

# EA AS A LEADER – 8 JUNE 2022

## Q&A SESSION

**Q: Speaking of resilience, being an EA to someone very senior can often find the EA displaced when their Exec retires. The skills an EA at that level has doesn't always compliment the skills required to fulfil that level outside of the EA roll. Has anyone on the panel been in that position and what did they do?**

- Use your networks, you would be amazed what you can move into when you just ask.

**Q: It's such a great point that was made about mentoring and tapping into the wisdom of our peers and leaders. I've been wondering for a while about how to tap into a mentoring program. Is there any advice you can give about how to go about this?**

- There seems to be a market for it, maybe just double check cross over with lead EA Network ([About us](#) | [LEAD EA Network](#) | [Canberra](#))

**Q: How would you network between Departments?**

- I would attend any and all public events that have a networking portion at the end. You would be amazed to see how quickly your cross-government network grows.
- Of course, not to plug ourselves at all, however the IPAA EA Network events are most useful as the attendees are the ones you will deal with more frequently ☺

**Q: What are some unique things you do as an EA that sets you apart from other EA's?**

- Changing meetings to accommodate their Executives diary instead of it all being about my Executives diary.
- Being very approachable.
- I do lots of work with EAs that isn't my job. I'll organise meetings with key people if I can see lots of EAs having a problem. I can tap into all the EAs across the ACTPS to arrange the meeting that benefits us, and the area being bombarded with questions and problems.
- I can connect dots that others aren't aware of so I will call someone and let them know.
- I share my knowledge.
- I make contact with our most junior EAs who are often intimidated to make contact.

**Q: How do you manage the work/life balance in terms of when you switch off for the day. For example, are you available 24/7 or do you have a cut-off time?**

- This is very hard when you work to the most senior executive. The role isn't 9-5pm. You need to be in a position in your own family life to commit more to these roles. I generally sign off no later than 6.30pm most days. My executive does make contact with me outside of normal hours, but she is very mindful of my work/life balance, and she often sends me things just as a heads up so I know she needs something in the morning. It is unusual for her to want me to do something outside of these hours. Working from home it is easy to start work much earlier but I have made myself not do this and make myself do some exercise or some of my cross stitch until 8.30am.
- This can be very hard; it is up to you to instil discipline in what your normal workday looks like. I drop my kids at school, make special events work and am always home for dinner and bedtime. I will log on early morning or later in the evening to make this work.

**Q: Not a question but a comment to say that as a new EA (6 months) I appreciate your knowledge and experience sharing to set EAs up for success.**

- If only one person gets something out of what I do, no matter what time and effort I have put into it, makes it worthwhile for me. Sharing information is very powerful and why not help those avoid the mistakes you have made already!
- Such great news, Welcome to the EA role. Remember we were all new at one point. Take deep breaths on some days and enjoy the dynamic role you are now privy too 😊

**Q: What is the best way of dealing with clearances? My exec has numerous streams of incoming information, and it would be helpful to get some advice on how to group that.**

- Understanding the priorities is key. Is ministerial correspondence right up there for your Minister, if it is it, is a priority. Looking at deadlines and escalating them if they have been hanging around for a while. Working with an executive officer is very useful because they can often help with clearing work on their behalf in some circumstances. Letting the Executive know what they have to clear each day. Setting aside some time in their diary for clearance or if you have Estimates coming up, blocking out time for preparation ahead of it is good to do in planning.
- Know your executive priorities, I have found the best way to work is most senior down helps determine urgency. I have also found that using a colour code system on all forms of correspondence helps (hard copy or email)

**Q: What is one tip the panel would give to someone starting out as an EA?**

- Being a good EA means you are often thrown things from far and wide that sometimes isn't your job but it is your job to be the facilitator/conduit to make things happen. The work done by policy officers, admin support etc is the bread and butter so you need to get a lot of the BAU through so your Executive is meeting his/her outcomes. The work you do is very important, and you are not 'just' the EA.
- Breathe, you have this. No one expects you to know everything – ask all the questions you can (from the right people) and back yourself 😊

**Q: Have you ever worked with a difficult Executive? If so, how did you manage the relationship to ensure they are using their time effectively.**

- Personally no. If, however I have a difficult executive I would just ensure that I worked the way that best worked for them (just ask) if this continues then find another job.

**Q: Do your respective departments have formal EA Committee's or Networks? What is your role, and what are the roles of the other senior EAs in your respective departments?**

- At Defence myself and another EA led the Defence EA Network (DEAN) we would meet with the EA Executive sponsor, talk about training opportunities, put together a budget to send EAs on training, create welcome packs for EAs and worked with SES Unit to roll recruitment for EAs under there banner. All Departments / Agencies as far as I am aware have them. Ask a friend 😊

**Q: I am an EA to several executives in a legal area in the APS. One thing I have struggled with is prioritising tasks and meetings when I don't necessarily understand the subject matter. Have you experienced this situation, and if so, how have you prioritised tasks?**

- This is very difficult when you are expected to work for multiple Executives. I think initially you have to meet with each one of them and ask them what their priorities are, so you understand them. Having a catch up at the beginning or end of the week to find out what is coming up that won't catch you off guard. Most Executives are always happy if you can assist them with anything especially if they have to share an EA.
- It is hard and if in doubt, I have looked from a most senior down approach

**Q: Have you ever had someone be disrespectful to you because you are "just the EA"? How did you deal with the situation?**

- To be quite honest in my 33 years as an EA I have never come across anyone who has made me feel that way. I understand the value of my role and I always try and help people I work with to get their work through my manager, so I haven't found this, or I haven't noticed it!
- I can't say I have ever experienced this, know that you are NOT just an EA. Remember your worth, just because someone has a negative position towards the role of an EA don't let that define you or undermine the position you are in.

**Q: How do you approach asking someone to be a mentor?**

- Most people are generally chuffed to be asked. I think the first things is to know what it is you want to get out of mentoring and let them know why you think they can help you.
- I found that a mentor is someone you are able to look up too and get along with, just ask the worst they can say is No. I found that if you provide reason behind why you think they would be a great mentor for you than most of the time they will say yes. Put a trial period in and see if it works

**Q: Loyalty is very important to me and one of my SES has asked me to move with him to another government agency/Dep, but I feel guilty for leaving my other executive. Any advice I appreciate this is a very individual situation based on your personal circumstances.**

- I haven't worked for multiple Executives so I don't know what I would do but I have had the dilemma when my Executive has assumed I would go with him if I moved. My family circumstances dictated where I need to be located and he did his best to make me feel bad. I worked for him for 9 years and in the end, I just had to do something for myself. Relationships go two ways. You have to look at all opportunities for your own career and development as well. A really good Executive wouldn't put themselves first.
- Ask yourself the question "what is best for me" think about your career and the opportunities in both roles and go from there. Remember that your executive should be happy for you whatever you decide and if they are not then you will know you made the right decision anyway 😊

**Q: The world of EA-ing is rapidly evolving these days. Where does the panel see the future of EA's heading?**

- EA as a career is a relatively new concept, there are some many different ways to title what we do. I think it will continue to evolve into a strategic partnership between the Executive and the EA. I am excited to see what the changes will be, and it is also one of the reasons I love what I do, it is ever evolving

**Q: Obviously everyone has a wealth of experience in the EA role, but were there any skills that you brought into the role that you think were beneficial?**

- Working in a ministerial branch, cabinet office and budget area helped me understand machinery of government, so I think bringing this into my EA roles was really helpful.
- Organised – there really is no substitute for being organised in these roles

**Q: What skills would you say have been the most beneficial for you professionally?**

- The multiple years I have been an EA have helped me a lot. Most things are common sense – not everyone has this funnily enough. Some people are very bad at processes so having templates is helpful and I think Executives are watching more than you think what you do and can see you wheel and deal to get what you want but also doing it without making people annoyed along the way.

**Q: Being new to the role would be great if you can share good training courses to take for being effective and efficient**

- Diploma of Government really helped me understand Machinery of Government when I first started out was the theory behind the day to day of what you do and how those Ministerial briefs helped shape legislation or policy

**Q: Coming into being an EA as my first job outside of customer service, what are some of the tips you might have regarding stepping into more of a corporate/professional role and creating those first initial relationships with people in your department and your executive**

- You would be amazed at the skills you already have as someone who was customer facing. Ask what, where, when, why, who.
- Be mindful of body language and don't be afraid to ask questions

**Q: What self-care strategies do the panel apply to themselves?**

- I find a good walk helps, get up, chat to people. Find whatever helps you to un-wind and use that as your strategy 😊

**Q: Hi, as mothers being an EA, do you find it being the most rewardable job. Sometimes I feel I need to continuous find the next big skill to achieve, however in saying that I EA for a CIO that the most amazing Executive.**

- This seems to be a thought more than a question? I can't really gauge what they would like as a response?

**Q: You said at the start that you manage 15 different people's diaries. What are some tips to managing so many different people?**

- I only look after one calendar out of the 15 and that is my boss, Kathy Leigh's calendar. She has 15 direct reports and I have read only access to those calendars. I am required regularly to find a time for a meeting across all those calendars.
- Firstly, understanding the priority of the meeting and asking the right questions i.e. who are the main people who need to be at the meeting. Looking at their calendars first.
- When does the meeting have to happen by?
- Understanding the colours of the 15 other calendars – what do they mean i.e. Minister's meetings, external stakeholder meetings, private appts etc.

- During COVID many of our executives started picking up children – avoiding those timeslots if I can even though we are working more ‘normally’. The flexibility in the ACT PS means we can accommodate many timeslots now and executives come back on in the evening or early morning. There are times I can’t accommodate, and they understand.
- I try not to make meetings over lunch or after 5pm, sometimes this is unavoidable as well but is an exception to the rule.
- The EAs who work for Kathy’s 15 direct reports know I try very hard not to make meetings at a time normally that will cause them a lot of problems. I go out of my way to accommodate them to the point I will talk to another EA to get them to move a meeting I can see that is the problem and I shift that one (if it is with Kathy) so the meeting Kathy needs can happen more easily.
- When I have a meeting, I have no choice they don’t get annoyed they just make things happen for me so those networks we keep banging on about come into play here. I have been the EA at the bottom of the chain – it’s not fun – we are often the people who have to deliver a message so we can bear the brunt of someone who is annoyed about it.

**Q: What are some key professional institutes that are useful for an EA/EO to be a member of?**

- IPAA and LEAD

**Q: For personal reasons, I stepped down from my latest FAS EA role, to look after 2 AS' instead. I now work with a new young EA as the new EA to the FAS. I have tried to assist with knowledge, however I find that she is not interested in anything that I have to say, and treats me with some disdain, to the extent that I am ignored completely. How do you try to impart knowledge when it is not welcome but really could assist?**

- You can only help people that want to be helped. They will not succeed in these jobs if that is the attitude they take. Take a step back and let them come to you

**Q: As an EA, do you ever feel like you can't have days off, or be sick because there are things waiting on you or due dates coming up. How do you deal with this?**

- All the time. Unfortunately, being away a day or two isn’t long enough for work not to pile up. If you are away a week or more often the reactive works comes and goes, and you don’t have to worry about it. Having the ability now to work from home is good and bad. Good that you can access emails etc bad that you can do this – double edged sword. To be honest I generally log on the night before and clear as much as I can otherwise my day is going to be horrendous. This is not ideal, but it gets you out of feeling like you are drowning.
- Of course, I think everyone suffers the work guilt at times. Just remember that if you are off unwell your body is telling you it needs the time. Work will always be there tomorrow. Don’t get me wrong the catch up is hard and makes you feel like it is never the right time to be off, but life happens ☺

**Q: Having a good working relationship with your Exec is paramount to an EA, do you believe that the person you work for, and their working style is more important than where you work and secondly, have you ever held back on taking other opportunities because of the great relationship with that Exec?**

- Yes and no. I believe that working for someone you get along with is paramount to a great working relationship however don’t forget this is YOUR career. Do what is best for you.
- As an EA loyalty can sometimes play funny tricks on you. Please just remember that your career needs to come first. If it doesn’t you may miss out on something truly amazing

**Q: Being the constant go-to person and needing to keep steady and mindful, what is your natural "reset" for yourself? --to keep you grounded and brings you back to self? What is your own 'third space?' i.e. taking a walk**

- I find just getting away from my desk for 5min always helps, mindfulness breaks are important, figure out what helps create your Zen and use it

**Q: As a Senior EA, Leadership to me is not about being the best, it's about making everyone else better. Networking and building that capability by helping others around you, whilst building trust enables you to do your job effectively.**

- I couldn't agree more, well said

**Q: A few of the new EA's were left in the exact way you explained it... given a laptop and then put straight into lockdown and basically forced to teach themselves how to be an EA. If you were feeling like your Exec team (your EO and fellow senior EA's) who have more experience than you, weren't actually that helpful or supportive... what would you do?**

- Reach out to someone you may have spoken to and ask them for some guidance and help. People reach out to me all the time. I wrote an induction guide with all the links to key documents, email addresses, websites, share point sites to assist brand new EAs who started like you did. As a senior EA it is my job to make contact you to offer support and guidance so those working around you aren't doing their job unfortunately. We should have a 'buddy' system where a new EA is matched with someone who is willing and happy to assist and support.
- Friends – They don't even need to be in the same department of agency (use your network)

**Q: OMG, I LOVE these women! So humble, kind, knowledgeable, and generous with their lives as EA's. Such a great forum. Thank you!**

- No thank you for being so kind and generous with your comments. It's hard sometimes to know if you have hit the mark and have been able to encourage people to stay working in a wonderful cohort, we call being an EA. It is very worthwhile and rewarding.
- Such a lovely comment. Thank you.

**Q: How do we encourage people to see being an EA as a long-term career? There seems to be a huge demand in Canberra for EA's and many people seem to view the EA role as a steppingstone to another career pathway. Thanks in advance for your time today ladies :)**

- It makes me very sad to know lots of people see this as a way into the public service whether it is Commonwealth or ACT. I think we have some work to do with our classifications so there is a career path. In the ACT PS our structure is very flat, so we have lots of 5s and 6s but very few 4s. We are constantly trying to backfill for people moving to other roles. I think we need to introduce a traineeship for EAs in Yr 11 so we can encourage those students who may not know what they want to do to come into the public service to see what it is like I sit with EAs across all the different levels and different Branches and Divisions as well as in a Secretary or Deputy Secretary's office and learn from them. This is really the only way to learn how to be an EA – on the job training. Once they finish their traineeship – they are offered an ASO/APS 3. You aren't expected to know everything and can learn from those around and be given a buddy until they have more confidence. Once you have your contacts, life becomes a lot easier.

- I think that will come when people see the true value in what a good EA can do. EA as a career isn't for everyone, I sometimes think you have just as much work stress in your life as the executive you work for. If a person uses the opportunity as a steppingstone, I don't actually think they were ever going to be an EA. Don't take it personally and be happy with all the amazing people that just fall into the role

**Q: Finding a good EA is difficult, how do you recruit and weed out the ones that are applying to 'get their foot in the door' to those EA's who are career EA minded. Is there a key question we can ask that can show us which category they fit into?**

- I actually tend to look at people CV first. If you have someone with a world of experience (not in the admin stream) or master's degrees (just finished) I have found that they tend to be the foot in the door folk. I still interview them if they address the criteria the way required (Don't get me wrong) but I also know that I am bringing them into the APS to further the APS as a whole not necessarily the EA stream