

## GLOBAL PA NETWORK: PA CASE STUDY 'Sophie'

Sophie (not her real name) has been a PA for almost 20 years, although it is not a career she intended to pursue after she graduated from a Manchester university in 1991 with a degree in Maths and Computing.

"People always say to me, 'Why didn't you want to do anything with your degree?', but I graduated into a recession when there were few relevant jobs around and rather than be unemployed I wanted to forge a worthwhile career. I love being a PA: I like organising events and having the satisfaction of everything going to plan and I like the flexibility it offers – I can work from home one day a week."

Sophie, 41, enjoyed her early career doing secretarial work for employers including a health authority, the British Council and a computer software company but she ran into difficulties while working as the PA to the director of a small marketing company. "I was asked to do increasingly junior tasks. I was spending a lot of time stuffing envelopes and printing out documents: it didn't stimulate the brain and certainly didn't require a degree." She added: "When I first graduated I worked in a factory, in an all-male environment and never felt bullied or harassed and yet here I felt I was being bullied, undermined and denied training opportunities."

Sophie left the marketing company and joined her present employer, a computer firm based in the City of London, where she works as PA to the general manager. She finds her current role fulfilling. "I manage my boss's email and if anyone wants anything I'm the first person they contact. I'm not just a PA, I'm an office manager." However she said that secretaries, herself included, were generally undervalued and underpaid. "I don't think secretaries and PAs get a fair salary for the amount of work they do for their company and their boss. If my current employer had advertised for an office manager rather than a PA I'd be paid at least a third more than I am now."

She added: "I've been really lucky with my bosses; on the whole they've been encouraging and appreciative. However there is still a minority of people who have that attitude of 'you're only a PA', which makes me want to wear a badge saying 'I do have a degree'."

She considers it part of her remit to undertake some personal tasks for her manager. "I helped my boss find a house to buy, I have the keys to it to let in contractors, and I'm about to take some dry-cleaning in. Mine is a fairly old-fashioned PA role and I don't have a problem with that."

Sophie said she had received very little training during her secretarial career, although she had recently taken part in two PA Masterclasses organised by the Global PA Network. "One of the things about being a PA is that I always thought of myself as being in the background but since doing the classes I've felt more confident and ready to take on more responsibilities." She said she would welcome the introduction of a national PA qualification.