



**Marc-Oliver Schlichtmann, PA and Chair of the Regional Networking Group Hamburg talks about his career and winning Germany's Best Secretary 2008 award.**

In a profession overwhelmingly dominated by women, last year Marc-Oliver became the first man to win Germany's Best Secretary award. The competition, organised by Leitz, Germany's leading manufacturer of office products, tested the professional abilities of the most talented individuals from offices throughout Germany.

Marc-Oliver, the only male participant amongst the ten finalists, emerged as the winner collecting 2,500 Euros in prize money.

#### **How did you begin your career as a PA?**

At school I was very good at languages whereas my performance in natural science was rather average. After A-Levels (German Abitur) and the Civilian Service, I decided to attend a language school in order to become a multilingual secretary (German, English, French and Spanish). Having finished my training, I spent a couple of weeks in France and then started my career as a foreign language secretary with Arthur Andersen. This was in 1998.

Apart from languages, there are other reasons I became a PA; I always liked to organise and communicate with different people, as well as to deal with various situations. However, the most important reason was that my mother was a successful PA. One day, when I was a young boy, I discovered her old typewriter – of course non-electric – in a cupboard with which I then played fairly regularly. This possibly influenced my later career.

#### **What are the three most important skills you use as a PA?**

I am currently working for a partner in one of the Big Four auditing companies worldwide. Due to the fact that I have mainly worked in auditing, tax consulting and law companies, I have good industry knowledge which is quite important for my position. Thanks to my former jobs, I could bring a lot of expertise that simplifies my daily work immensely and helps me to understand the complex administrative procedures in a huge tax department. This special know-how was one of the reasons why I finally got the job. PAs from outside the industry normally need much more time to familiarise themselves with the work.

Another important skill I use at work is the English language. As we run offices in 140 countries, the job is quite international and there are numerous cross-border transactions with which I am involved. Furthermore, my daily routine also includes proof-reading and sometimes translations, so I have to utilise

the language almost every day. However, a certain level of fluency is required in my company, since the computer programmes and parts of the inter-office communication are also in English.

The third one is soft skills. As we have many different clients from all over the world, I have to adapt to various people from other cultural backgrounds. Therefore, empathy and sensitivity are indispensable attributes in such a position. These characteristics, combined with a good deal of diplomacy and cross-cultural competence are key qualifications that help to handle difficult situations smartly.

#### **What does a typical day look like for you?**

My key responsibilities generally include a variety of tasks, such as managing incoming communication, coordinating meetings as well as following-up on action items, managing my boss's diary, and organising business travel. Furthermore, I have to deal with the day-to-day correspondence, partly from draft or dictation and partly on my own initiative. This also comprises translations from German into English. In addition to that, I transfer information into presentational tools and I am in charge of the billing issues and assist my boss in ad-hoc projects. Honestly speaking, one day never looks like the other. However, this is exactly what makes my position interesting and what I like about my job!

#### **Tell us how you became the first man to win Germany's Best Secretary Award.**

When I heard of this competition, I was not sure if I should apply or not. However, a friend of mine persuaded me to submit my application which I finally posted shortly before the entry deadline. Only a few days later I received a call from the agency organising the competition, informing me that my papers had been convincing and that I was amongst the ten finalists.

One day before the competition, I had the chance to become acquainted with the other participants and the judging panel, during a marvellous dinner in a fancy restaurant in Hamburg. This was a very relaxing evening and I did not feel any pressure.

The next morning the competition started. Under the eyes of the judging panel and the press, we were tested in the following five categories: General knowledge, an ad hoc translation from German into English, an organisational task, memory training and a role play testing diplomatic skill and spontaneity.

Not winning but taking part was the most important thing for me! Since the competition was very strong, it came like an absolute surprise when the jury suddenly called my name during the presentation ceremony. Later on I learnt that my performance was convincing all along the line, but that I was particularly impressive in my general knowledge and in the translation part.

Of course, this competition is a great opportunity to show how diverse the tasks of a PA are and it also pays tribute to our frequently underestimated profession.

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As this job is overwhelmingly dominated by women, it is my personal concern to make a contribution to equal opportunities for male PAs. Winning the award was a great platform to demonstrate that men can brilliantly perform in this domain.

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### **How did you become involved with EUMA and how have you benefited from membership?**

Shortly after the competition, Astrid Balzer, head of the Regional Networking Group in Cologne/Düsseldorf, contacted me via XING in order to congratulate me on my award. In a long telephone conversation we talked about our profession and she informed me of the advantages an international network such as EUMA offers.

A few weeks later I met Viera Schleidt, National PR Officer, for dinner. We also had a very interesting conversation, which finally convinced me to submit my membership application. This was a couple of weeks prior to the annual conference in Berlin – the first event I attended. It was probably the best start one could have!

On balance, EUMA has definitely made me more confident in my own capabilities. It helped me to ameliorate my presentation skills and to speak without notes in front of an audience. Apart from that, I truly benefit from the training and seminars which do not only provide a great opportunity to learn, but also a way to network with other PAs on a domestic and international basis.

### **What do you enjoy most about your role with EUMA?**

First of all, an honorary post is something special! It is certainly a lot of work; however, you always get something back from the members of the group. This is a great feeling and also very motivating.

Furthermore, I see this role as a chance for me to work on my weaker spots and to bring in my strengths at the same time. In other words, it is like a playground free of charge. If you make a mistake, nobody will bite your head off.

Last but not least, how boring would life be without any challenges?

### **What have been your best, and worst, career moments?**

The biggest challenge I have faced so far was in my previous position as PA to the Managing Partner at Allen & Overy. I joined the company in 2001 shortly after the Hamburg office was opened. Besides assisting my boss, my main task at the outset was to help establish the new business location as ‘liaison officer’ between our office and the headquarters in London and Frankfurt. It was really exciting and at the same time challenging, because we almost started from scratch.

Departments such as marketing, finance, billing and HR did not exist and I had to co-ordinate all related matters with the people in our Frankfurt office. I gained substantial insights into

other work routines and with hindsight, tremendously benefited from these experiences.

In retrospect, this start-up period was probably the biggest challenge in my working life but also belongs to the best time of my career. Another best career moment certainly was to be appointed secretary of the year 2008, which strongly influenced my further development.

The worst experience was at the time I was working at Arthur Anderson. In one and the same week my two bosses told me that they would leave the company. One had accepted a client’s job offer and wanted to move to Amsterdam, the other was pregnant. This was extremely hard for me because the two had always treated me well. Therefore, I quit my job only a couple of weeks later as I had been recruited by another company.

### **What are your career plans for the future?**

Since winning the competition, numerous possibilities have opened up for me. When I entered the competition, I had just started another distance learning course, which I have not finished so far. As human resources have always interested me a lot and had been part of my former jobs, I decided to enrol for a correspondence course that will end up with a qualification as personnel officer. This is one of the goals I would like to attain in the near future. However, my time is unfortunately so limited at the moment that I am not able to work on my studies on a regular basis. This can be traced back to the fact that I have started a couple of different activities which I would like to continue in the future.

I do secretarial training and presenting at PA conferences which I enjoy very much. It is a real pleasure to use my experience and knowledge to help others and also to entertain them. That is why I could imagine working in the coaching or training area one day.

Furthermore, I write a web blog at [www.sekretaria.de/blog](http://www.sekretaria.de/blog) which is all about office management, and presents expertise as well as little anecdotes taken from my career.

Because of these small articles and the fact that the number of male PAs is so vanishingly little, several people have encouraged me to write a book about my experiences. I am not sure about that but it could be an option some time in the future.

Of course, another goal is to further develop the Regional Networking Group Hamburg in terms of membership and attractive events. Since my term started in January 2009, two new members joined our group, which I am very happy about! So far we have had five regional events with great speakers in fantastic locations. My overall impression was that both members and guests thoroughly enjoyed these regional events, which is very satisfying and encouraging for me to keep going.

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However, there is always room for improvement and a lot of things to be done in the future!

All in all, I am quite happy at the moment and also very busy. Nevertheless, there are still so many things to discover and eventually life always has something up its sleeve.

**What piece of advice would you give to other PAs?**

To keep a positive attitude! It is often hard to move beyond our comfort zone, but change just determines and affects our workaday life. Hence, it is important for PAs to stay flexible and open to change.

To learn as much as you can! We are living in a fast-paced and constantly changing environment which requires us to never stop learning. Additional qualifications do not only broaden our mind but also help us to sustain a competitive position in the tight job market.

To establish your own network! Beyond experience exchange with other PAs, it also grants access to a wide spectrum of other skills. Knowing the right people can only be advantageous.

**Tell us how you unwind after a hard day at work.**

Due to all these activities there is not much free time for me. Nevertheless, I try to hit the gym on a fairly regular basis in order to work out and to stay healthy. To relax, I love reading detective stories, especially from English writers such as Ruth Rendell, who is my favourite one. Since I was a young boy, I have had a passion for audio story books, which is one of my hobbies even today. Of course, I like to travel, discover new cultures and practise my other languages. I am always interested in further training because lifelong learning is of crucial importance in our time and also necessary for our profession.

However, the most important activity for me is to spend time with my friends. During the week, after work, I often see friends for dinner or for a coffee, and at the weekends I go clubbing or just chill out in one of the bars in central Hamburg.