

INTERVIEW

Digital is no longer an Option

Working digitally is an essential part of a management assistants job, says Corrie Fourie. He is an Executive Assistant in South Africa and, in this interview, talks about how his workplace becomes more and more digital. He also reveals why he was convinced that South Africa needed an international assistants network.



CORRIE FOURIE

is currently working as the Executive Assistant to the Managing Director of Fresenius Kabi in South Africa. He started his career in the military service and also studied opera singing. In his opinion, assistants need to work and network more internationally, that's why he founded IMA South Africa.

Foto: Corrie Fourie

Corrie, since when have you been working as an assistant?

After my National Military Training, I started my working career as a reservations clerk at the South African Railways in 1980. After 13 years and having been promoted to Chief Clerk I decided to join the military in a full-time capacity within the HR environment. During my service in the military I also served on many committees and assisted in arranging several high-profile events. Nonetheless, in 2002 I decided to pursue a career in the corporate private sector where I have gained experience in various positions and companies. In 2009 I accepted an offer as the Executive Assistant to the Managing Director of Fresenius Kabi South Africa, where I have been since.

Which tasks does your actual job involve?

In addition to my position as Executive Assistant I recently also became Assistant to the Director of Finance, Supply Chain and IT. In this role I am responsible for diary management and scheduling of several types of meetings. I arrange functions and events, do travel bookings and travel management, assist with various types of projects and act as the first point of contact for the MD and FD's office. I also do some general office management in the Executive Suite.

Are there any developments during your many years of experience that stick out?

Oh yes, of course. What I would point out are the many changes in technology. Back then, for example, we would communicate via telex machines and it was very complicated. Today, we just write an e-mail; talk via WhatsApp, Skype calls and all the other communication tools available on various platforms. This has a great impact on how people work nowadays. The changes have been enormous, but I think that for the young generation, who has no knowledge about how it was, the development will be even stronger.

Not only technologies have changed, our workplaces have become more and more "digital". Have you had to deal with it too?

Absolutely. Working within the digital age and as we head towards the 4th Industrial Revolution

working digitally is no longer an option but increasingly an essential part of a management assistants job. In my own environment I am striving to work more paperless and save energy.

I was part of a recent implementation and migration towards an online travel booking tool; following a decision by the board of Fresenius to implement such a tool in all the markets. The goal was to not only save costs but also to have better visibility on travel trends and to increase our buying power and being able to negotiate for better tariffs. Video conferencing, Skype calls and webinars also are becoming increasingly popular as a means of connecting people and employees, networking with other individuals and for conducting meetings.

Can you name tools and apps you are using?

24Me is a free app where you set reminders for paying accounts, important meetings etc. Used to sync all my to-do lists, notes, calendar and anything else into one convenient app. **TinyScan** lets you scan any document and send to your e-mail. Working across time zones – **Time Zone Ninja** is a very handy app and saves me many headaches. **TripIT** is a handy tool which allows you to coordinate your boss's travel. **Expensify** is a handy tool to keep track of travel expenses.

Do you do any trainings?

In my job you always need to be up to date and "in demand". I gladly take the opportunity for online trainings that are on offer. My last one was called "How to manage your boss". I am also planning to enroll at the University of Cape Town to do an online training program.

I want to add, that it is great to be given the opportunity to do trainings. But professional development needs to be taken in one's own hands. You have to take care of your development yourself and not wait for your boss to take the initiative. Training also means reading, networking, meeting colleagues etc.!

Does your job have any international components?

Since Fresenius is an international company, my job also involves many international contacts.

First of all, I regularly get calls from the Managing Directors of other countries. I recently talked to a colleague in Paris, about a conference in Brussels. Then I was in contact with Barcelona to arrange a marketing meeting.

You see, there is always lots of interaction between assistants in other countries where Fresenius is. To me, being part of IMA, therefore is a huge benefit. Once, I needed to make reservations in a specific restaurant in Austria. I called my IMA-colleague in Austria and got help from her right away.

What were the main reasons South Africa decided to join IMA?

In South Africa we have four national associations with an estimated 20 000 members spread amongst these associations. I have been a member and award winner of all the national associations. Around 2013 I started searching for an international association which I could join as part of my further development and training.

I realized working within an international company, often having to interact with assistants from other countries in Europe will add to my benefit and advantage. I then came across which was then EUMA. After several e-mails and discussions, I decided to join as an individual member and was subsequently invited as a speaker to the Netherlands.

Apart from the networking and interaction across countries in Europe the way IMA is structured and operates impressed on me. I attended several international conferences and training days since and started advocating amongst assistants in South Africa to test the possibility of starting an IMA group. Eventually ten members joined which gave us an opportunity to apply for ratification to the Executive Council during the International Conference in The Hague 2017.

I foresee great potential with the opportunity for huge growth in the near future; not only in South Africa but also moving into Africa. Of course, this would take time and will not happen overnight. A strong diverse team willing to take the first steps are needed with much support from management assistants in Europe to advocate via all means of marketing the benefit of being part

of and a proud member of an international network of choice.

In Germany, the assistant's role is currently changing a lot – how about SA? How would you describe its standing?

Since I moved into the management assistants profession in a full-time capacity the role has changed dramatically from a mere typist/receptionist/administrative position or role to a more integrated and inclusive function which forms a definite partnership relation between the management assistant and his/her executive or manager.

From my perspective it is important to have a good overall understanding of the business as a whole. This helps me to render the assistance and support which my executives need to free up their time which enables them to focus their energy on managing and expanding the business.

The foundation of this working relation lies in the mutual trust which is formed between the management assistant and the executive/manager. It is essential that the management assistant is an all-rounder, in support of the executive. The continuous development and training of management assistants and networking within their respective groups are some of the most important elements which is often overlooked by management. If this would become but one of the focus areas the advantage and benefits this would add to the working life of the executives is yet to be realized.

Thank you!

The interview was conducted by Melanie Grell

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