The administrative assistant who lasted only one day: A legendary prank from days of yore

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Today is Administrative Professionals Day, according to somebody who decided to declare today to be Administrative Professionals Day.

Administrative assistants are perhaps one of the most important members of a team. They work almost invisibly behind the scenes to keep everything running smoothly. They make sure everybody has what they need, they clear administrative roadblocks, they know how to navigate corporate procedures and cut through the red tape, they have contacts in all sorts of places, they organize morale events, and they are the keepers of the equipment in the storage room. They basically serve as "den mother" to a bunch of software developers.

When I joined Microsoft, the position was named Group Assistant (or just "G.A."), and I was unaware that the group assistant for my group was famous for being one of the best. The story goes that for some sort of business exercise, everybody was asked to describe their job concisely. Our group assistant wrote, "My job is to make sure developers have no excuse for not working."

Anyway, this is all lead-up for a legendary prank from the day of yore. This story has been told more than once, but I'm going to tell it a third time. I wasn't there when it happened, so I'm just using those two stories as raw material, but mostly taking Bruce's original text and spiffing it up a bit and filling in some context.

Yes, I'm plagiarizing. But I'm being up front about it, and giving you citations to the originals, so you can see the source material.

Okay, here goes the story.

The Word team had a group assistant named Pam. Everybody loved her. She was friendly and efficient. She brought snacks on Workaholic Wednesdays (which I guess was a thing on the Word team), made sure everyone's birthday was celebrated, and kept the whole team pleasantly isolated from the corporate bureaucracy. Rick Schaut notably recalls that after a

group of mischievous Word developers gathered up all the "Ship-It" awards from three office buildings and stacked them the project lead's office, Pam spent months without complaint returning all the awards to their rightful owners.

The head of the Word team left the group to lead a different team, and the convention is that the group assistant goes with the manager. The team was sad to see their project lead leave to head another team, but they were probably even sadder that Pam was leaving, too!

The Word team's new manager Antoine did not have a group assistant, so he had to go find one. Replacing Pam was a daunting task. I mean, what do you ask at the interview? "What kind of snacks would you suggest for sixty weary developers?"

In the meantime, it fell to developers to fend for themselves: filling out their own expense reports, bartering for equipment, struggling to figure out who to call or what forms to fill out to get something done. Antoine himself bought the snacks for late-night coding marathons, but his choice of snacks were not always well-received. (Rice crackers anyone?) Other tasks simply went undone, like monitoring the amount of surplus equipment and offloading the excess to other groups that need it. Vines started to grow up the outside of the building, letters started falling off the "Microsoft" sign, it was a descent into *Lord of the Flies*.

Finally, on March 28th, Antoine found a great candidate. She was experienced, bright, articulate, funny, and she had some knockout snack ideas. On Friday, March 29th, he announced to the team that they had a new group assistant, and Meredyth would start on Monday. The team breathed a collective sigh of relief.

On Monday, the group smelled something different about Meredyth. Literally, because she burned incense in her office. She also made short work of personalizing her office with affirmations like "Be the best Meredyth you can be!" and "I deserve to succeed! Yes I do!" And she put a bright pink nameplate on her door, accompanied with a little sign that cheerful announced, "Please stop in and say hi!"

Antoine took Meredyth around the building to introduce her individually to the team members, and she made a great first impression. She was cheerful and focused, although she would alternate between being demanding and cowering very quickly. Several people thought to themselves that Meredyth had some serious self-image problems, but she seemed nice, and the heart-shaped stickers she put on everyone's door were a cute touch. Well, not everyone's door. One team member Mark got a sticker on his shirt.

During one of these trips through the halls, Meredyth met a few team members chatting in the hall. One of them was showing an old bottle of Odwalla fruit juice that been forgotten in the refrigerator for weeks. The juice was a nasty bright green, and the bottle was bloated and distended from internal pressure. As the team members discussed the horrible things that could happen if you shook a bottle of rotting Odwalla juice, Meredyth asked for and received the bottle in question and took it back to her office.

Why did she want that bottle? Surely, she wasn't going to drink it. Or perhaps she was?

Later that morning, one of the developers came to Meredyth's office and half-jokingly demanded a new computer to do his testing on. Meredyth said "Of course!" and promised one as soon as possible. Pam never made promises like this.

Meredyth made another pass through the halls to take inventory. Some people asked that she come back later, and she agreed. Pam never backed down when taking inventory. Some people tried to sneak a peek at Meredyth's inventory notebook, but she guarded it jealously. Pam was very open about the information she collected.

Later, some people noticed that Meredyth spent a lot of time playing a video game that was set up in the hall as a diversion. Pam was always busy with real work.

Clearly, life with Meredyth was going to be very different from life with Pam.

Meredyth joined the team for lunch in the cafeteria, and she confessed to one of the team members that she didn't have any cash. He gave her four dollars, but then, thinking that wouldn't be enough for the sushi and bowl of hot water that Meredyth had picked up, he gave her his <u>meal card</u>. She never returned it.

At lunch, Meredyth joked with everyone, and after finishing her meal, she asked if anyone wanted anything from the cafeteria. The group was a little surprised by this waitress-like behavior, and no one asked for anything. Meredyth returned from the kitchen with two huge desserts, strawberry cheesecake and pumpkin pie. Several people were amazed as she wolfed these down in quick order. Here was a woman who knew her snacks!

Just after lunch, Meredyth wandered around carrying some old clothes and a pair of big leather boots. She asked several people who they belonged to and where she could put them. One of the team members suggested keeping them in the storage room for now. Once there, she pulled out a building map and marked the spot with a big black X. "I think I can find my way back here," she said. She then mentioned something about getting more stuff from her office, but turned and walked in the wrong direction.

In the early afternoon, Meredyth went around to everyone's office to schedule a fire drill for the group. This was highly unusual. Fire drills were usually scheduled by the <u>real estate and facilities group</u>, and you learned of them via e-mail. When one developer pointed this out, Meredyth replied, "Well, there's no time like now to start." Others pointed out that the fire alarms had gone off a few months earlier, thankfully, <u>nothing serious</u>, so the team didn't really need to practice evacuating the building.

Meredyth was unmoved. She convinced everyone to agree to a fire drill on Friday at 2pm.

After successfully obtaining everyone's agreement, she ran up and down the hallways with a stopwatch. She said she was doing some pre-timings for the big fire drill. No one called her attention to the toilet paper stuck to her shoe.

And then things turned real bad real fast.

The team's beloved Pam returned to help Meredyth settle in to her new group.

It did not go well.

Meredyth initially was very angry that Pam left her office so messy. It was Pam's clothes and boots that she had found earlier in the day. From down the hall, people could hear Meredyth angrily shouting "THIS IS MY OFFICE!" Antoine tried to intervene, but Meredyth got angrier and angrier. Pam retreated to a friendly office around the corner. She choked back tears. "That new girl's something else... She doesn't want any of my help... I wonder if Antoine really knows how to hire a G.A....".

Pam headed toward the elevators with a livid Meredyth trailing right behind, shouting "YOU'RE JUST TRYING TO RUIN THINGS BETWEEN ME AND ANTOINE!" Pam finally got on an elevator, there was some more shouting, and Meredyth stormed back to her office.

At this point, the entire hallway was atwitter with rumors. "Did you hear the big fight?" "What happened?" "Pam was crying?" Questions were asked in hushed voices. Two of the team members came to the office of Bruce Oberg (the project development manager), closed the door, and suggested that Bruce go to Antoine and tell him that the new G.A. was not working out. "I don't know what the fight was about, but I do know one thing: It wasn't Pam's fault." Several developers called Pam to make sure she was okay.

Meredyth had suddenly become much more sullen. She kept her door closed, and the "Please stop in and say hi" was crossed out with a big black X. Around 4:15, she gave out small "performance review" forms to everyone. they were written in fat black magic marker: "How am I doing?" and they had check boxes marked "Great, we love you," and "We're sure you'll improve," and "We'll get used to you eventually." Some people balked at the form, saying it was way too early for that kind of thing, but Meredyth insisted that they be filled out and turned in before the weekly 4:30 group meeting.

One of the team members that had come to Bruce's office earlier in the day returned to Bruce with a frightened look on his face: "I am not touching this," he said, holding up the form away from his body and shaking his head.

Most of Word's fifty developers were present for the group meeting that afternoon. Everyone chatted and joked as usual, while Meredyth sat in the back of the meeting room with a somber look on her face and her purse plopped on the desk in front of her.

Antoine started the meeting by introducing Meredyth again and asking her how her first day went. Meredyth stood up. Her voice was shaky.

"Well, this is hard for me to say, because I was so looking forward to working at Microsoft, but I have to say that I haven't felt very welcome here."

The room was frozen while she spoke.

"I mean, no one came to my office to say hello," she continued. "I had to go around to everyone's office myself."

Most of the developers stared at their shoes in embarrassment.

"... and I was just looking at the feedback forms, and they've all been really negative." Tears were running down her cheeks. Bruce and Antoine held their faces in their hands.

Meredyth became more stern. "Well, I thought Microsoft would be a friendlier place to work. This was my first day.... it's also my last."

She stormed out of the room.

Everyone sat in stunned silence for around fifteen seconds, then the door opened and Meredyth came back in.

"Uh, I forgot my purse," she said, sniffling.

"... and by the way... April Fools!"

She walked out again, and everyone was confused. What was that April Fools thing about? Was she really not quitting?

Antoine and Bruce were forced to explain: Meredyth was not the new group assistant. She was an actress. The entire day had been an elaborate prank.

Moans of agony filled the room, and several people swore revenge right then and there. Meredyth returned a few seconds later to a round of applause from everyone.

Bruce's bonus chatter:

Only two people later admitted to suspecting that Meredyth was a fake. Several people thought something was up during her group meeting tirade, but when they saw her crying, they were convinced it was real. Most everyone thought she was really really weird, but that it was due to overzealousness or self-esteem problems.

Bruce and one of the developers involved in the Odwalla incident came up with the idea for the "world's most insane group assistant" and sold it to Antoine the week before. Meredyth, the actress, had performed this "fake employee" prank before. The original plan was to prank Antoine, but they concluded that pranking even the boss would be nearly impossible. Pam herself was in on the joke, and the fight with Meredyth was part of the performance. One of the developers on the team is deaf, and Meredyth revealed the truth to him prior to the group meeting so he would know what was going on during the big finale.

The following day, the real estate and facilities group sent email to everybody in the building to inform them that there was going to a fire drill on Thursday.

Bonus Raymond chatter: I shared this story with our team's administrative assistant, who replied, "Very apt that you're posting it on April 24th." I guess all administrative assistants know exactly when Administrative Professionals Day is.

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