



TIPS FOR RECRUITING PEOPLE

**APPENDIX
STRATEGY 4**



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Job Descriptions – specify the assistant's duties: telephoning for appointments, correspondence, simply telephone answering, etc. Decide upon the income and benefits package, hours, sick-time and holiday time. Later on give the description to the candidates that you are interested in hiring.

Gather CVs by putting an advert in the newspaper or asking clients for recommendations. Make sure the position is described honestly and fully, especially if telephone referrals is an important duty.

By mentioning the telephone you will probably reduce the number of job applicants; however, you will weed out the people who are not suited to the job.

Prioritise the CVs and make calls to the candidates. Interview them on the telephone to determine their work experience, telephone skills, computer literacy, income needs and general outlook about the job.

Invite the most promising candidates to a first interview at your office. The interview should last about 1 hour; discuss the job description and explain the procedure of telephoning for appointments.

If you are interested in the applicant, test their spelling, grammar and maths. At this stage we would also recommend that you do a Kolbe personality profile test. This can be found on www.kolbe.com; it costs approximately \$35.00 US and is worth its weight in gold. If you like the candidate and they test well, discuss possible starting dates and your compensation package.

If your assistant is expected to telephone for appointments, provide scripts for the most promising candidates to give them a feel for the language and procedure. You may want to include role-play exercises during the second round of interviews; after the first interview, check the applicants' references. If a former employer gives you a lot of helpful information the job applicant was probably a satisfactory employee; if the former employer is reluctant to talk, however, this may well be a bad sign.

During the second interview ask why the candidate wants the position and what they can do for your business. Find out what they think about a bonus incentive programme, but most of all rely upon your instincts. Is this a person you could work with for 40 hours a week; do they seem enthusiastic, motivated and genially interested in the job? What is your gut feeling? If the candidate scores well on the basic skills test, along with the Kolbe and if you would think they would click as an assistant, make an offer.

CHECKLIST

- Give an accurate job description to applicants.
- Determine the assistant's income, holiday, sick-time, hours and benefits, etc.
- Place an advert in the newspaper or ask clients for recommendations for the position.
- Ask applicants to sit a Kolbe personality test.
- Carefully check the applicants' references.
- Conduct second interviews for the most promising candidates.
- Ask what they can offer to your business.
- Trust your gut feeling – if the basic tests are good and the Kolbe is good, go for it.
- Specify employment terms.

STRATEGY 4

“Learn from my mistakes, not from yours. It will save time, money and fast-track you to the top.”

Karl Hartey



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TRAINING GUIDELINES

Give your assistant a set of training guidelines on the first day of work. The guidelines should include: basic information that the assistant should be reading or learning on the computer; how many appointments they should schedule per day, per week; who to call, with questions and the available training tools. Make sure the guidelines describe each duty in detail, including deadlines for training and skill mastery, so that the personal accountability is built into the relationship from the outset.

If the training is not completed on time, your assistant may be taking the position too lightly or may be poorly suited for the job. If your assistant completes the task, they will end up with a good understanding of how things can be done in the insurance business.

Finally, decide the manner in which the guidelines should be learnt, i.e. through professional training or the self-taught approach. Training guidelines for assistants make an enormous difference in job satisfaction and turnover.

Draft and sign an employment contract, spelling out such terms as holidays, sick days, dress code, work hours, performance, pay review dates, salary, bonus incentive, benefits and any other formal requirements of the company. The assistant should read, date and sign the contract. Make sure each party receives a copy.

From the start the company should keep case history notes on the assistant: carefully document any accomplishments, performance problems, pay rises, etc. If a good situation turns sour or if you need help with a pay or performance review, you will have accurate information at your fingertips.

Attendance records are also essential. Keep track of sick days, holiday days, excused time off or personal time. An assistant needs to understand where the line is drawn for daily attendance. Work hours vary through an 8-hour day; 1 hour for lunch is normally typical. For performance: reviews help measure growth, reward accomplishments and identify problem areas. Schedule performance reviews for a new assistant at the end of each month during the first three months.

After that, conduct reviews on a quarterly basis, discuss the assistant's accomplishments and any skills that need improvement. Questioning of best, worst and change can be a good informal way of opening up an appraisal, i.e. what is the best thing about working at this company since you joined, what is the worst and if you could wave a realistic magic wand, what would you change?

Remember performance reviews are a two-way street, both for the company and the assistant. Each should analyse their strengths and weaknesses. Pay reviews are usually carried out annually unless the assistant is on a probationary period at the beginning of her contract, e.g. three months.

By reviewing your assistant regularly, you are asking them to live up to professional expectations. This sends a message that they are important, their work is valued and their extra effort will be rewarded. Be sure to discuss your business goals and your plans for achieving them as a team and always take time to answer your assistant's questions.

I recommend a bonus incentive as part of your assistant's compensation package; incentives spread the financial risk between the company and the assistant and encourage the assistant to become more involved in the business.

EMPLOYMENT TERMS CHECKLIST

- Prepare training guidelines and employment contract, attendance record, performance review schedule and bonus incentive. Have this material ready on the assistant's first day of employment.
- Decide a training schedule for your assistant. Provided resources to answer the assistant's questions, set guidelines for the completion of training.
- Express your expectations in writing.

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TOGETHER • **E**VERYONE • **A**CHIEVES • **M**ORE

I have been told and know by experience that the average adviser goes through approximately 5 assistants in three years. The reason for such high turnover is because of poor communication between the adviser and the assistant. The chances are that the adviser's expectations are never expressed or even formulated. Perhaps the adviser hired the wrong person because they did not know what they wanted from the assistant in the first place.

Perhaps they did not realise that they needed a capable office manager for a small business; perhaps the adviser hired the right person, but provided inadequate training. If you do not know what you want from the assistant then the odds are that they will not do well in the job. If your expectations are unclear and the training is inadequate, even a clerical superstar will fail. Assistants are not mind readers: they need practical guidance and support.

- Decide on the job description – zero- in on the tasks that you want your assistant to perform. Do you want someone to answer the telephones and transcribe tapes, telephone for appointments, submit applications, handle underwriter problems, service policy owners, follow up doctor reports, work on the computer with sales presentations?
- Once you decide what you want, you can create a job description listing and itemising the assistant's daily duties: highlight the three most important ones, i.e. find their unique ability.
- Be sure your assistant understands these duties and their own accountabilities. Discuss a game plan for learning them and make it clear to the assistant that they are not limited to the tasks on the job description.

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INVOLVEMENT IN THE BUSINESS

How involved is your assistant in the business? Would you like them to become more involved? What are some additional responsibilities for them? By examining these questions you will shape and define the assistant's role. Job duties vary with each office. Some assistants do only what they are told; others grab the reins and run the whole show.

The heightened degree of involvement is dependent on whether the agent wants a clerical worker or an active partner in the business. If you are looking for someone to manage your business, you need to relinquish control and learn to delegate the duties. Make sure your assistant is self-directed and takes the initiative if you want a team player and not a mere employee. At first they may require close supervision, but a highly motivated assistant will operate independently leaving the adviser to pursue sales-growth potential.

An assistant's career track depends upon their personality drive and the office dynamics. Most assistants start out as an adviser's secretary; some are content to remain at this level. If an assistant is ambitious they can climb the ladder to administration assistant, a position with greater responsibility based on greater knowledge of the business.

A possible roles is: Sales Assistant/Personal Assistant, which means, in the future, getting licensed or at least understanding the sales cycle well enough to answer the client's questions. If the assistant becomes licensed their potential becomes unlimited.

Once you decide the role of the assistant you must determine a fair income.

If you want to create a successful partnership – take the time to teach your assistant your office systems and procedures. How can your assistant reach their full potential if training is neglected?

CHECKLIST

- Create a detailed job description for your assistant, indicating your expectations.
- Discuss the heightened degree of involvement you want from your assistant.
- Talk about the assistant's growth potential and where they see themselves in the next three years.
- Determine a fair income and bonus incentive for your assistant.
- Consider professional training for your assistant as a cost-effective way of introducing them to office procedures.



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COMMUNICATIONS

What can you do to improve your adviser/assistant team, whether you work together for two days or ten years? The question is worth asking again and again. The adviser/assistant team is a difficult relationship and in some ways it is harder than a marriage. You have two adults working together for 8 hours a day, sharing the excitement and disappointment of a volatile business.

You can be euphoric one day and depressed the next. Many advisers complain that assistants do not understand the pressure of sales and an independent livelihood. It is true, assistants do not experience the face-to-face rejection which is part of an agent's professional life, but they certainly feel the tension when an agent returns to the office from an unsuccessful appointment. Both the adviser and the assistant must develop thick skins and an upbeat attitude to survive in the business.

Working closely with just one individual is tricky; you must learn to deal with the highs and lows of business and maintain respect for each other; you must value each other's input. Build on individual strengths and downplay the weaknesses and, most importantly, you must learn to communicate.

Although goal setting, motivation, efficiency and patience are important components, communication is the cornerstone of any good relationship.

How does an adviser/assistant team improve its communication? The first step is to agree to make the effort. Getting most advisers to sit down and talk is a challenge at first; generally this is placed as low priority.

The best way to show an open line of communication is to establish a 15-minute daily meeting. You can cover a surprising amount of territory in a short time. A meeting should be held at the same time each day; mark it in the diary just as you would any other appointment. To make the most of it you should prepare carefully for the meeting and avoid cancellations. During the meetings, discuss problem cases. Air all work-related concerns and grievances. It is also an ideal time to review the goals and performance. The first daily meeting can be a real chore. However, once you can see their intrinsic value, communications skills will grow, and so will the productivity and profits.

CHECKLIST

- Discuss ways to improve agent/adviser/assistant communication. Consider weaknesses in your current communication patterns.
- Set aside 15 minutes per day to meet, go over any work-related plans, problems and achievements.
- Devise new ways to keep each other motivated.

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GOALS/FOCUS

Most assistants are in the dark about most advisers' aims; they are unclear about the goal. As a team you should review your joint and individual goals on a regular basis, e.g. every Monday get together to talk about the goals and make sure that you are moving in the right direction and that your goals can be broken down into monthly objectives, weekly activity.

Firstly, determine what is important to you on a monthly basis: commissions, fund-based fees and new clients: whatever. Then set up weekly activity goals to achieve your monthly objectives. Assign responsibility for each activity; if you do not achieve the weekly goals, catch up on them the following week.

Do not wait until the end of the month or you might find yourself hopelessly behind. By achieving your monthly goals you will automatically reach quarterly and annual goals. For a new assistant the main goal is to complete training; new responsibilities can be assigned over a period of time.

For a veteran assistant, possible goals include: continued education; more appointments; the sale of additional purchases such as retaining fees or other policies, for example pensions for grandchildren.

The assistant should set their own activity goals and report them to the adviser.

CHECKLIST

- Create weekly, monthly and annual business goals; share them with each other.
- Update the activity goals every Monday during your daily meeting.

SALARIES

The best things in life are not always free. Salaries for top-notch assistants, or even mediocre ones, are expensive, coming straight out of the adviser's wallet. The question is: are you paying your assistant the right amount in terms of income, benefits and retirement contributions?

The average salary for an assistant will be between £14,000 and £20,000 per annum; this does depend upon location. That can be seen as a lot of money for most advisers and the expense is fixed, no matter how well the adviser is doing. Whether it is a good month or bad a month, the assistant must be paid first. The starting salary for new assistants depends on their previous work experience, education, the office location and other variables.

Assistants may deserve higher pay if their experience applies directly to new tasks, and they have a flexible attitude and an outgoing personality – although this, is difficult to assess during the interview process. Clearly a new assistant is a risk for an adviser, because they don't know what their true capabilities are. Why not try to reduce the risk? Rather than starting an assistant at say £16,000, set the salary at £14,000, telling them that if the written training guidelines are achieved in the first three months, the salary will be increased by £1,000 per year. If they continue to meet expectations after the second and third quarter, the salary will rise by another £1,000.

You have dangled the carrot in front of the assistant and, if the position is important to them, they will go after the incentive. If not, they will remain at the lower pay level and you are not out of pocket. You can also incorporate flexi-time which, rather than paying overtime, allows for any additional hours that are work being used for additional days off.

We work this system, allowing one extra day per month via flexi-times. These are attractive terms for somebody who is smart and works the system. This does allow them to have an extra 12 days per year of holiday. With smart people it is a win-win situation, as, it saves the company money and gives the assistant the reward of additional time off. In reality, if somebody is taking 20 normal holiday days, plus 8 days bank holiday, plus flexi-days, they could potentially have up to 8 weeks of holiday. The system does have to be managed properly so it is not abused, and it does have to be monitored on a regular basis.



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BONUS INCENTIVE PLAN THIS TAKES SOME STING OUT OF SALARY ALLOCATIONS

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This is the financial adviser's financial burden, while offering the assistant the opportunity to earn more money. Bonus incentives will enhance the assistant's salary and encourage greater involvement in the business. The adviser feels comfortable increasing their assistant's salary through incentives, because profits are up as a result of the efforts. Bonuses could be paid on a quarterly basis, upon increases in sales or banked commission over a certain level. This can be done on a quarterly basis, evening out the peaks and troughs of the year. Bonus money can also be paid on a monthly basis, motivating the assistant to keep up the good work. An assistant's compensation package is not complete without benefits. Some assistant benefits may not be absolutely necessary, but you should take into account such benefits as death-in-service, retirement benefits and income protection, as they all leave a dent in the chequebook.

COMPENSATION CHECKLIST

- Set up a bonus incentive plan for your assistant. Offer them additional pay if they meet specified performance goals.
- Choose an appropriate benefits package for your assistant.
- Consider retirement planning.



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SYSTEMS

Do you ever wonder if there is a better way to run your office? Is your productivity suffering because you do not have an efficient system of operation? Here are some solutions to common office problems:

Pending new business can be a stumbling block to efficiency. When a case is in underwriting a daily status report should be sent to the adviser. What should you do with it? If the assistant keeps all the pending files on the top of their desk or stuffed in the drawer, a mess is created. My suggestion is to keep one working copy of the outstanding business for the week in one file. Update when necessary, so information is quickly available. Keep all files and the pending cases neatly filed away. If an application is filled out correctly, the file will not be needed. If for some reason you need the file, pull it, use it and replace it in the filing cabinet.

Follow-up systems are another problem. Most assistants do not have a system. They probably keep files stacked on their desks or in drawers. You should have one, and only one, follow-up system. It should recall any pending medicals that are scheduled, outstanding applications, beneficiary forms or times to call prospects, clients or appointments. A day planner is an excellent organisational tool, useful to list incoming and outgoing calls. This could be a diary system such as the Franklin Planner or the diary system within your own software.

Appointment preparation poses another big dilemma. Many advisers wait until the last minute to prepare for their appointments. Under pressure to help, an assistant may make mistakes and feel intimidated. Projects are pushed aside because the agent/adviser is in a rush to meet the client. Do you really want your assistant to stop telephoning for appointments just to help you prepare at the last minute? They will never understand the importance of daily calls if you continue to interrupt. The solution to me is obvious: designate whatever needs to be done for an appointment as soon as the appointment is made. You will be thoroughly prepared to meet your client/prospect and your assistant will not be rushed, and therefore everyone wins.

Advisers need to learn how to delegate responsibility to their assistants. Simply dumping work during the morning meeting is not true delegation. You need to give your assistant time to ask questions and take notes. Make sure they have the necessary information to get the job done. Dictation is the best way of getting the work to your assistant. Your assistant can transcribe the information and then tackle the work throughout the day. The day is much smoother if they can do all of the applications, ledgers and correspondence at one time. Dictation also reduces the number of interruptions endured by the assistant. Interrupted by clients, insurance companies, underwriters and other advisers, they cannot maintain their work flow. If you want high productivity from an assistant, dictate work for them once a day and then allow them to finish it. At the end of the day, get a written report of the completed projects.

CHECKLIST

- Keep one working copy of the outstanding business for the week. File all other information immediately.
- Maintain a good follow-up system; get into the habit of using a daily planner.
- Prepare the appointments as soon as they are scheduled. Do not wait until the last minute.
- Delegate responsibilities in a timely and orderly fashion. Dictate assignments once a day and then let your assistant complete them.