

# The Sydney Morning Herald

INDEPENDENT. ALWAYS.

## Should executive assistants spy on their boss?

By [Tony Featherstone](#)

February 21, 2019

Move over James Bond. The executive assistant could be spying on the chief executive and other workers for the board. He or she is using their secret office power to catch corporate villains who inflate expense claims or have undisclosed office affairs.

Sounds crazy? Not to INSEAD, a top French business school, which recently reported research describing executive assistants as “spiders in the web” of business integrity and ethics.

Office support staff and assistants might know more about employees' lives than you think.



Yes, good executive assistants know what’s going on in the office. Others fill their day with office gossip and are a sounding board for unhappy staff. They know the office rorts and skeletons - and their serial perpetrators - better than most managers.

But INSEAD goes several steps further. Associate Professor Erik van de Loo, and Kees Cools, a corporate finance and governance professor, argued that board members “may do well to have regular chats with executive assistants, the eyes and ears of corporate culture. Of course, no one is asking these professional confidantes to become whistle-blowers. However, if discussing ethics with assistants creates clear tension, it might raise some flags.”

I normally bin emails from business schools and consultants (it’s getting harder to distinguish the two) about management fads. The research is predictable: a silly idea, based on a small survey sample, which would never work in the real world.

This research was an exception, mainly because I write a lot about boards and understand their focus on corporate culture and business ethics. Regulators have pounded boards, principally those governing banks, for a lousy job on organisation culture.

It wouldn't be surprised if more corporate do-gooders encouraged executive assistants to spy on workers in the name of transparency. If not a formal request to keep an eye out for misconduct, then a "fireside chat" with a director to understand the executive assistant's view on corporate culture. Experienced directors love talking to employees to gauge the organisation's pulse.

It sounds good in theory. Almost half of all executive assistants surveyed, according to the authors, said they had first-hand knowledge of some form of serious corporate misconduct in the previous 12 months. The survey had responses from 200 executive assistants in 22 countries.

About a third of this misconduct was wasting firm resources; 14 per cent was activity that posed a conflict of interest; 13 per cent was mishandling of corporate information; and 9 per cent of executive assistants knew of sexually inappropriate behaviour from colleagues or superiors.

If information is power, executive assistants could be the new kingmakers in an era of heightened corporate social responsibility, where even flimsy allegations of misconduct can destroy careers in a blink. Time to give executive assistants a fat pay rise and corner office!

Now the reality. Imagine a chief executive's response to a board director's request to talk to his or her assistant about corporate ethics and conduct. Some might welcome it; most chief executives I know would think directors were spying on them. Board-management relations would be strained.

Then there's the executive assistant. How would they feel about checking up on their boss and exposing colleagues? More importantly, how would the chief executive feel about their executive assistant if they could not trust them? The assistant would be sacked in a minute and unemployable.

Also, the survey's results lack context. An executive assistant might believe a manager is wasting firm resources, but that does not make it true. Some assistants see lots of disparate information and rarely the full picture or what goes on beyond closed doors.

Moreover, executive assistants, like staff in most large organisations these days, have avenues to report corporate misconduct through whistle-blower services. If the assistant is concerned about corporate misconduct, they can report it confidentially.

I'm all for transparency and business ethics; banks clearly need more of it. But the response to a few bad apples is over-the-top. It's not enough for companies to make money, reward shareholders and do the right thing; their focus now is having a "social licence to operate".

Want a great career? Forget about data analytics, technology or strategy. The hot new profession is compliance officer. Yes, more people who can enforce boring rules and bog companies and managers down in excessive regulations that hurt profits and spirit.

Forget about the fact that most staff do the right thing by customers, colleagues and the organisation each day. They need their work emails and text messages tracked, their social media analysed and even their location checked during work hours via geotagging.

Now we can add executive assistants spying on their boss to the list. Staff spying on each other, in whatever role, is a dumb way to maintain corporate culture. Strong, sustainable corporate cultures do not need spies because behaviours are transparent and bad news surfaces quickly.

That's not so say executive assistants do not have a considered, valuable view on corporate culture and conduct. Their position exposes them to lots of people issues and, at times, ethical dilemmas that challenge management.

Nor should executive assistants overlook severe corporate misconduct out of misguided loyalty to a chief executive who has not disclosed an office affair to the board or uses company funds to buy gifts for his mistress.

But spying is not the answer. Organisations have enough data on employees as it is. Executives have enough pressure without feeling their assistant is watching them. And good assistants know that loyalty and confidentiality - within ethical boundaries - is their greatest weapon.