



At the top end of the scale, PA wages can reach £100,000, but the expectations rise accordingly. It's a tough game and shrinking violets need not apply, says Zenab Short

Just a sec? Not in these jobs, you're not

Today's top secretary hires and fires her own staff. She is contactable 24/7 via her BlackBerry, takes a daily business newspaper and talks knowingly of FTSE 100 companies. Her official job title may be executive or business assistant, researcher, office administrator or personal assistant. These all mean much the same thing: she is a secretary at the height of her powers, earning up to £100,000 a year.

"She is a Miss Money Penny cross-bred with Superwoman," says recruiter Julia Killingbeck of Maine-Tucker. "She's her boss's Bible of information and his right-hand woman. The enlightened men in suits recognise she is worth her weight in gold," claims recruiter Sheila Childs, who recently placed one such candidate in a £55,000 role and has a £60,000 job on her books.

Land the right job with the right person, and the sky is the limit. Recruiter Emily Aldrich reminisces about the PA placed in a £70,000 role, while Julia Killingbeck claims one PA negotiated a salary of £100,000.

But nothing comes for free. "If you want work-life balance, don't go for PA jobs paying above £35,000, because it really is tough at the top," warns Vicki Wilkins of Crone Corkhill. "Bosses paying that much are workaholics and will not appreciate that you might have a home life too."

Sheila Childs's typical candidate would be a single woman, in her late 30s to early 40s, who is totally dedicated to "making her employer run smoothly and keep him on the road," to use Sheila's boss-as-car analogy.

"You might be rung early on a Sunday morning by him (or, sometimes, her) via a meeting in, say, Kuala Lumpur. He needs something done urgently - you have to drop everything to sort it out," says Vicki Wilkins. "So ask yourself - could you handle that?" And it gets worse: "I know of girls who have had to cancel their own holidays because their boss is having a work crisis which they have to attend to instead," says Emily Aldrich.

Molly Sales, who earns £45,500 as PA to a managing director, suggests that shrinking violets need not apply. "You have to stand up for your rights with these very senior people, or they will walk all over you," she says, while admitting having bought her boss underpants when he needed to go abroad suddenly, and vacuuming the office when the cleaner did not turn up.

So you tick all the boxes and win the job. But be warned - it is not a career for prima donnas. While the boss may



Sitting pretty... the power PA is a genius at anticipating all eventualities

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN RICARD/GETTY IMAGES/DK

admit he could not do his job without her, the top PA must be content to let him get all the glory. "My boss was lovely but he used to say to clients and suppliers, 'Just speak to my secretary' in a patronising sort of way, which riled me," says Helen Parson, PA to a chairman. "But, as he paid me £40,000, I could live with it. Businessmen don't like ditherers. They are very direct in their approach and expect you to just get on with your job of making their lives easier."

The power PA is a genius at "thinking the day", in industry-speak. She knows a month in advance what her boss will be doing, before he does so himself. Anticipating his every move, she researches who he will see,

writes agendas for his meetings and puts the speech she has written, which he will deliver, into his hand. Tessa James works for an MD in the fast-moving, cut-and-thrust world of private equity. She says: "One day I'm involved in top-secret deals, drawing up non-disclosure agreements, and the next, I'm ordering tyres for his car and filing away his business cards." She earns almost £40,000, a drop in the ocean compared to the MD's salary. "But I have to laugh," she says. "There he is with his huge Princeton-educated brain, but he could not get through his day without me. I literally organise every hour of it for him."

Camilla Campbell-Stanway is

looking for a PA role which pays £40,000. The world she has spent her career in, working for boards of directors in the property business, is still male-dominated. Tellingly, she says: "I have always found it easy working with guys, as I have two brothers, but I know some women find it quite tough. You're almost like a surrogate wife to your boss."

Sheena Smith, ex-PA to the chairman of a shipping company, describes her role as "nanny to grown-ups. I had to check my own ego in at the door." She says that although she didn't type even one letter for her boss (he did his own, and anyway, she was too busy doing things like negotiating the purchase of his New York apartment), the way in to

the best jobs is still to start as a traditional secretary and then to work your way up. Her first secretarial job paid £23,000; six years later, she was on £45,000.

If working as a demanding person's sidekick, who may ask you to put your private life on hold, buy their underpants and write their speeches has appeal, where should you be looking? "Only five agencies in London have these top vacancies," cautions Sheena. So a wannabe Miss Money Penny requires James Bond-like cunning to smoke them out - and that's a challenge the quick-thinking, trouble-shooting PA rises to effortlessly.

Some names have been changed.