovers, impending mergers and the like is paramount. It’s not uncommon for an EA to handle her boss’s finances, pay the Visa bill and pick out his or her suits. “It’s almost like being married,” says Binsted.

All of this leads one to wonder, what if the candidate is, um, a man? Has

Binsted ever placed one? “Never. Not at the CEO level. The best a really earnest and hard-working male might hope for on Bay Street is to be placed with somebody at the level of an investment adviser.”

Binsted also screens for grooming. In this regard, she looks for a certain reserve and conservatism. “They usually have what we call ‘polish.’ ” And based on the pay scale of EAs, she adds, they can afford it. An EA working for a CEO can expect a salary between \$60,000 and \$100,000 and a performance bonus on top of that. A “stellar” bonus would be in the range of 20 to 30 percent.

'I do anything that makes their lives easier'

Grateful executives are glad to pay it. The good ones—bosses that is—tend to keep their EAs for 10, 15, 20 years, Binsted says. “We know of executives who can’t keep an EA,” she confides. “They go through three or four a year.” The behaviour of those bosses, she says, ranges from sexist to highly demanding to downright abusive. Which is not to say that these women aren’t battle-hardened. They tend to be consummate professionals who aren’t fazed by the occasional barked command or snappish response.

The trick, Verkaik says, is not to take things personally. “I just want peace. I don’t like confrontation. I want everybody to get along and have a good time.” She admits to an intuition that lets her get inside the head of a boss she really likes. “As Sherry says, I read her mind and I finish her sentences.”

Verkaik also likes to maintain a certain accessibility—just in case her boss has a need that Verkaik didn’t anticipate. She works from about 7:15 in the morning to 6 at night, but relaxing in the evening or out shopping on the weekend, she keeps her BlackBerry attached to her hip. Perhaps her boss is in another time zone, or just wants to get something off her mind. This is not to say that Verkaik is expected to respond.

“Naturally, I just answer it right away. I can’t leave it sitting there.” She allows that there are times when she stays in bed rather than get up in the middle of the night to start text messaging. “Sometimes I do, sometimes I don’t. I mean, there is a limit, you do have to get your sleep,” says the woman who apparently has no limits.

Does she ever feel like letting things slide at the office, even for a little while and, say, play video poker? “No. Never. Never. That doesn’t happen,” says Verkaik, laughing at the very idea. Not that she would actually slow down, but is she ever just ... *tempted*? She is truly perplexed by the question. No. Never. This time she’s not laughing.

Lisa Duffy has similar genetic coding, but she has followed a different path. Duffy figured she had a knack for organizational skills when she discovered that not everyone arranges the clothes in their closets by colour.

Charming, energetic and fit, she has a master’s degree in public administration from the University of Texas at Arlington. She is also efficient, reliable and organized. Duffy worked for a consulting firm in Texas, then the mayor’s office in Guelph, Ont., and now she works for a city councillor in a Toronto suburb.

Several years of keeping the household running for her husband, three stepchildren, two cats and a dog puts looking after one councillor into perspective. “I’ve learned a lot about negotiation skills, too,” she says of life with three teenage girls. Still, Duffy works “50 pretty-intense hours” a week. Whatever images some taxpayers might have of city workers sitting around drinking coffee, Duffy says, are simply not true.

These days she’s spending a lot of time fielding calls from citizens complaining about the pace, timing and overall quality of snow removal from one street or another. Duffy consoles, cajoles, persuades the transportation and public works department to report back to her and keeps the councillor in the loop on every call.

She also writes speeches for the councillor and helps plan community events associated with Earth Day. She sees her role as enhancing the boss’s image. “You’re supporting someone who may have centre stage so you really have to enjoy being behind the scenes.” What about temperament? Do you have to get along with the person you’re working for to be a good EA? Having your values aligned is absolutely key, says Duffy. “I think one of the biggest challenges is finding the right fit. Not just personality fit but

Trudy Verkaik micromanages the life of Bay Street economist Sherry Cooper

'It's almost like being married'

Ann Binsted has found a lucrative niche as an executive assistant recruiter

character fit."

Duffy is most satisfied when she's working for a boss who wants to enhance her role in return. Duffy sees the business world as "a great, exciting adventure" and she likes the challenges of writing and working with other people.

Some executives, she says, see an EA as a taskmaster, which is a view she finds frustrating. She adds that an assistant can quickly feel burned out if the job isn't interesting or rewarding. Duffy would like to see more executives take on the role of mentor. "Women helping women—we need more of that."

Many women in these roles seem to have an affinity for helping others that goes far beyond the famed organization and reliability. Indeed, they are brimming with charisma and joie de vivre and a certain desire to please.

At her Toronto home, Verkaik has hanging on the wall a two-page poem that Cooper wrote and gave to her at Christmas. "It was so lovely I had to have it framed," she says. "It's wonderful. Those are my rewards."

When her boss muses along the lines of "I don't know what I'd do without you," Verkaik assures her that she has no plans to move on yet. "I tell her, I'm not going to leave you. I've just got you trained where I want you to be." ■



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