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## Travail de Fin d'Etudes

en vue de l'obtention du titre de

**Bachelier Assistant de Direction**

Année académique 2014-2015

**Are soft skills necessary to  
succeed as a PA? How can they  
be developed in your daily life?**

Présenté par  
**Lise LABEYE**

Date du dépôt  
**Mai 2015**



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I would like to thanks to Mr Alen, my promoter, for his advice as well as for the support he provided throughout the achievement of this work. I also would like to thank Mrs Mouzon and Mr Zebidi for taking the time to answer my questions.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1        Definitions.....</b>	<b>8</b>
1.1       Hard skills .....	8
1.2       Soft skills.....	9
<u>1.2.1</u> <u>Communication skills</u> .....	10
1.2.1.1 <i>Non-verbal communication</i> .....	11
1.2.1.2 <i>Verbal communication</i> .....	12
1.2.1.3 <i>Active listening</i> .....	13
<u>1.2.2</u> <u>Time management</u> .....	13
<u>1.2.3</u> <u>Team spirit</u> .....	14
<u>1.2.4</u> <u>Leadership</u> .....	15
<b>2        Which category is more important: hard skills or soft skills?..</b>	<b>15</b>
2.1       The importance of soft skills .....	16
<u>2.1.1</u> <u>In day-to-day living</u> .....	16
<u>2.1.2</u> <u>In the working world</u> .....	17
<u>2.1.3</u> <u>In recruitment</u> .....	17
<u>2.1.4</u> <u>In the educational system</u> .....	19
2.1.4.1 <i>In Belgium</i> .....	19
2.1.4.2 <i>At HELMo Saint-Martin</i> .....	20
2.1.4.3 <i>In America</i> .....	21
2.2       The top skills required for a PA .....	23
<u>2.2.1</u> <u>Hard skills</u> .....	24
2.2.1.1 <i>Languages</i> .....	24
2.2.1.2 <i>Computer tools</i> .....	24
<u>2.2.2</u> <u>Soft skills</u> .....	25
2.2.2.1 <i>Organization</i> .....	25
2.2.2.2 <i>Proactivity</i> .....	25
2.2.2.3 <i>Interpersonal skills</i> .....	26
2.2.2.4 <i>Thoroughness</i> .....	27
2.2.2.5 <i>Versatility</i> .....	27
2.2.2.6 <i>Confidentiality</i> .....	28

<b>3</b>	<b>How to improve your soft skills?.....</b>	<b>32</b>
3.1	Interpersonal skills.....	33
<u>3.1.1</u>	<u>Public speaking</u> .....	33
<u>3.1.2</u>	<u>Interpreting body language</u> .....	35
3.1.2.1	<i>Proxemics</i> .....	35
3.1.2.2	<i>Head</i> .....	35
3.1.2.3	<i>Eyes</i> .....	36
3.1.2.4	<i>Imitation</i> .....	37
3.1.2.5	<i>Arms and hands</i> .....	37
<u>3.1.3</u>	<u>International communication</u> .....	38
3.2	Proactivity.....	39
3.3	Organization .....	41
<u>3.3.1</u>	<u>Priority management</u> .....	41
<u>3.3.2</u>	<u>Time management</u> .....	41
3.4	Thoroughness .....	43
3.5	Versatility.....	43
	<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>44</b>
	<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>46</b>
	<b>Appendices</b> .....	<b>49</b>

## Introduction

The labor market has not been going well in the European Union for a couple of years. At the end of 2014, the unemployment rate was 9.9 % compared to 5.6 % in the United States. Given this critical and worrying situation that especially affects young generations, *European* countries have to take immediate action in order to reduce this rate. In Belgium, the government has recently decided to increase the retirement age from 65 to 66 years by 2025. However, even if those measures will probably improve the employment situation over the years, they will not save our economy by themselves. Indeed, another major problem is to be solved: the question of unemployability.

Employers often complain that they cannot find suitable candidates to fill positions because the applicants' training does not match the needs and expectations of the companies at national and European level. The students who graduate are technically qualified but are not able to apply these qualifications in the workplace. The main reason of this phenomenon is the lack of life skills, more commonly called soft skills. Unfortunately, these skills are not valued enough yet and the educational system does not enable us to develop them properly.

Although soft skills still suffer from a crucial lack of respect, European companies begin to recognize their value. They have become a significant factor in their hiring processes. Due to the growing importance of soft skills in the working world and the inadequacy of the teaching structure with this reality, I decided in this dissertation to answer the questions: Are soft skills necessary to succeed in a career and how can they be developed in your daily life?

Another reason influenced my choice for this subject matter: I did my third year internship at Randstad, a temping agency. For 15 weeks I had the opportunity to participate in the recruitment of candidates and I have been able to draw some conclusions about it.

It turns out that the most important part of the process is the interview with the recruiter, during which he analyzes the candidate's personality, soft skills included. In this context, I wondered how people could improve these skills and thus be more likely to please the consultant and get a job.

Throughout this work, I will first give you a short definition of the terms “soft skills” and “hard skills”, which are the 2 key words of this dissertation. After giving you some examples of these skills, I will try to define which category is more important according to the career you choose. Then I will demonstrate the importance of soft skills at different levels (professional and private) and which one a personal assistant needs to work efficiently. Lastly, in the practical part, I will give some solutions, tips and exercises to develop and improve some of the soft skills you are all likely to need some day.

Enjoy your reading!

# Theoretical part



# 1 Definitions

By way of introduction, I would like to point out that Management Assistant is known to be a "female-dominated" profession. Indeed, in Belgium, only 10 % of them were men in 2010<sup>1</sup>. That is why I have chosen to use the feminine gender when referring to secretaries all along this thesis. However, I am fully aware that they are not the only ones to do this job.

Before I start developing the subject, I think it is also important to clarify what I am referring to when I talk about "soft skills", the term used in the title of my dissertation. It is often used in opposition to the term "hard skills". Soft skills are ruled by the emotional intelligence and the hard skills by your intelligence quotient. Yet these concepts are a bit more complex than that.

## 1.1 Hard skills

Hard skills are defined as the technical skills and the teachable abilities. They are related to one's personality and enable the person to perform some functional tasks in particular. Some examples are computer programming, speaking a foreign language, typing, calculating, ... In other words, they are the minimum skills necessary to do a job. They can be easily assessed, by taking an exam for example, and can be attested by a certification.

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<sup>1</sup> SPF Economie. (2013). *Les professions en Belgique - Métiers principalement féminins ou masculins (1993-2010)*. Online <http://statbel.fgov.be/fr/statistiques/chiffres/travailvie/emploi/professions>, viewed May 10, 2015.

The learning method of hard skills remains the same, no matter what the personality of the person is and the company he works with. For example, take a website designer. Maybe he does use different tools from his peers but the basis of creating the code remains the same for any website and anyone in the world working on website development. The skills and resources he needs to work effectively are learned during training or scholarship.

## 1.2 Soft skills

People are often confused about what soft skills are. When they consider a definition, communication skills are most of the time what come first to their mind. They do not know that soft skills include much more than that: they are the skills that deal with the emotional intelligence. They consist of individual qualities and attitudes that describe our ability to interact with others. That is the reason why they are also called people skills or life skills.

While technical abilities can only be applied in specific situations, soft skills are transferable skills that can be used anytime, and not only in the professional environment. For example, if you manage to have a well-run organization in your family life, you are likely to demonstrate it on a trip or at work. Therefore, since people change jobs on average 3 or 4 times in their career, it is interesting to highlight in our CV the life skills that are interesting to transfer from one job to another.

Just like hard skills, we can work on soft skills in order to develop and improve them. Moreover, by improving the soft skills you can optimize the hard ones. Let's take the example of people who work as sales representatives to illustrate this idea. Some of them start with greater natural assets for this job than others, such as good communication and negotiating skills. Others, who are not lucky enough to be born with these assets, are less efficient in their work, even if they have a lot of experience in sales.

What they do not know is that they can still learn the skills they need to excel in their job. In fact, they had better learn them because they will definitely increase their sales by doing so.

Very few people are equipped with all the soft skills they would like to have but it is never too late to develop them. However, this range of skills is not generally acquired during school education as it is the case for hard skills. In fact, there is no simple way to learn life skills: they are innate qualities that develop over the years, through experiences, trials and errors. Although many books explain how to cultivate them, you need to apply those tips in real situations in order to acquire them. You must keep in mind that the more you put soft skills into practice, the more they will become natural. This takes a considerable amount of time but once you have understood and acknowledged that it will pay off, you will be ready to make time for it.

The term “soft skill” is a broad subject. While I was gathering information about it, I noticed that there is no exhaustive list and people do not yet agree about the way to classify them. I have to say that it is not an easy thing to do because most life skills can fit into several categories. In order to explain more precisely what they are and how they influence each other, I divided them into the 4 categories that appear most often: communication skills, self-management skills, team spirit and leadership.

#### 1.2.1 Communication skills

When you are in contact with people on a regular basis at your workplace, it is essential to be able to express yourself clearly, listen effectively and write correctly. You will be led to explain things to people who do not specially know your job and it is important to make yourself clear in these situations. Internal communication is also very important in order to enhance the atmosphere within the company.

Communication can be described as an interactive exchange between people, the purpose of which is to transfer information in a verbal or non-verbal way. Being able to communicate clearly and effectively is the most important life skill; if you manage to do so, misunderstandings and conflicts are less likely to disrupt your professional career and your daily life.

Imagine that at the beginning of the week you set an appointment on Friday at 9 am with a customer. D-Day arrives but he never shows up. You decide then to call him to know what is going on. Actually, when planning the meeting, you told him to come "next Friday" without specifying a date. You were thinking about the Friday of the same week whereas the customer thought it was the following week. Simple communication problems like this occur regularly and could be easily avoided – or at least reduced - by communicating in a clearer and more accurate way.

#### *1.2.1.1 Non-verbal communication*

Non-verbal communication is much more important and has much more impact than we think. Psychologists have proved that visual impression makes the strongest impact when we try to assess another human being. Fifty-five percent of the message received by an audience is actually conveyed by the physical appearance of the speaker. This includes much more than clothes, hairstyle and makeup. Gestures, facial animation, smile, posture and eye contact also play a big role when speaking to a public.

Interlocutors do not realize that they convey a lot of information without knowing it; they unconsciously react to the non-verbal messages they send to each other. Thus, 2 interlocutors may disagree on the surface whereas the verbal message is nonetheless positive. This non-verbal communication adds an extra dimension to the message, which is sometimes in contradiction with it.

Moreover, it takes only a few seconds for people to form judgments about you. Psychologists have found that the first half-second of a meeting is decisive because this tiny period of time is enough for people to form a first impression about you. During the next 7 seconds, they are trying to determine whether they like you or not, if you appear qualified or confident. And with each interaction, they will continue their assessment of you. Whether this impression of you is good or bad, it will have an impact on the success of the communication.

This pattern holds true both for oral and written communication. Readers will form an opinion of you based on the content and the presentation of your written message. A message full of grammar, punctuation or spelling mistakes will not seem relevant and may be misunderstood. Moreover, it is really not pleasant to read. That is why being able to read and write properly is also necessary in order to communicate effectively.

Written communication is even more important for Management Assistants because they are the image of the company for which they work. If a PA sends a message with mistakes to customers, they will associate it with a lack of professionalism and will probably doubt the credibility of the company.

#### *1.2.1.2 Verbal communication*

A university professor giving a lesson and a recruiter doing a job interview are using 2 different kinds of verbal communication. The first one is called public speaking and involves one or more people delivering a message to a group whereas the second one, interpersonal communication, generally refers to a face-to-face exchange that involves both talking and listening.

The vocal characteristics (pitch, tone, speed, volume and pause) represent 38 % of what the audience takes in. This leaves 7 % for the actual content, the message itself, the spoken word.

### 1.2.1.3 *Active listening*

Have you already experienced this situation where the person you are talking to does not seem to listen to you, does not react to what you say and sometimes does not let you finish your sentences? I think you will agree with me to say that there is nothing more frustrating when communicating.

We can deduce from this fact that listening is a major factor in a conversation. The problem is that people often take listening for granted but in fact they do no more than hear sounds. Moreover, listening is not enough for the communication to succeed if is not done in an active way.

Active listening is not only the fact of listening without cutting the speaker off, but also showing compassion and interest during the interaction with him. It can be expressed in several different ways: by rephrasing the idea, confirming what we heard, questioning or simply by making gestures and facial expressions like nodding. Thanks to these simple feedbacks, the person in front of you will have the feeling of being heard, listened to and will be encouraged to keep on talking. That is why active listeners who communicate are more likely to get a smooth interaction.

### 1.2.2 Time management

Time management is as important as the job itself and has more impact than you think on your well-being. Imagine that you are able to manage your time better than your colleague. You are therefore more productive than him in the same period of time. This involves that you will learn more things, gather more experience and improve your work quality because you are more focused. Plus, you will have extra free time for leisure activities. Thanks to your extra time, you are better organized and you can prevent deadlines from becoming a problem.

If you are a good time keeper, you do not absolutely require stress management skills to succeed. The reason is simple: you find yourself very rarely in a stressful situation. Good time management at work or in life reduces the feeling of being rushed, which is one of the main causes of stress. When your colleagues stress-out about work, you spend your time relaxing instead.

In a nutshell, time management skills enable people to enjoy life to the fullest. Who would not like to be able to do it?

### 1.2.3 Team spirit

Working effectively in a group is an important factor for success and it is part of the skills a Personal Assistant has to master. She is often involved in the company's projects, which requires people to work together to achieve a common goal. As one says, 2 heads are better than 1. A unified team is more likely to be performing and achieve goals than a single person. But this old saying is only true if both heads are able to work as part of a team.

The ability to work with others is often perceived as getting along with your co-workers. Yet the greatest group achievements could not happen without unity, strong commitment, support, a sense of urgency in obtaining a common and specific goal as well as a good leader (see below). For example, when an entire community works to support a team, including wearing t-shirts and attending games, there is a greater chance that a team wins a championship. A team also recognizes the qualities and abilities of each member and everyone is encouraged to participate and give their contribution to the project.

#### 1.2.4 Leadership

How many times have you heard around you people complaining about their boss? I bet a lot. Bad bosses have become so common that training programs have been specifically developed to deal with them. The problem is that management skills are too often taken for granted. Yet not anyone is able to lead troops unless he follows a management training program. Unfortunately, this kind of training within a company – when it exists at all – is frequently brief and taken lightly.

Companies are not the only ones to blame. When they are offered a management job, people sometimes focus all their attention on the salary and the job's position in the organizational chart instead of the function itself. Unfortunately, money and power are much more interesting to their eyes than what their job really consists in. Nevertheless, the transition from individual contributor to team manager is a huge time commitment.

## **2 Which category is more important: hard skills or soft skills?**

In the working world, it depends on the career you choose. Some jobs require more hard skills, like physicians or mathematicians. They do not often deal with people during their career and when they do, it has little influence on their success at work. Other jobs need more soft skills; most professions are in this category because it concerns the ones in which you interact with people. There are also some professions that need both hard and soft skills equitably.



In order to determine the importance of people skills in your job, you have to ask yourself 3 questions:

- Does my performance review and my chances of getting promoted depend on the way I work and communicate with others?
- Are colleagues who seem to be appreciated in the company promoted faster than me?
- Does my ability to control my temperament affect my efficiency at work?

If the answer to all 3 questions is yes, soft skills are very important to develop if you want to advance in your career.

## 2.1 The importance of soft skills

You will have understood that soft skills are complementary skills for effective performance and higher production. They have a huge and undeniable effect on almost everything you need to move forward at work but also in your personal life.

### 2.1.1 In day-to-day living

We probably all have favorite friends, relatives or colleagues to talk to and share our problems with. Do you ever wonder what makes them so special? No matter the circumstances of the situation you are in, they always know how to react and what to say without offending or upsetting us. When they do not manage to find a solution to our problematic situation, they still help us feel more hopeful and optimistic about our situation. Furthermore, we never hesitate to share something with them because, even though they may disagree with us, we know they will never judge us.

There are also those people around us who manage easily their emotions. You might admire their ability to remain calm in stressful situations. They seldom get into trouble with people because, instead of getting angry in difficult situations, they have the power to calm things down, step back from the conflict and resolve it. Finally, they accept criticism and are smart enough to act accordingly to improve their performance.

This kind of people is fitted with the so called “emotional intelligence” skills. People with good EI skills are usually perceived as optimistic, caring, peaceful, trustworthy and charismatic; qualities that often attract and please the others. They lead to better understanding and relationships.

#### 2.1.2 In the working world

The skills market is no longer reduced to certifications. Nowadays, although hard skills are essential to get a job, they are not enough to guarantee a position or advancement in your career. You need to possess some skills in addition to your theoretical knowledge in order to be able to apply them in the workplace and thus make them more lively and productive. If you do not manage to do it, your academic skills are useless.

Moreover they are vital in order to work well with others. Some senior people who are not that experimented and have limited hard skills, keep their position thanks to their outstanding soft skills, such as leadership skills, management skills and self-promotion skills. In this way, you might be an outstanding student and then become a colleague no one wants to work with.

#### 2.1.3 In recruitment

Recruitment becomes more and more competitive between candidates. That is why it is important to stand out from the crowd. When employers consider applicants for a same vacancy, they are typically requiring both soft skills and hard skills.

First, they will pay attention to the professional experience and career path. The point is to determine if the candidate has the necessary skills to fill the vacant position and carry out the requested tasks. Experience is now mandatory but it can be demonstrated in different ways, from summer jobs to work experience in a related field, traineeships included.

When a job seeker does not have any experience, it also means he does not know the work norms as well as the behavior and the attitude he has to adopt at the workplace. Certifications will also back up the applicant because they confirm the technical skills acquired during the studies too.

By the way, one of the first things that drew my attention during my internship at Randstad is the so-called "CV screening". When a candidate applies for a job and has not got any professional experience, he has no chance of getting the job he applied for or another one. His curriculum vitae heads immediately in the trash can and the consultants do not bother to meet him.

The second key factor that employers check during the hiring process is the personality of the job seeker. His life skills, people skills and self-management skills, which can be summed up as soft skills, are thoroughly examined through different ways. In "general recruitment agencies", the consultants' assessment is mainly based on the interview. They ask specific questions and examine the candidate's body language to learn more about him. You will find further details about this employment's step in the attached interviews.

For most jobs, while hard skills are essential to get the interview, soft skills are the ones that will determine whether you get the job or not. Recruiters usually look for candidates with a pleasing personality and character because the companies want people who are not only qualified but also "life skilled". This means they will not just perform their job function, they will also make a good impression on clients and their personality will fit into the company's state of mind.

I could also confirm this hard reality during my internship at Randstad. When several candidates with the same qualifications apply for a vacant position, they are asked to come to the agency for an interview. The choice is based on this meeting, during which their personality and soft skills are analyzed by the consultant.

The lack of experience and the lack of soft skills are 2 different problems in our current society, but they are linked because they are both solved by doing.

#### 2.1.4 In the educational system

##### 2.1.4.1 *In Belgium*

In Belgium, like in the rest of the European Union, we assume that soft skills are learned at home or through observing others – this idea is not wrong but doing so is definitely not enough to deal easily with these skills. Considering that they are essential to get a job and work efficiently, such skills should be taught at school.

However, the learning of life skills is unfortunately pushed aside in any kind of education. Instead, we value hard skills, as shown by the current educational system of our universities. Our grades, our certifications, the results of our final exams are what matters the most, regardless of whether we are a team player, a hard worker, if we play truant or not. These particularities, to which recruiters pay more and more attention, are not listed on our diploma. As a result of the poor connection between classrooms

and the working world, young graduated students are being criticized: they have fewer life skills than theoretical achievement.

Yet the situation is about to improve because the idea has been slowly emerging in some European schools and companies: soft skills begin to be slightly included through teaching and in methods used to assess the staff. For example, some schools provide a Conflict Managers program in order to teach students how to negotiate and develop the “problem solving” skill. Randstad also offers their employees soft skills trainings but there are not mandatory. Consultants discuss with their manager which program would be interesting for them according to their personality, function and needs.

#### 2.1.4.2 *At HELMo Saint-Martin*

I consider myself lucky to attend a college which does not only focus on the theoretical learning. Unfortunately, this is not often the case, especially in university studies where the possibility to do an internship during the training is limited, if not non-existent.

At HELMo, students are closely supervised with regard to their connection with the working world and their job search. Thus, many approaches have been set up to equip future graduates to enter the professional life:

- Management Assistants are offered the possibility to do 2 internships, in the second and the third year. The second one of 15 weeks takes place in a company.
- The "Conférences, visites et séminaires" course connects students with workplaces and professionals.
- The testimonials from professionals within many courses (HR, project management ...) and at the Trainee and job day<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The trainee and job day is a trade fair that takes place at school with about 50 companies. They help second-year students find an internship and the third-year students take the necessary steps to find a job.

- The access to the web portal "Assistant plus" from Secretary Plus where much information on Management Assistants are available.
- Activities aimed at preparing students to write CV's and application letters in French as well and in foreign languages.
- ...

In addition, HELMo takes the advice of (former) students, internship supervisors and employers into account to elaborate its curriculum. As you can see, the institution is constantly trying to guarantee the best possible match between the business needs and its own training program.

#### 2.1.4.3 *In America*

America, in contrast with Europe, is very aware of the importance of soft skills. Americans have understood for some time that the command of these skills goes together with relationship intelligence and the taste for challenges. This survey conducted in 2013 on a sample of 1,001 adults proves that most Americans think that soft skills should be taught at school. The results are based on the annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll on Americans' attitudes towards public education<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Lopez, S. & Calderon, V. (2013). *Americans say U.S. schools should teach "soft" skills*. Online on the website of Gallup <http://www.gallup.com/poll/164060/americans-say-schools-teach-soft-skills.aspx>, viewed April 3, 2015.

### *Expectations for Today's Schools Among the American Public*

"Today's schools should..."

	<b>% Strongly agree</b>
Teach students critical thinking skills	80
Teach students communication skills	78
Teach students how to set meaningful goals	64
Know how to motivate students	61
Teach students how to collaborate	57
Foster students' creativity	58
Promote students' wellbeing	54
Build students' character	51

May 7-31, 2013

PDK/Gallup poll

Actually, Americans are a step ahead of us and offer students, as well as the active population, many different trainings in soft skills like Problem Solving or Team Management programs. Soft skills are somehow already integrated into their assessment system. It is indeed impossible for a high school graduate to be accepted into a university without a solid academic record. This record has to contain good grades as well as commitments for sports, associations or arts.

To compare with a concrete example, the "miscellaneous" section at the bottom of our curriculum vitae is much better valued at the other side of the Atlantic. The European Union should follow this example if we want young Europeans to master these important skills by the time they enter the working world.

## 2.2 The top skills required for a PA

The job of a Personal Assistant still suffers from a stereotyped image linked to the execution of clerical tasks. When I decided to become a Management Assistant, I was not aware of the complexity of the job before I saw the training program. What people usually do not realize is that the management and coordination tasks we must perform are essential for the proper and smooth functioning of a company. Numerous skills are needed to be the right-hand person to a performing boss and achieve these ambitious and various goals.

Our job is even harder today because it is continuously changing and evolving. The development of the information and communication technologies, the globalization and the growing power of customers are the 3 main factors that have a long-term impact on this post. That is why the qualification level of a Management Assistant keeps increasing; nowadays 8 out of 10 secretaries have got at least a bachelor versus 4 out of 10 in the 90's.<sup>4</sup>

You will have understood that a PA has to deal with many skills to excel in many sectors since her particularity is to be multi-tasked. As I will graduate this year, I thought it was interesting for me but also for the current and future PA's to find out which skills employers usually look for when they hire a secretary. I mainly based my research on the interview that I conducted with a recruiter from Secretary Plus, a Belgian temping agency for secretaries. I also questioned my colleagues of the Office Department at Randstad.

What comes out of these interviews in the first place is that being a Personal Assistant means you need more soft skills than hard skills. Here are the skills of a PA the recruiters of these agencies pay attention to.

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<sup>4</sup> Harache, C. (2010). *Toute la fonction assistante – Savoirs, Savoir-faire, Savoir-être*. Paris: Dunod.



### 2.2.1 Hard skills

#### 2.2.1.1 *Languages*

Globalization leads us to live and work in an environment that is more and more multicultural. As a result, we communicate more frequently with people whose mother tongue is different from ours. We, as Belgians, also have a chance to live in a country with 3 official languages. The numerous professional, private and social exchanges that we have with our neighbors make it almost necessary for us to master at least 2 of the 3 national languages. For those reasons, it is not surprising to hear Mrs Mouzon from Secretary Plus say that about 95 % of the job offers her company receives require the good command of a foreign language in addition to French.<sup>5</sup> It goes without saying that mastering fully your mother tongue is the minimum required for a Personal Assistant.

#### 2.2.1.2 *Computer tools*

Information technology is a driving force of our society, especially in companies. Internal and external communication could not be efficient without it. If computer tools are well managed, they ensure a smoother daily running within the company and save a lot of time. Clerical work is a major part of the job of a Personal Assistant: writing meeting reports, filling in and scanning documents, typing letters, encoding orders are few examples among hundreds of others. To this end, she uses many different computer tools like Word, Excel, accounting software etc. For this reason, she has to be able to take maximum advantage of office automation to make this kind of work as simple as possible.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Mrs Mouzon, consultant at Secretary Plus, Liege, April 3, 2015.

## 2.2.2 Soft skills

### 2.2.2.1 *Organization*

Organization within a company is necessary today more than ever. The growing size of the teams and new technologies that make communication very rapid are the 2 main reasons for this need. Managers need workers who can remain focused, thanks to their good organizational skills, on the projects they are involved in. In the same way, Managers could not devote full attention to their own projects and missions if they were not assisted by someone who deals with the logistical and administrative tasks. Organization talent includes setting priorities, managing time, coordinating information and equipment, planning and meeting deadlines.

No matter if you have got children or not, if you have your own car or travel by public transports, you use your organizational skills every day in your private life, sometimes without knowing it. Once again, the way you deal with organizational problems in your private life is linked to how you manage to do it on the job.

### 2.2.2.2 *Proactivity*

In order to face successfully changes and complexity, organization and reactivity are no longer enough: a proactive attitude is necessary. It means that you have to anticipate things and react accordingly before they actually happen. Being proactive also means taking control of one's life, changing the things that can be changed and not worrying about the others we cannot control.

Let's take an example of the daily life to illustrate this concept. Imagine that your job is not satisfying. If you are only reactive, you will spend your time criticizing and complaining: your boss is incompetent, your salary is not high enough, nobody listens to you, your qualifications are undervalued, etc. You will lose a lot of time and efforts with your negative thoughts and you will never do anything to change things.

On the contrary, if you are proactive, you will be able to take any action you can to improve your situation. You will go and see your boss to ask him to review your function, you could propose him to be given more tasks or responsibilities. You will try to see your colleagues as allies instead of opponents. Last but not least, you will think positive and accept your working terms – at least if they are acceptable.

#### 2.2.2.3 *Interpersonal skills*

For the Assistant, even more so than in other jobs, interpersonal skills are an integral part of her function. She has to deal with customers on a day-to-day basis, either in person, on the phone or by mail. She therefore has to adopt the appropriate behavior – neither passive nor aggressive – to contribute to an open and constructive communication.

As a result of the development of the international relations, a new skills requirement has appeared: a good intercultural communication. For the same reasons as mentioned above, Management Assistants are closely involved in this new need. Even though they do not always take part in the international business trips of their boss, they are responsible for their entire organization. Hence, PA's are regularly in touch with the local interlocutors and receive international visitors at the company. In our multilingual and multicultural country, they are still more likely to practice their intercultural know-how and to realize that some beliefs and traditions are not universal.

#### 2.2.2.4 *Thoroughness*

Success is much more related to thoroughness than to good ideas and luck. If you launch a project and you work on it with rigor and continuous efforts, you can be sure that it will pay off in the long run. It can therefore be said that this skill is an essential element to achieve strong and lasting results.

When you work closely with others, being rigorous is still more important because there are more factors that may interfere with your collaboration. Therefore, everything must be analyzed thoroughly: the follow-up of orders, projects, accounts, customers, ...

Managers enjoy working with people working this way because they know they can rely on them and that any detail will never be overlooked.

#### 2.2.2.5 *Versatility*

In the 80's, American specialists thought that the job of a secretary would be replaced by the development of new technologies. Far from it, the job has survived and evolved a lot since that time. The traditional image of the secretary who depends on one manager and whose tasks mainly consist in typing is out of date. Faced with the emergence of new computer tools that help office employees save a lot of time, typing decreased from 62 % to 20 %<sup>6</sup> of their working period.

Moreover, it is well known that today's secretaries have to deal with a lot of things at the same time. They are no longer reduced to an administrative assistant role: they wear so many different hats that the company's organization could not run efficiently without them. They have been assigned tasks with more responsibilities, which makes their job more demanding and diversified. Secretaries have to be more qualified and display their

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<sup>6</sup> Randstad France. (2013). *Etude Randstad sur l'évolution des métiers du secrétariat et de l'assistanat*. Online <http://www.top-assistante.com/metier/etudeSecreteriat.pdf>, viewed March 30, 2015.

adaptation capacity, especially since the job is continuously changing and evolving. That is why the terminology used to qualify this job has been changed in order to upgrade its image. Now, secretaries are called Management Assistants.

#### 2.2.2.6 *Confidentiality*

“Secrétaire”, the French word for Secretary is not without significance. It is an association of “secret” (same word in English) and “taire” (keep quiet). This shows how she has to manage all the information she deals with. As a PA works closely together with her boss and has to act as an intermediary for consumers, she is aware of a lot of things concerning the company, customers and even her manager's private life. To avoid ambiguity and discomfort, she has to be very careful not to share it with the wrong person, at the wrong time or to share it at all.

# Practical part

Now that you know a bit more about soft skills, you are certainly aware that it is necessary to equip both with hard and soft skills to excel in your professional as well as personal life.

I explained to you earlier that the method to acquire hard skills is quite easy provided you get a good training. The way you apply them is also the same for anyone who manages them. These rules do not apply to soft skills: they are to be adapted according to the person we communicate with. Moreover, like I told you above, they are not easy to develop because they cannot be taught by following a formal training like other subjects or hard skills. The current educational system in Europe is not adapted and the situation is not likely to change in the next few years.

Life skills are learned by experiencing situations, receiving feedbacks from your colleagues, making mistakes, ... In short, through practice. The more you practice them, the more they become part of you. The good news is that soft skills are generally interconnected. If you start to work on a particular skill, you will quickly notice how much impact it has on another skill. Throughout your work, you will progressively realize that it affects a lot your technical skills and your working method as well. In this way, working on your listening skills will undeniably affect the team spirit and maybe also the behavior within a group. You become step by step a good listener and your team workers are therefore more likely to trust you and to ask for your advice before taking a decision.

Since students are inadequately prepared to be successful in the workplace and because of the growing importance of soft skills in the working world, I wondered how these fundamental skills could be developed. Of course specific training programs exist but they are expensive and hardly ever open to the public. That is the reason why I have chosen to give you a few tips and exercises that will enable you to improve your soft skills.

As a committed scout leader, I decided a few years ago to follow a 300-hour training program to get my children's animator license. Most ideas come from this training, which was divided into theoretical and practical sessions alternately. During these sessions, I have been taught how to manage and entertain a group of young people. Taking care of children or teenagers and working as a PA may seem 2 completely different activities but some of the skills you need to do these jobs are common: versatility, time management, proactivity etc. For this part to be as complete as possible, I also gathered information from books and website articles written by experts on soft skills and psychologists.

Due to the huge amount of people skills that exists, it would not have been possible to explain to you how to enhance each of them. To make it possible to write the practical part of my dissertation, I decided to focus on the main skills you need to succeed as a PA. The choice of these skills is based on the interviews I conducted with 2 recruiters from different Belgian tempting agencies. You will find their content in the appendices 1 and 2 if you are interested.

I do not claim to be an expert on soft skills training and I do not expect you neither to become the boss of your company nor to have a perfect family life after applying the advice written in the following pages. However, if you pay attention to the different kinds of process, it will give you an overview of how you can develop your soft skills and have a greater harmony between work and the rest of your life. It can only be beneficial for your well-being and for your next interactions with people. Once again, you will have to practice a lot so that these behaviors and attitudes become natural and spontaneous.



### 3

### How to improve your soft skills?

You cannot start to work on your soft skills if you do not know which ones you need to improve. Here is an easy thing you can do to assess your personality and know yourself better.

First, be honest with yourself and think about your 3 main strengths and weaknesses. Then, ask 2 friends/relatives and 2 people from work/school the same question. Compare your answers with theirs and pick up the most common qualities and weaknesses.

To get complete results about your like skills, you also have the possibility to take personality tests in specialized centers like the PMS of the Province of Liege. If you decide to take online tests, choose them carefully because they are not always reliable. The one you will find on the website *www.skillsyouneed.com*<sup>7</sup> will give you accurate information about your interpersonal skills (listening skills, personal intelligence, verbal communication and communicating in group).

Once you know which skills need your attention, you have to set yourself a goal: you can choose to strengthen your weakest skills or enhance those you already master. Then get to work and, more importantly, stick to it.

In the appendices, I created some summary sheets of the practical part in case you would rather have an overview of it and not go into details. The files can be taken with you wherever you go so that you always have the tips and exercises handy.

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<sup>7</sup> Skillsyouneed. (2011). *Interpersonal Skills Self-Assessment*. Online <http://www.skillsyouneed.com/ls/index.php/survey/index>, viewed March 21, 2015.

## 3.1 Interpersonal skills

### 3.1.1 Public speaking

Everybody has always had to speak in public, whether at school, at work, as a scout leader etc. So you know it is a particularly stressful situation and it is not always easy to complete this mission successfully. Even people like politicians and teachers, who are used to speaking in front of many persons, do not always feel comfortable. Over the years they learned to hide their fear and control their emotions but, in reality, few of them really feel at ease.

The next time you will do public speaking, think about those tips and, more importantly, try to apply them.

- **Know your subject**

You will feel and appear much more confident if you know your subject and what message you want to deliver. So, gather as much information as possible about your subject; by doing so, you will be more prepared in case your audience has the opportunity to ask you questions after your speech. Rehearse your presentation again and again until you do not need your notes to back up. Do not forget to prepare the introduction too. Keep in mind that the first 7 seconds makes the difference, so if you start the wrong way, it does not promise well for the rest.

- **Be positive**

Having negative thoughts before even starting to speak will not help you to get through it. Your attitude will reflect and influence naturally your body language and your message. It also relates to a meeting with people you do not appreciate or you do not know. Despite the uncomfortable situation you are about to live, stay positive and try to relativize. For example, you could think about good memories or something you are looking forward to, like your last or next vacation.

- **Make good eye contact**

When communicating with someone, it is essential to maintain good eye contact with the person. If you are talking to a group of people, try to keep them all attentive by looking at them in the eyes. The point is also to show your interest and openness. In case you meet and greet one or a little group of persons, I would advise you to notice the eyes color of the person(s).

- **Smile!**

Is it necessary to remember that a smile makes you more friendly and approachable? Of course you do not need to smile all along your speech or meeting, otherwise it may seem fake and exaggerated. Try at least to give a warm welcome and goodbye so that the person keeps good memories of you. If you are not convinced about it, go and check the interviews at the back of this work. You will see that both Mrs Mouzon and Mr Zebidi stated the smile when I asked them which signs of the body they appreciate during a job interview.

### 3.1.2 Interpreting body language

Not everyone can read the signs communicated by the body and interpret them. If you have already tried to focus both on the conversation and the body language, you know that is not easy at all. Furthermore, it takes years of practice to understand what it means. That being said, there are some simple signs that may help you to know how your interlocutor really feels. Of course, similarly to proxemics, they are not universal and their meaning varies depending on the situation. Besides, some signs are not completely unconscious and are sometimes simple habits. So, when you manage to spot a sign, do not jump to conclusions.

#### 3.1.2.1 *Proxemics*

The more people stand close to you, the more they want to establish a friendly relationship with you. The less they stand away from you, the less they care about the situation or about you. If you decide to make a step ahead to get closer to your interlocutor and he makes a step back, it means that he does not want to have a closer relationship with you and that he does not want to interact with you? If, on the contrary, the person stays where he is standing and perhaps make a step ahead too, there are great chances that he likes you and feels good in your company. It is interesting to remind that the space between people is based on cultural beliefs. What is considered as close in a country can be distances in another.

#### 3.1.2.2 *Head*

Watch the head's position of the speaker. A too tilted head may either be a sign of friendliness, or if the person is smiling at the same time, maybe that he is playing with you or is trying to seduce you. Having the head down may indicate that the person wants to hide something. If this happens after a compliment, the person may be shy, ashamed, embarrassed or want to mark his astonishment or disbelief in order to keep a distance

from the other person. If this reaction follows a conversation in which you explained something, then this is a sign that the person is not sure of what was said or is thinking about your words. Note that in some cultures, it is a sign of respect.

Having bowed head can mean that the person is either confused or wants to challenge you, everything depends on the eyes, eyebrows and mouth movements. On the other hand, in combination with a smile, bowing his head can indicate that the person likes you and is engaged in a nice conversation.

#### 3.1.2.3 *Eyes*

People who look to the side on many repeated occasions are either nervous, absent-minded or they are lying. Nonetheless, taking progressively their eyes off the look of the speaker can be both a mark of comfort or submission. A shifty look can usually tell that the person is suspicious or skeptical. If he seems to look away or stare into space, it is usually a sign that he is lost in deep thoughts and does not collect your information.

If your interlocutor stares at the ground during the entire conversation, he is definitely shy or is trying to hide unpleasant emotions. If the emotion is pleasant, he is rather going to raise his head. It should also be noted that we tend to look down when we are angry.

In some cultures, looking someone straight in the eyes is a lack of respect. You are only allowed to do it between friends or relatives, which might explain that someone avoids eye contact with you.

#### 3.1.2.4 *Imitation*

During an interaction of several minutes, try to change the position of your body (like leaning on the back of your chair) and check if the person in front of you does the same. If he imitates your gestures or attitude, it is certainly a sign that he is interested in you and he is trying to develop a relationship.

#### 3.1.2.5 *Arms and hands*

People with crossed arms are closed to any social influence. Although some of us cross our arms due to habit, it can also indicate that we are not open to interactions or that we are not comfortable with our appearance and we are trying to hide it. When our arms are crossed whereas our feet are aligned with our shoulders or if we stand with our feet shoulder-width apart, this is a defensive or bossy position.

If the person rubs his hands or touch a body part to reassure himself, it may mean that he is trying to cheer himself up and he is very likely to think "Come on, it will be over soon.". If a person rests his arms behind his neck or his head, he is open to discussion or is simply relaxed. If his hands are on his hips, the person can expect something, be impatient or just tired. Lastly, if his hands are closed or tightened, the individual may be irritated, anxious or nervous.

#### 3.1.2.6 *Feet*

If they are not hidden behind a desk, take a discreet look at the feet of the speaker. A quick tap of the foot or moving on his chair usually indicates that the person is anxious, excited, nervous, fearful or intimidated. The meaning of tapping your foot can generally be detected depending on the context. If you are doing it while someone is talking, it is an indication that you would like to withdraw from the meeting (although this behavior usually indicates that a person is obsessed with the fact of going to a particular place,

like a meeting, rather than with what you are doing or saying in particular). If you do slow movements with any part of your body, it indicates to the person who is talking that you are bored.

If you are in front of a person who is sitting with his feet crossed at the ankles, it means that he probably feels at ease. If this person is standing and always keeps his feet together, it means that she is trying to look "clean". Sometimes having the feet together is a mark of submission or passivity.

Some people point their feet in the direction they want to go to, towards the thing or people that interests them. Of course, this sign is totally normal in the case of a face-to-face conversation. However, if in a group discussion someone points his feet towards you, he may be interested in you.

### 3.1.3 International communication

The best way to ensure a good communication with a non-French speaking person is to be able to make yourself understood in his own language. However, learning a language is part of the hard skills and teaching them is obviously not the goal of this work. Here is a little piece of advice to apply in case you meet a foreign person, especially when none of them is able to speak the other person's language.

According to the country you live in and your culture, the physical distance between interlocutors is not the same. This is the so called "proxemics". Even in our own society, there are 4 different distances depending on the relationship you have with the person you speak to: the intimate distance (close relationships like friends or family), the personal distance (interactions among acquaintances), the social distance (normal communication distance) and the public distance (teachers and public speakers).

As our society is becoming more and more intercultural, we happen to talk steadily with people with different cultures. We have to pay even more attention to respect this distance and not invade the personal space.

The next time you know you will stand in front of someone with a different culture than yours, for example a German customer coming to the company you work in, do not hesitate to inquire about their custom and habits beforehand. If you do not act in accordance with them, it may lead to uncomfortableness and misinterpretation.

## 3.2 Proactivity

Proactivity is an indispensable step of the personal development, which is linked to lifestyle change and self-improvement. How to quit your reactive attitude to become a proactive and pleased individual?

- **Think ahead**

The first thing to do to move from reactivity to proactivity is to develop foresight. Proactive people are rarely caught by surprise. Learn to predict problems and events, understand how things work, recognize habits, daily practices and natural repetitions that occur at your workplace. But, be careful; do not simply expect things to happen as usual. Use your creativity and logic as well. Think about multiple scenarios for how events could move in and anticipate long-term consequences.

- **Distinguish between the things you can control and those you cannot**

In order to be proactive, you must understand that 2 types of things can be problematic: things you can change and others on which you do not have any influence. For instance, there is nothing you can do against the weather, political decisions, natural disasters or a computer crash. As you do not have any influence on them, there is no point complaining about them.



At the same time, act upon things you can control and deal with. For example, do not criticize your co-worker behind his back but go and find him to find common ground. Instead of complaining about the passive attitude of politicians towards environmental degradation, act in your own way: eat organic food, buy local and fair-trade products, ride your bicycle whenever you can. Do not be jealous about your friend getting promoted but recognize he worked harder than you and be happy for him.

If you decide not to change things, this is for a good reason. So take responsibility of your choices and assume the bad part of them. Let's say that your job is not fulfilling anymore but you do not want to change because you are afraid not to find a new one. If you are reactive, you are going to say: "I cannot take the risk to quit, I have little chance to find another job because of my age, what will become of my children in that case?". If you are proactive, you will say: "I have chosen to keep my job because it allows me to make ends meet and to raise my family. This is not the ideal situation but the fact that my incomes are ensured is more important than the job's displeasure."

It is worth noticing that proactivity is not necessarily an action but also sometimes a new way to see things and people.

- **Stop making excuses**

Becoming proactive also means giving up excuses. They are serious obstacles to proactivity and you will quickly figure out for which reason. Imagine that you have got a friend who does a lot of sport and who is in good shape. When talking to him, you feel jealous and you want to be like him. Your friend is answering you that it only depends on you if you want to be as fit as him. If you are a reactive person, you are going to say: "I am not like you, I do not practice any sport because of my health, my age, I do not have time for it" etc. Each excuse is an illusion. Except in some extreme cases, we can always decide to change.

### 3.3 Organization

#### 3.3.1 Priority management

The first thing to do to improve your priority management skills at work is to classify any sheet you receive in a filing cabinet. It may seem obvious but this step is too often neglected by employees and is responsible for many lost documents and messy desks. Actually, there are ready-made filing cabinets, which are separated in 7 sections (the 7 days of the week). If you do not have one, you can easily do it yourself with separators. It will enable you to put your files in one of the sections according to the day on which you have to deal with it. When you arrive at the office in the morning, you immediately know which task you must carry on simply by opening your cabinet.

Apply the same rule to your emails. You also have the possibility to create files in your electronic mailbox but many of them also enable you to highlight your messages with a specific color according to the importance or urgency of the answer. Choose the method that suits you the best.

#### 3.3.2 Time management

The problem of people who cannot manage their time is that they often have difficulties with estimating the time an action actually takes. Here is a simple training that you can do several times in a day to improve your time management skill. Before going shopping, getting ready for a night out, driving your kids to school or any other activity you think about, try to evaluate the time it will take you. Do not forget to take into account any factor that may alter the duration of the activity, such as weather, traffic, failed attempt and so on.

Sometimes, even if you have a strong organization and if you are good at managing your time you have got so many things to do at a given time that it is just impossible to get the job done in time. In order not to be overloaded with work, it is important to learn to say no, even if I know that you have good reasons not to do it. I think about the fear to disappoint, stay in good terms with a friend or increase your importance within your company. However, there are smoother ways than others to refuse something. Here is some advice:

- Ask your interlocutor to explain to you why it is so urgent. If it is not, ask the person with a smile if he can wait 1 or 2 days for the job to be done. If it is really urgent, explain that the work will not be well done because you only have a short time for it.
- If you judge that another person should carry on the mission, just mention it.
- Open your diary and have a look at it before saying: "Sorry but I cannot squeeze it in my timetable".
- Make a list of your priorities and show it to the speaker before saying: "I understand but I already have this and this to do. Could you ask someone else?".

If, despite applying these tips, you feel that you will lack time to deal with your assigned tasks, do not hesitate to delegate some of them to a colleague. Nevertheless, think about checking the progress of the file. There is nothing more unpleasant than hearing that a co-worker did not succeed in doing the job. You will then be responsible for completing it in the rush.

To avoid the stress caused by the bad time management of a colleague, make sure to respect these rules: surround yourself with collaborators that you can count on, pick up the person carefully according to his skills, make yourself clear about the work to do and the timing, ask for a brief report and congratulate once it is done.

### 3.4 Thoroughness

Thoroughness is closely linked to organization skills. If you define and organize well your tasks, responsibilities and priorities, you will have fewer opportunities to forget one or another detail. To be more rigorous in the actions you undertake, you first take the time to think about what prompted you to realize your plans. The more committed and determined you are, the more you will be thorough in your work. Then, take time to clarify expectations when a task or project is assigned to you. After giving it back to your manager, ask him for feedbacks and figure out together what kind of information is missing.

Here is another simple exercise to do on the job to have more ideas on how to enhance your thoroughness. When attending a meeting where participants have to provide reports, notice who is rigorous and who is not. The next time, observe techniques and methods that they use in their work. Ask what these people think about when they approach it.

### 3.5 Versatility

In the first part of the exercise, pick an activity that you do on a daily basis, such as cooking, exercising or answering e-mails. On the first day, do that same activity while doing something else: talking to a friend, watching a movie ... On the second day, do that activity on its own, with no distraction at all. Once it is done, ask yourself whether one scenario was more fun and efficient or not. This simple experiment will help you identify the costs and benefits associated with multitasking. Repeat this exercise and why not add a third activity. By doing it, you will have new ideas on how to focus on several things at the same time.

## **Conclusion**

To succeed in your professional life, you obviously need to possess the technical qualifications your position requires. Yet is it also necessary to be fitted with soft skills in addition to your hard skills. This is the question that I have been trying to answer throughout my dissertation, in particular concerning the specific case of a Personal Assistant.

After all my research, I can now safely say that the efficiency of a Management Assistant depends as much on her technical abilities as on her life skills. The significant difference between them is how they are mastered: most graduated PA's have got the same qualifications but never master the same kinds and number of soft skills. Those skills are therefore a way to stand out from your counterparts. If you can choose to work on them, you will be more efficient in your function.

I am aware that improving the soft skills of students, employees and bosses is not going to solve the problems the work market is experiencing. However, I repeated over and over again in these pages that the command of soft skills does not necessarily only imply the improvement of the professional quality of a worker; this process also has a positive impact on his family and personal life.

Indeed, thanks to the new and better personality you have been acquiring, you are able to get rid of all that once prevented you from leading a successful life. Of course, you cannot complete success in all aspects of your life at the same time. However, being able to handle interpersonal relations, to take appropriate decisions and to manage your time can only help get things better at home and at the workplace.

Moreover, it is important to remind that improving your life skills involves changing your attitude towards life. By mastering more and more people skills, you will quickly become aware that you can take control of your life. You also realize that, despite what we are used to hearing, greater harmony between work, family and society is possible if you develop the people skills you most need. This new vision will help you get rid of your bitterness, rancor, negative thoughts, bad feelings and will improve considerably the positivity and quality of your life.

To answer my initial question "Are soft skills necessary to succeed as a PA?", I would say for all the reasons I have stated that they are not only necessary but also essential. The more a job involves public relations, the higher development of soft skills the person should possess. Since a Personal Assistant steadily deals - directly or indirectly - with customers, colleagues and managers, she must be equipped with as many soft skills as possible to work efficiently.

Concerning the practical part of my work which was about "How can soft skills be developed in your daily life?", I hope that I provided you clear and rewarding tips and that I gave you a good overview of the things that work to develop the life skills you need as a PA. The main idea to remember from this part is that there is no age to develop your soft skills but, like any new habit you want to get into, it requires hard work. If you do not practice in the long run, they will never be part of you.

The question I am asking myself now at the end of this dissertation is the following: how to integrate soft skills in the current theoretical educational system in Europe?

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## **Appendices**

- Appendix 1: Interview with Mrs Florence Mouzon, consultant at Secretary Plus.
- Appendix 2: Interview with Mr Adel Zebidi, consultant at Randstad Office Liège.
- Appendix 3: Summary sheets of the practical part.

<p>Appendix 1: Interview with Mrs Florence Mouzon, consultant at Secretary Plus. (Liege, April 3, 2015).</p>
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**Lors du screening des CV, quelle section regardez-vous en premier lieu?**

Quand on reçoit un CV, on l'analyse en fonction de l'offre pour laquelle la candidate a postulé, de la demande du client. De façon aussi générale, par rapport aux demandes habituelles de nos clients. Nous sommes spécialisés dans le recrutement des assistantes de direction principalement multilingues donc, très souvent, notre œil part directement vers les connaissances en langues. Néanmoins, on ne se limite certainement pas à ça car beaucoup de personnes s'évaluent mal, que ce soit dans un sens ou dans l'autre: elles se surestiment la plupart du temps mais il y en aussi qui se sous-estiment.

Après un premier coup d'œil aux langues, on regarde le parcours professionnel, que ça soit des stages ou des expériences. On regarde le parcours des candidates, quels postes elles ont occupé. Puis, pour analyser de façon plus approfondie, on regarde les dates de leurs emplois pour savoir si ça fait longtemps qu'elles n'ont plus travaillé, s'elles sont toujours en poste ...

**Accordez-vous de l'importance au visuel d'un CV?**

Un peu moins. Evidemment, si le CV d'une secrétaire de direction est tout décalé, cela va un peu nous déranger parce la mise en page est sensée faire partie des choses de base qu'elle maîtrise. Cependant on ne va jamais s'arrêter à ça parce que le programme avec lequel on ouvre le CV n'est pas nécessairement celui avec lequel il a été fait, donc parfois simplement ce qui peut modifier la mise en page ça change la mise en page.

Maintenant tout ce qui est très original, je pense à des CV des graphistes que l'on reçoit de temps en temps, attirent de toute façon plus l'œil. Mais attention à ce qu'il ne soit pas bariolé, de toutes les couleurs et où on ne sait pas trop regarder. Rien de tel qu'un

CV clair et épuré, ça nous facilite les choses pour trouver les informations que l'on cherche.

**Accordez-vous de l'importance à la partie "Divers"? Pour quelle(s) raison(s)?**

On regarde toujours, on jette un coup d'œil. Maintenant, d'expérience, on sait très bien que les gens mettent parfois des choses pour mettre des choses. Par exemple, la lecture s'y retrouve souvent mais quand on demande le dernier livre que la personne a lu, elle ne sait pas répondre où cite le dernier livre dont on a parlé aux médias. Ce n'est pas non plus parce qu'une personne fait de la natation qu'on va se dire qu'elle est solitaire ou si elle mentionne le football on ne se dit pas qu'elle travaille bien en équipe; on ne fait pas de parallèle. C'est chouette pour pouvoir discuter, faire connaissance mais c'est vraiment une des dernières choses qu'on regarde sur un CV.

**Vous arrive-t-il d'éliminer des candidats après analyse de leur CV? Pour quelles(s) raison(s)?**

Nonante-cinq pourcent des offres qu'on reçoit demandent des connaissances linguistiques autres que le français. Donc si on voit "néerlandais connaissance passive, de base ou pas du tout de connaissance" et qu'on recherche justement une personne bilingue, c'est éliminatoire. Sauf si la candidate a vraiment l'air bien, on le met sur le côté pour faire une réserve de recrutement et donc pouvoir le recontacter par la suite. Autre CV qu'on éliminerait directement, le cas où l'expérience n'a rien avoir avec ce qu'on recherche. Par exemple, on a parfois des gens qui ont des connaissances ouvrières alors qu'on recherche du management assistantat.

### **Est-il important de joindre une photo?**

Ça a peu d'importance pour nous, on ne se base jamais sur une photo en tout cas. Les gens qui en mettent une c'est très bien. Ceux qui n'en mettent pas, on ne se demande pas pourquoi, ce sont des gens qu'on va de toute façon rencontrer. Maintenant c'est sûr qu'une photo avec une personne souriante et avenante va nous donner une bonne impression.

### **Au vu des exigences des offres que vous recevez, quelles sont les compétences (savoir-faire et savoir-être) les plus demandées chez une assistante de direction?**

Au niveau des compétences personnelles, les principales sont l'organisation, la rigueur, la polyvalence, la discrétion, la communication aisée, la gestion des priorités. Je pourrais ajouter la résistance au stress mais on la retrouve dans plus ou moins toutes les offres d'emploi. Au niveau du savoir-faire, les langues et l'outil informatique sont les plus demandés.

### **Selon vous, quelle catégorie est plus importante: "hard skills" ou "soft skills"?**

Les "soft skills" sont plus difficiles à changer, c'est bien connu. Il est possible de les modifier un petit peu mais si on est d'un naturel pessimiste, on va difficilement devenir optimiste. De la même façon, si on se lève du pied gauche le matin c'est difficile de se lever du pied droit du jour au lendemain.

Tandis qu'une "hard skill", on peut toujours l'acquérir en étudiant ou en lisant. A l'agence on accorde autant d'importance aux 2, si pas un peu plus aux "soft skills". Comme Secretary Plus est un intermédiaire, on va plus appuyer un candidat avec une personnalité hyper agréable et qui peut tout à fait correspondre aux attentes du client. Si, à côté de ça, son niveau d'anglais n'est pas parfait - mais avec quand même une bonne connaissance de base - on va le pousser au client en disant qu'il peut améliorer son

anglais mais que, par contre, une personnalité est difficile à changer.

**Les candidats ont-ils toujours un entretien en agence avant que leur candidature ne soit envoyée au client?**

Toujours. Il y a d'abord un entretien d'environ 1 heure avec une consultante pour apprendre à connaître le candidat. Ensuite, on fait passer des tests d'informatique, de langues, Word, Excel, Powerpoint parce que les "hard skills" ont quand même de l'importance. Il y a également un test de personnalité. Seulement après, on décide d'envoyer ou non le candidat en fonction des résultats. On est plus sélectives à la base que les généralistes<sup>8</sup> parce que ça prend beaucoup de temps, surtout que c'est principalement pour des CDI donc sur une longue durée. On reçoit entre 6 et 8 candidats par semaine, on passe beaucoup de temps avec eux pour mieux les connaître et, donc, pour que le matching<sup>9</sup> soit le meilleur possible.

**Comment procédez-vous pour analyser la personnalité du candidat pendant un entretien?**

Nous avons un très chouette test de personnalité (Profil Pro) qui prend environ 15 minutes. En général, ça dégage déjà une assez bonne image des candidats. Ils sont d'ailleurs assez souvent surpris des résultats. Au-delà de ce test, on analyse aussi le candidat pendant l'entretien. On essaye de déceler l'attitude non-verbale, pendant une 1 heure on a bien le temps de l'analyser. On leur pose des questions de mise en situation, on essaye de voir si la personne se trahit. Une chose non-négligeable qu'on fait également pour en savoir plus sur le caractère d'un candidat c'est prendre des références. Que ce soit des juniors ou pas, on ne loupe jamais cette étape. Pour les juniors, on téléphone aux lieux de stage ou aux professeurs.

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<sup>8</sup> Les agences de recrutement qui ne sont pas spécialisées dans un métier en particulier.

<sup>9</sup> Terme utilisé en recrutement pour désigner la recherche des candidats d'une base de données qui correspondent le mieux possible à la demande du client.

**Vous faites donc attention au "body language" du candidat. Savez-vous le décrypter?**

Au fur et mesure des années et des expériences, on a appris à déchiffrer les signes les plus clairs. Par exemple, la façon de s'asseoir sur une chaise. Peu importe qu'on se tienne très droit ou pas mais si la personne est avachie, ça n'engage déjà rien de bon. Les gens stressés ont généralement le regard fuyant. On essaye de déceler d'où ça vient, si c'est de la timidité, un malaise, un mensonge etc.

**Vous m'avez parlé de la façon de s'asseoir sur une chaise, quels autres éléments du "body language" appréciez-vous et n'appréciez-vous pas?**

Ce que j'apprécie c'est quand la personne sait maintenir le regard dans les yeux. Elle peut avoir de temps en temps le regard qui part ailleurs, bien sûr. Ensuite, le sourire. Sourire dans sa façon de parler je veux dire, pas garder un sourire béat pendant tout l'entretien évidemment. Par contre, j'accorde moins d'importance aux mains et aux bras. On dit beaucoup que si les gens ont les bras croisés, ça veut dire qu'ils sont fermés. Je ne me considère pas du tout comme quelqu'un de fermé mais il m'arrive de me mettre dans cette position parce que je l'aime encore bien. Chipoter avec un bic peut vouloir dire que la personne est anxieuse ou stressée mais je vous avoue que je le fais aussi pendant l'entretien et que je me sens tout à fait à l'aise. Donc, pour analyser le "body language", mon attention va plus attirée vers le visage de la personne.

**La formation des assistantes de direction qui se présentent à votre agence est-elle généralement/souvent/rarement en adéquation avec les attentes de vos clients?**

J'ai envie de dire généralement. Maintenant, une école n'est pas l'autre. En fonction de l'école de laquelle sort la future assistante, sa formation est plus ou moins solide qu'une autre car il y en a où les cours de langues sont beaucoup moins poussés. Ça dépend aussi de la personne: deux diplômés ont pu suivre la même formation, l'un peut être complètement apte à assurer son poste et l'autre pas du tout. De nouveau, dans ce cas-

ci, il y a aussi la personnalité qui a son importance, tout comme la façon dont on suit ses cours. Une personne A peut suivre la formation de façon très passive, réussir mais ne pas être faite à 100 % pour le poste. Une personne B peut s'investir tout au long de ses études et s'y intéresser et correspondre parfaitement au poste. Au final, c'est vraiment la personnalité de la personne qui fait tout.

**Donc quand il manque des compétences au candidat c'est plus au niveau de la personnalité?**

Tout à fait, et des compétences linguistiques. Mais ce n'est pas un blâme, je suis consciente qu'une langue s'apprend sur le terrain. Si une personne réussit brillamment ses cours de langues mais ne fait rien à côté pour les travailler elle va peut-être être nulle à l'oral. Inversement, si elle regarde des séries ou des films en VO, si elle a des amies en Flandres ou si elle travaille là-bas comme étudiante, elle aura probablement un très bon niveau à l'oral. A côté des compétences manquantes, il y a parfois un manque d'informations quant à la fonction réelle d'une Management Assistant. Là aussi, c'est parfois difficile d'en être conscient avec une formation qui reste assez théorique. Les stages peuvent aider à voir comment cela se passe sur le terrain pour autant qu'on ne tombe pas sur une entreprise qui fait faire des photocopies du début à la fin.

**Une assistante de direction avec de l'expérience professionnelle dans son domaine a-t-elle plus de chance d'être engagée qu'une autre qui vient d'être diplômée?**

Tout dépend de l'attente de la société. Une assistante avec de l'expérience a plus chance d'être reprise pour un poste qui en demande. Cependant, ça nous arrive de proposer un candidat junior dans ce cas parce qu'on croit vraiment en lui. On le vend alors d'un point de vue plus personnel. Les personnes avec de l'expérience ont souvent des attentes salariales plus élevées que les juniors donc elles n'acceptent pas non plus certaines offres pour cette raison. Les 2 ont leurs avantages et leurs inconvénients.



<b>Appendix 2: Interview with Mr Adel Zebidi, consultant at Randstad Office Liege. (Liège, April 10, 2015)</b>
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**Lors du screening des CV, quelle section regardez-vous en premier lieu?**

Dans le département Office, c'est les connaissances linguistiques en néerlandais, anglais et allemand. La plupart du temps nos clients demandent la maîtrise d'une ou plusieurs de ces langues. Ensuite, on regarde la formation du candidat de manière générale, s'il a un bachelier. Ceux en assistant de direction sont les plus demandés mais ça peut être aussi en commerce extérieur ou en droit.

**Accordez-vous de l'importance au visuel du CV?**

Si le CV correspond à ce que je recherche, c'est-à-dire aux critères linguistiques et à la formation, je serai moins regardant. Mais c'est vrai que c'est un petit plus quand même d'avoir un CV bien rédigé. Si je tombe sur un CV qui n'est pas bien rédigé mais qui m'intéresse, je vais quand même le signaler au candidat pour qu'il puisse le mettre à jour. Parfois ce sont des personnes qui travaillent au même endroit depuis années et qui n'ont donc jamais dû faire de CV.

**Est-il important de joindre une photo ?**

Ça n'a aucune importance pour moi. Par contre, certains clients nous le demande. Ça peut être discriminant si c'est demandé par pure subjectivité. Si maintenant c'est pour un poste d'hôtesse ou steward, ce n'est pas discriminant car il y a certains critères physiques demandés. Dans le département Office, c'est rarement le cas.

**Accordez-vous de l'importance à la partie "Divers" d'un CV? Pour quelle(s) raison(s)?**

Je la regarde mais je n'y accorde pas d'importance. Le principal c'est de voir si le candidat correspond aux critères demandés par le client.

**Vous arrive-t-il d'éliminer des candidats après analyse de leur CV? Pour quelles(s) raison(s)?**

Si la personne ne correspond pas au profil de par ses compétences, que ce soit au niveau des tâches, des connaissances linguistiques et du diplôme.

**Au vu des exigences des offres que vous recevez, quelles sont les compétences (savoir-faire et savoir-être) les plus demandées chez une assistante de direction?**

Dans l'ordre d'importance, l'organisation, la rigueur et la gestion du stress. Cette dernière exigence n'est cependant pas spécifique à notre département. Au niveau des "hard skills", encore une fois la pratique des langues. Une assistante de direction qui ne maîtrise que le français a beaucoup moins de chances de trouver un poste qu'une autre qui parle 2 langues. On a parfois de plus petits profils (de secrétaire, mais pas de direction) où c'est le diplôme et le stage qui priment mais c'est très rare.

**Selon vous, quelle catégorie est plus importante: "hard skills" ou "soft skills"?**

Les 2 vont de pair. Une assistante de direction doit absolument être multitâches et avoir un esprit ouvert. Elle touche à tout (événements, réunions, courriers, téléphone, accueil des personnes, ressources humaines, finance, comptabilité ...) et c'est tellement vaste qu'il faut absolument qu'elle soit polyvalente et ouverte à tout type de travail.

**Une assistante de direction avec de l'expérience professionnelle dans son domaine a-t-elle plus de chance d'être engagée qu'une autre qui vient d'être diplômée?**

Oui, si le client demande une première expérience professionnelle. S'il reste ouvert au niveau du profil, il va quand même privilégier un candidat avec de l'expérience dans la majorité des cas. Cependant, si on tombe sur une super candidate junior avec de bonnes références, on va la vendre auprès du client, ce qui aura plus d'impact. Les stages ont

beaucoup d'importance car s'ils sont bons, ils permettent d'avoir de bonnes références.

**Les candidats ont-ils toujours un entretien en agence avant que leur candidature ne soit envoyée au client?**

Oui. On ne saurait pas vendre le candidat si on ne l'a pas rencontré. Si on ne le fait pas nous-mêmes, c'est parce qu'il a déjà été rencontré par une autre agence intérim. Dans ce cas-là, on reprend la "productline"<sup>10</sup> du dossier du candidat et on essaye de le vendre par rapport à ces informations.

**Comment procédez-vous pour analyser la personnalité du candidat pendant un entretien?**

Les premières secondes sont très importantes, on a déjà un avis tranché sur la personne. Si la première impression est négative (apparence, poignée de main, voix), ça va être difficile de la changer, à moins que le candidat ne fasse un excellent entretien. Pendant l'entretien, je pose tout simplement certaines questions au candidat pour en savoir plus à son sujet telles que "Si je devais demander à un ancien collègue ou employeur ce qu'il pense de vous, que dirait-il?" ou "Pouvez-vous me citer 3 qualités et 3 points à améliorer chez vous?". Sinon, on prend toujours des références sur le candidat, ce qui nous donne des informations fiables au niveau de son travail et de sa personnalité. Depuis peu, on a également un test de personnalité qu'on peut faire passer aux candidats. Cela nous permet d'avoir une indication supplémentaire si on n'arrive pas à cerner le candidat ou si le client le demande. Toutes ces étapes permettent de nous assurer que la personnalité collera avec le client et les valeurs de la société. Maintenant, c'est vrai qu'on ne peut pas tout déceler au niveau de la personnalité en un seul entretien.

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<sup>10</sup> Section du dossier d'un candidat où sont mentionnées des informations à son sujet relevées pendant un entretien: les points forts, les points à améliorer, les attentes professionnelles, les motivations, ...

**Faites-vous attention au "body language" du candidat? Si oui, savez-vous le décrypter?**

J'y fais attention mais je sais seulement décrypter certains signes. De mon côté, je me suis documenté sur la PNL<sup>11</sup> car c'est un sujet qui m'intéresse mais je ne l'ai pas fait de façon approfondie. Je me concentre beaucoup plus sur les compétences de la personne que sur le "body language" car c'est quelque chose de très complexe. Selon moi, il faut des années de pratique pour pouvoir déceler les signes et déchiffrer le langage du corps.

**Quel(s) élément(s) du "body language" appréciez-vous?**

Un candidat avec une bonne poignée de main tout d'abord. Il faut qu'elle soit ferme mais pas autoritaire. Le sourire est également important.

**Quel(s) élément(s) du "body language" n'appréciez-vous pas?**

Le fait de parler avec les mains si c'est fait de façon exagérée. Le fait aussi que la personne ne me regarde pas du tout va me déranger. Pendant un entretien, je n'aime pas non plus qu'une personne soit presque affalée sur mon bureau et essaye de regarder mon écran; c'est un manque de professionnalisme.

**Après l'entretien, vous arrive-t-il d'écarter un candidat?**

On n'exclut jamais totalement un candidat quand il a un profil souvent demandé par nos clients mais on le met en réserve. On sait que d'autres candidats vont convenir donc c'est plutôt eux qu'on va envoyer. Si le candidat est une "pépité" au niveau de ses compétences mais que son caractère pourrait ne pas coller avec l'entreprise, on en parle quand même au client tout en nuancant qu'on a un doute au niveau de la personnalité. On essaye que le client puisse le rencontrer et juger de lui-même.

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<sup>11</sup> Programmation neuro-linguistique.

**La formation des assistantes de direction qui se présentent à votre agence est-elle généralement/souvent/rarement en adéquation avec les attentes de vos clients?**

Ce qui nous gêne dans la formation de secrétariat de direction c'est que, quand les personnes sont diplômées, elles ont un niveau trop faible en langues (souvent B1<sup>12</sup>) par rapport à ce qui est demandé sur le marché du travail. On ne demande pas non plus qu'elles soient bilingues mais avec un niveau B2 elles multiplieraient grandement leurs chances de trouver un travail.

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<sup>12</sup> Référence aux niveaux du test ELAO, le logiciel d'évaluation linguistique utilisé chez Randstad.

### Appendix 3: Summary sheets of the practical part

Public speaking	Thoroughness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gather as much information as possible about your subject: you will feel and appear much more confident.</li> <li>• Rehearse your presentation again and again until you do not need your notes to back up.</li> <li>• Be positive. Your attitude will reflect and influence naturally your body language and your message. Think about good memories or something you are looking forward to, like your last or next vacation.</li> <li>• Make good eye contact. It keeps the audience attentive and it shows your interest and openness.</li> <li>• Smile! It makes you more friendly and approachable.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take time to clarify expectations when a task or project is assigned. Ask feedbacks to your manager and figure out together what kind of information is missing.</li> <li>• When attending a meeting where participants have to provide reports, notice who is rigorous and who is not. The next time, observe techniques and methods that they use in their work. Ask these people what they think about when they approach it.</li> </ul>
Priority management	International communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Classify any sheet you receive in a section of a filing cabinet according to its importance;</li> <li>• Highlight your urgent/important emails with a specific color.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respect the physical distance between interlocutors (proxemics). According to the country or the religion, the intimate, the personal, the social and the public distances vary.</li> <li>• Inquire about the custom and habits before meeting someone with a different culture.</li> </ul>

Versatility	Proactivity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pick an activity that you do on a daily basis (cooking, exercising or answering e-mails). On the first day, do that activity while doing something else: talking to a friend, watching a movie ...</li> <li>• On the second day, do it on its own with no distraction at all. Then, ask yourself whether one scenario was more fun and efficient or not. Repeat this exercise and why not add a third activity. By doing it, you will have new ideas for how best to manage your attention.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Think about multiple scenarios on how events could move in and anticipate long-term consequences.</li> <li>• Distinguish between the things you can control and those you cannot (weather, political decisions, natural disasters or a computer crash).</li> <li>• Act upon things you can control and deal with.</li> <li>• If you decide not to change things, this is for a good reason. So take responsibility of your choices and assume the bad part of them</li> <li>• Stop making excuses.</li> </ul>
Time management	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Before going shopping, getting ready for a night out or driving your kids to school, try to evaluate the time it will take you. Do not forget to take into account any factor that may alter the duration of the activity, such as weather, traffic, failed attempt and so on.</li> <li>• Do not hesitate to delegate some of your tasks to a colleague you can count on. Make yourself clear about the work to do and the timing. Also do not forget to check the progress of the dossier.</li> <li>• Learn to say no.</li> </ul>	

## Reading body language

Feet	Head
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tapping the foot quickly: the person is anxious, nervous, fearful or impatient.</li> <li>• Crossing feet at the ankles: the person is feeling at ease.</li> <li>• Standing with his feet together: the person is trying to look "clean" or it may be a mark of submission or passivity.</li> <li>• Pointing its feet towards something or somebody: that thing or person interests the individual.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A tilted head may be a sign of friendliness, or if the person is smiling at the same time, he is playing with/trying to seduce you.</li> <li>• A head down may indicate that the person wants to hide something. After a compliment, the person may be shy, ashamed, embarrassed. After a conversation, this is a sign that the person is not sure of what was said or is thinking about your words. Note that in some cultures, it is a sign of respect.</li> <li>• A bowed head can mean that the person is either confused or wants to challenge you. In combination with a smile, it can indicates that the person likes you or/and is engaged in a nice conversation.</li> </ul>



Eyes	Imitation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Looking repeatedly to the side: the person is nervous, absent-minded or is lying.</li> <li>Taking progressively his eyes off the look of the speaker can be both a mark of comfort or submission.</li> <li>A shifty look may mean the person is suspicious or skeptical.</li> <li>Looking away or stare into space: the person is lost in deep thoughts.</li> <li>Staring at the ground during: the person is angry/shy or is trying to hide unpleasant emotions. It is also a sign of respect in some cultures.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If the person in front of you imitates your gestures or attitude, it is certainly a sign that he is interested in you and he is trying to develop a relationship.</li> </ul>
Arms	Hands
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Crossing arms: the person is not open to interactions or not comfortable with his appearance. When arms are crossed whereas feet are aligned with the shoulders or if we stand with our feet shoulder-width apart, this is a defensive or bossy position.</li> <li>Resting his arms behind his neck or his head means the person is open to discussion or simply relaxed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Putting his hands on the hips: the person is expecting something, is impatient or just tired.</li> <li>Closing hands is a sign of irritation, anxiety or nervousness.</li> <li>Rubbing his hands or touching a body part: the person is reassuring himself and is very likely to think "Come on, it will be over soon."</li> </ul>

