



**Presenting:** Sue France (FCIPD, INLPTA)

**Profession:** Qualified FCIPD L&D Practitioner, Certified NLP Practitioner, Author of “The Definitive Personal Assistant & Secretarial Handbook”

**Awarded:** The UK Times Crème/DHL PA of the Year 2006

**Volunteers in** : UK Chairman for EUMA (European networking organisation for Assistants), Editorial board member/author for Executive Secretary magazine

**Interviewed by:** Marion Van Happen, Brand Manager Secretary Plus at USG People N.V.

### Questionnaire

1. **At Secretary Plus we try to make everything visual. To express who we are we have created a word cloud. What would your cloud say about you as a woman, mother, author, chairwoman, trainer, coach, grandmother? Can you express yourself in 20 words?**

Passionate, Proud, Loving, Excited, Curious, Confident, Credible, Dynamic, Creative, Energetic, Enthusiastic, Friendly, Empathetic, Supportive, Sociable, Honest, Sincere, Successful, Trustworthy, Proactive

2. **You have written a book for all 21st century PAs etc. What was the reason for you to start writing this book in 2009?**

I started writing the book because after I was awarded “The UK Times Crème/DHL PA of the Year 2006” I was frequently asked to present at PA conferences. Whilst at one particular conference in London, I had just presented and I was listening to the next speaker on innovation and creativity through mind-mapping. He asked us to draw ourselves in the middle of the A4 page and mind-map all the different areas of our lives being as creative as we could incorporating ambitions and letting us know that everything we wanted was possible and it didn't matter how far-fetched it sounds. With my creative juices flowing, ‘Secretarial handbook’ popped into my brain so I wrote it down. I was asked to share my mind-map with the delegates and when I said “secretarial handbook” the delegates immediately shouted out I should write one as there was a gap in the market for such a book. One particular delegate said that she had searched the internet and bookshops for an up-to-date secretarial handbook for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century PA and could not find one suitable for her needs and another delegate confirmed this to be true and to be quite honest I also thought that there was a lack of good books for the needs of today's Assistant. At breaks and lunch more delegates were asking me if I would indeed write a book so I agreed that I would see if I could find a publisher. I believe if you don't ask you don't get so I went to The Times editor who had awarded me the PA of the Year title and asked if The Times would find me a publisher which they did. They introduced me to Kogan Page and in August 2009 my book was published and it has sold over 19000 copies worldwide.

3. **You write you want to help others to be more confident, increasing self confidence. Are you confident yourself?**

I am confident for most of the time and in many areas of my life especially when I am running workshops for office professionals as I am passionate about the subject and about helping people and I get a real buzz from it. I am also confident when driving (even when driving on the opposite side of the road in foreign countries and on hair-pin bends and hill tops with steep drops) or when cooking (even for a dinner party for 12) or when writing books and articles and in many other situations. However I do not believe that anyone can say they are confident in absolutely everything they do or attempt to do. As soon as we step out of our comfort zone we start to feel less confident and until we practice and repeat whatever it is out of our comfort zone and until it becomes within our comfort zone through learning and practice then confidence will be lacking. I find getting out of my comfort zone and learning something new is exciting and as my skills set grows so does my confidence.

For example, if I was asked to fly a helicopter (which I would love to do) I certainly wouldn't feel confident until I had lessons and knew what I was doing.

#### **4. What makes you confident?**

What helps me to feel confident is to believe in myself and my abilities and knowing that it's okay to make mistakes as long as I learn from them and improve myself.

It also helps to have a list of all my achievements so I can review them as it reminds you how successful you are and what talents you have.

I have learned to tell my 'negative gremlins' (that is the voice in my head) to 'back off' when they start telling me I can't do anything or I'm not good enough to .... and I have learned to listen to my 'positive coach' instead that tells me I can do everything I put my mind to and I am good enough to..... I remind myself about what Eleanor Roosevelt said: "No-one can make you feel inferior without your consent!" – and that includes yourself making you feel inferior!

Our beliefs mostly exist in our subconscious minds and some of our beliefs are limiting beliefs which place self imposing boundaries around our own potential.

I remind myself that within limiting beliefs there is a 'lie' (be-lie-fs) and I question them when they pop into my head. Our beliefs come from our experiences from our past lives and from other people especially our parents. Parents tell their children not to talk to strangers and we grow up with this limiting belief. As an adult when we go networking and walk into a room full of strangers – what is the voice in our head saying and how does it make us feel? Well now my positive coach says "you are now an adult and you no longer need the belief that once kept you safe and in fact it is good to talk to strangers and network – you just never know where it leads to and remember to feel excited about the opportunity". When our beliefs are limiting, we limit our perception of what is possible so don't allow those limiting beliefs to rule you and bring in your positive coach to help you.

I use an NLP technique of anchoring and have anchored a feeling of confidence that I can bring to the fore whenever I want to. The way to do this is to get into the stance using the body language that is confident for me by remembering a time when I really felt confident, I hear what was said, feel what I felt at the time, see what I saw and it brings back that complete feeling of confidence. When my body is in the confident stance for me it tells my brain I'm confident and when I'm thinking I'm confident it tells my body to stand confidently. When other people perceive me as being confident due to my stance/body language I then in turn feel more confident and it goes on in a cyclical fashion.

#### **5. You talk about avoiding stress. Do you have practical tips?**

- The more proactive, organised and prepared you are, the less stress you will feel – look in your diaries weeks ahead so you can plan ahead eg order the visa in time or book travel in time or order foreign currency, research on the culture of the country

where your boss is travelling and make some notes for them so that they do not make any cultural blunders and also give them a few words of translation if they are going to a country with a different language etc The phrase “fail to plan then you plan to fail” is so true.

- Remember that most strengths have a weakness to them so if you are the kind of person who is always willing to help even when it means staying late night after night and people know they can rely on you to get things done then the weakness to be being overly helpful is that you can lose your work life balance, have too much work on and become stressed. You need to be assertive and say no sometimes.
- Make sure your desk is ergonomically correct ie your desk is uncluttered on top and underneath and your screen and document holder are at the right height (on level with your eyes so your head does not hang causing musculoskeletal stress) and that your document holder is on the side of your dominant eye. Your telephone should be on the left hand side if you are right-handed and a pen and paper on the right hand side ready to be picked up as soon as you hear the first ring. You should not be twisting or leaning or your body will suffer and causes you stress.
- Go home and listen to your favourite music and then get a good night's sleep so you are fresh, willing and raring to go the next day – remember to have a notepad by your bed just in case you wake up in the middle of the night remembering something you have to do. Write it down, get it off your mind and your mind will allow you to go back to sleep knowing it's safely recorded for the morning.
- Remember happy moments or something that makes you smile. I only need to think of my wonderful 21 month old granddaughter and I can't help but feel good and it puts everything into perspective. Just putting a smile on your face can help reduce stress. Laughter definitely reduces stress. You can't feel sad when your smile either – try it! (This is because your subconscious mind is listening to your body language and is trying to make you feel happy).
- Put things into perspective - think on a scale of 1-10 and 10 is death just how stressful is this situation really?
- Remember what Mark Twain said” I have been through some really terrible stressful things in my life... some of them actually happened!” Many of us tend to worry unnecessarily.

## **6. What about communication in working relationship. How important is that?**

Communication is paramount to every working relationship, without it the relationship simply will not work. There needs to be an understanding in a relationship and this cannot happen if there is no communication or if communication is misunderstood. You need to understand each other's rules and parameters and what is expected of each other.

Communication includes verbal and non-verbal, in fact 93% of our communication is our attitude, tone of voice and body language. Virtually everything we do in the company of others communicates something so we need to make sure we are communicating in the most effective way. Effective communication establishes trust and builds rapport, avoids conflict and misunderstanding. Clearly defined goals and objectives need to be communicated and deadlines agreed otherwise people make assumptions which can make an 'ASS/U/ME' (ass of you and me)! Effective questioning and active listening is crucial to make sure there is no ambiguity or lack of understanding.

Communication can be face to face, phone calls, voice-mail video conferencing, text messages, e-mails, skype, reports, minutes, social media, meetings and all of these ensure

effective constant communication and issues and problems can be raised and dealt with before they get out of hand.

The right type of communication should be used for each situation and remember if you have something urgent then you either need to make an appointment to see that person or pick up the phone but don't send an email expecting the other person to treat it as urgent as you. I think people have come to rely far too much on emails and more phone calls and face to face meetings need to be brought back into the workplace.

**7. The profession of the assistant has changed over the years. What part will stay forever and what part is to change due to the “new working” environment?**

The assistant will always be the 'right-hand person to the boss – the 'go-to' person, the one they rely on to make sure they are in the right place, at the right time with the right documentation. They will do less typing as bosses are typing and sending their own emails and sending those rather than writing letters and posting them and this relieves the assistant to volunteer for other more interesting projects to free up the boss's time.

Bosses have to be trained to delegate the parts of the job they do that an assistant can take care of for them which frees up their time to enable them to be more efficient and do the job they are being paid for and using the knowledge and skills they worked hard for.

**8. How do you adapt to the newest innovations?**

It's not about what you know it's about how fast can you learn!

Technology is changing on a daily basis, things move fast and if you don't keep up then you get left behind. New innovations such as

- cloud computing
- virtual exhibitions and conferences (see <http://www.hostavirtualevent.com/>)
- Apps and everything they can do for you

Social media is one of the fairly new innovations that assistants need to be up to speed with and it changes constantly. They should understand how social media is affecting the working day and procedures as we know them. If their bosses and companies are not using social media then they should prompt them to get on board. In particular they should be involved with LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. For example Twitter can be very useful for travellers to keep them updated and you can 'follow' the airline you are travelling with and keep up to date with all travel arrangements for example this was extremely useful when the “ash cloud” stopped all air traffic. You can follow the departure and arrival airports and you will be the first to hear about any issues – forewarned is forearmed!

**9. What apps do you use? What would you advise?**

Apps that I use are:

- Dragon Dictation which is very useful when out and about and I need to send myself or someone else a quick note. I can talk into the phone and it accurately translates to word even without being 'trained' and it can be emailed or sent by text.
- Maps App - to help me get from A to B – you can put your destination in and it automatically finds where you are and a little blue circle shows you the direction you are walking or driving so you can't make a mistake. I find this invaluable when in a big city and have parked my car a few streets away and need to find the venue or office that I will be meeting in.

- Manchester Airport App – so that I can check flight departures and arrivals and which terminals to go to as I travel a lot
- Kindle for downloading and reading books
- Dropbox – free up to 2 MG storage – you need to download this on to your computer and you can drop documents/photos/videos into Dropbox and access them anywhere or you can access them from the Dropbox website. It keeps them safe and if anything should go wrong with your phone or computer you can still have access to them through Dropbox. You can share files with others too. When dropped into Dropbox, it saves them automatically on your phone, computer(s). Great for me to put my presentations into Dropbox when travelling just in case something goes wrong. I also have my videos in there to advertise me and I can share them with people.
- Post Office to check cost of postage worldwide from the UK
- CamCard – this App takes pictures of the business cards I collect and puts the details into my contacts – this is excellent!
- Dictionary
- Bump – when you want to share contacts, business card, photos with people – if you both have Bump it's easy to pass them over
- Know your Enneagram Type App – This is 9 different types of personality with distinct habits of thinking, feeling and behaving. I love learning and it means wherever I am – whether it is waiting outside my daughter's work waiting to take her home or sitting on a train I can always use my iphone to keep on learning about people.
- TED talks – These are videos of presentations and lectures on many different subjects and it is constantly updated – again to learn from
- 3 Dale Carnegie Apps – Secrets of Success, Personal Leadership and Team leadership – again these are for me to learn whenever I get a moment. It includes video and role play too – I don't need to take a book with me just my iphone.
- Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter – just to keep in touch and know what's going on and also to upload photos
- AccuWeather – so that I know what to wear and if I need to take an umbrella and also how to pack when on my travels to different countries – you can specific places so that you will know exactly what the weather will be like over the next 15 days and also hourly
- Pay Pal – so I can check on my personal book sales and pay retailers direct from my phone or receive into my phone
- Talking Friends Collection Apps plus games – Talking Friends Apps are animated animals that repeat what you say and do actions and you can press buttons to make them do things – these are invaluable to keep my granddaughter amused when we are out having a meal or sat on a plane etc.
- National lottery results – just in case!
- AA Hotel guide

- You Tube App – There are thousands of useful videos on U tube that you can learn from – there are two on there of me! There are also funny Apps to lighten your mood
- Tube Deluxe – to help me find my around the London Underground – it tells you which station, platform you need to get on, change at and get off and tells you how long it takes and which zone tickets you need to buy.
- There are many Apps to choose from to suit all needs – there is one if you are looking for a job called Pocket CV which means you can create multiple CVs depending on what job you are going for and when the opportunity arises you can email a pdf CV to them.
- ISpeak Spanish – to teach me the Spanish language as one day I want to retire to Spain and my brother lives there so I visit quite often therefore it is useful to learn the language plus it's one of the most spoken languages in the world.

My advice is to talk to people and find out what Apps they use and get recommendations and continually keep your ears and eyes open for useful Apps that can make your life easier – there are thousands of them and some of them are brilliant and many are either low cost or free!

I would also say that you should not 'play' with your Apps when in the company of other people or at work unless you are using certain Apps for work.

#### 10. How do you adapt as experienced professional to the new way of working?

Be open to change – embrace it, appreciate it, enjoy it, look for the good and be excited about it. Be a half full glass person as opposed to a half empty glass person – life will be so much more enjoyable this way and opportunities open up to you. Grasp opportunities whenever they arise – make opportunities for yourself too. Volunteer to do things both in and out of your comfort zone and grow your confidence and self esteem increasing your knowledge and skill set.

Remember if we have not already adapted to new ways of working we would still be working on manual typewriters typing on 5 pieces of paper with carbon paper in-between with an ink rubber or Tippex by your side! You would still be word processing all day instead of taking charge of different projects, being involved with recruiting and induction procedures, looking after budgets, organising events and the many other duties we can now take on. Thank goodness for new ways of working!

#### 11. Effective working. Can you describe what to your opinion is most important of this often used expression?

Effective working is having **Specific, Measureable, Agreed, Realistic** and **Time-bound** goals that are written down and regularly **Evaluated** and **Revised** (if appropriate) ie working '**SMARTER**' not harder! Effective working is about communicating well by using questions and active listening to avoid misunderstanding and conflict. It's dealing with time thieves and working at your most productive time for you eg for many people it is between 9.30 and 12 noon when you can take on the tasks that really need your full power of thought and creativity. Being effective means having the right attitude and willingness to learn, being open to change and embracing it. It's about keeping up with your daily chores eg filing and email management (which saves time in the long run) and understanding what is important and urgent and prioritising and at the same time being flexible. Effective working is about having a good work/life balance, keeping stress at bay and taking regular short breaks away from looking at the computer screen to keep you physically and mentally alert. It is also good to do some ergonomic desk exercises which can prevent deep vein thrombosis



and keeps your body healthy – these can be found in my book. Above all it's about enjoying what you do and having fun too.

**12. What is the most inevitable characteristic of a successful assistant?**

Being **proactive** - in their thoughts and actions. An assistant should be proactive in everything they do using their own initiative, always being one step ahead, leading the way, making suggestions, giving solutions and being prepared having everything planned well in advance and being proactive about their own continual self development and future role.

**13. What do you think is essential in moving up as a professional?**

A proactive attitude to continually learn and be flexible and having the willingness to volunteer and grasp opportunities – getting out of their comfort zone and allowing themselves to progress.

**14. How do you prioritize your work? Tips?**

- Remember the things that matter most must never be at the mercy of the things that matter least!
- Ask yourself several times a day “Is this the most efficient use of my time right now?”
- Concentrate on results rather than just keeping busy. Remember the Pareto Rule: 80% of the results comes from 20% of the work
- Have a clear vision of your goals that you need to achieve daily/weekly/monthly
- Remember to plan for the unexpected
- Use my ‘Task Prioritisation Matrix’ that you can find in my book “The Definitive Personal Assistant & Secretarial Handbook” which uses 4 quadrants of prioritisation. The Master and a blank form for you to complete can be downloaded from my website and the password can be found in the introduction of my book.

**15. You are writing a new book? Can you explain why you felt you should write this book/why you feel another book is required?**

I decided to write my new book which is called “The Definitive Executive Assistant & Managerial Handbook” as many people I meet have requested it especially those who supervise one or more employees as this book is missing in the market and it's a natural progression from my first book “The Definitive Personal Assistant & Secretarial Handbook”. However, all assistants manage and lead their boss (es) and the 2020 assistant will be in more managerial type roles than they are today so it will be suitable for everyone. This book concentrates on different topics than my first book and it will include supervisory and leadership skills, performance management, emotional Intelligence, persuasion and influencing using Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP), recruiting, coaching and counselling, working with different personality types, project management, negotiation skills, event management and change management.

**16. What is your vision on the evolution of the profession in 2020?**

The evolution of the profession in 2020 is that the assistant will progressively work on more managerial projects and be more of a business partner to their boss. They will do less typing

than they do now as the use of vocal recognition and digital dictation and bosses writing their own correspondence increases due to the younger technical generation coming through the ranks to those born in the mid 90's and known as Generation Z (the generation brought up computers and the internet from birth).

The Assistant needs to be proactive in their learning and let their bosses know what they are capable of and volunteer for areas of work that they know they can do or can learn to do and let their boss get on with other more technical parts of their job. They will be leading and organising their bosses in every respect and still be the right hand 'go to' person for their busy boss. They have to be aware of new technologies and innovations and be at the forefront of change. They need to lead their boss and create their business partner strategic role continuing to be a trustworthy confidant. The boss will look upon them as a business partner who they can trust and rely on to help them do their job to the best of their ability. One thing is for sure the future of the executive assistant is in their own hands and they should lead the way towards their own change and think about how they can expand their role and help their bosses and what title they could be using to best describe the role they do – possibly admin business partner or office professional assistant or professional admin assistant?

**Additional information on Sue France:**

She's an internationally renowned motivational speaker, coach and trainer and the author of the successful worldwide book: "The Definitive Personal Assistant & Secretarial Handbook." Sue is the UK Chairman for European Management Assistants (EUMA [www.euma.org](http://www.euma.org)) a voluntary secretarial networking organisation operating in 25 European countries.

Sue started work as a shorthand typist/word processing operator and worked her way up becoming a senior secretary, team supervisor, events manager and Personal Assistant to the Head of a Global Accounting firm in Manchester, UK. Sue was also the events manager for Clients and organised teambuilding weekends for the employees and alumni events. Sue has worked in the secretarial field for over 30 years and studied part time as a mature student to be awarded a post graduate diploma in human resource management. Sue then became training manager responsible for 600 secretaries in the UK for a global accounting firm. Following her boss's nomination Sue won the prestigious award of The UK Times Crème DHL PA of the year 2006 and also was a finalist in the European Smart PA of the Year 2007. Sue is a certified NLP Practitioner and a Fellow member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

Sue set up her own training business for Assistants in November 2009 and has worked in Dubai, Cyprus, Ireland, Johannesburg, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth, Kenya, Zimbabwe, France, Germany and the UK. Sue is currently writing her second book which will be the Advanced Handbook for Assistants and Office Managers.

Sue is on the editorial board of the new global magazine for secretaries – "Executive Secretary" and regularly writes articles for the magazine.

Sue has been involved in raising funds for children's charities by being sponsored to walk in such places as the Grand Canyon, the Inca Trail in Peru, the Alps, Mount Etna and the Great Wall of China.

Sue has 2 children, Samantha aged 19 and Sara aged 31 and is now the proud grandmother of Isabella born January 2010.