

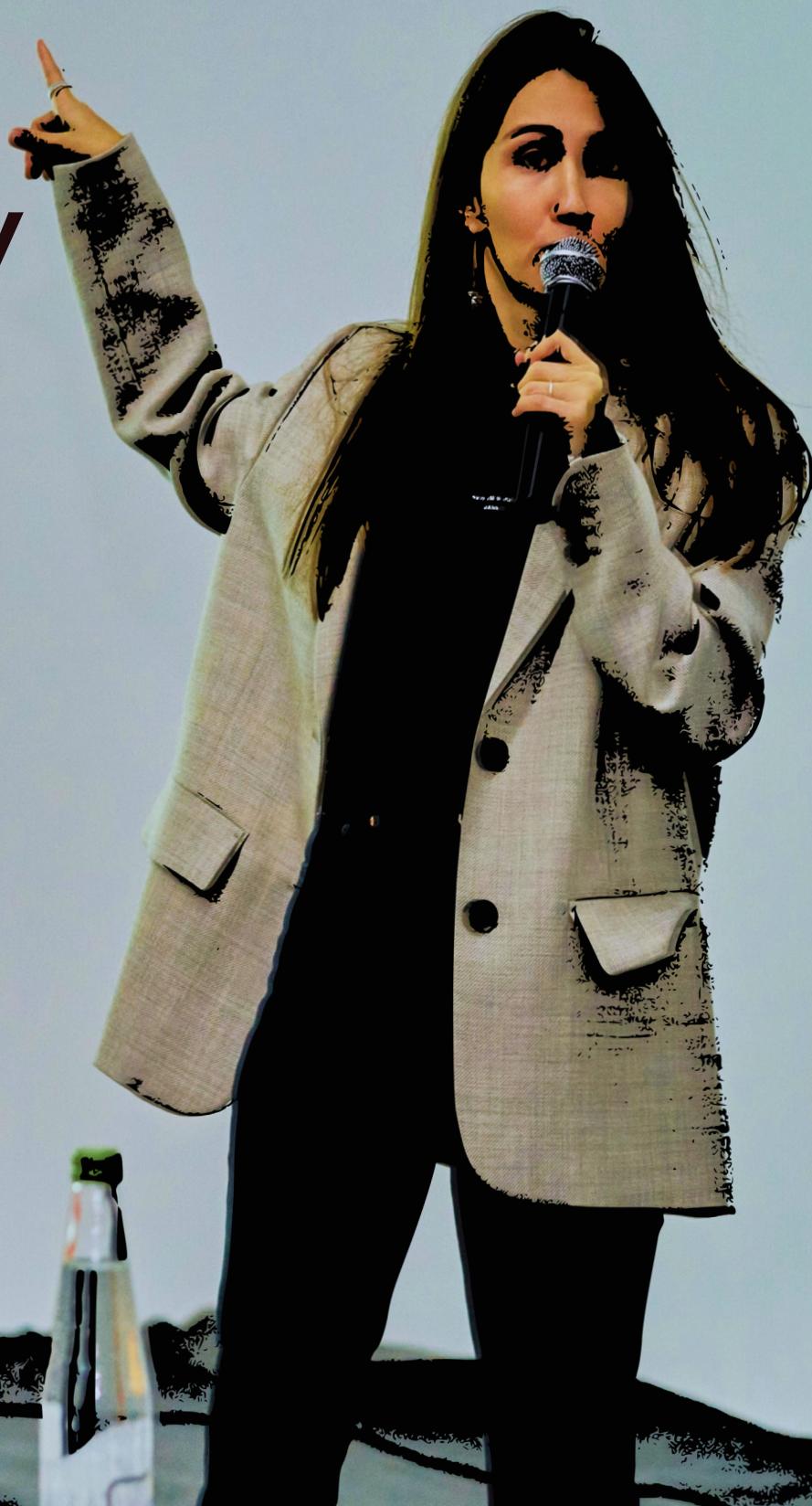
The OPERATIONALIST

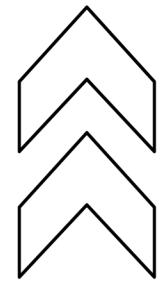
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From Staples to Strategy: The Strategic Blueprint for Next-Level Admins

By Caitlin Willson

The role of the administrative professional is changing, and honestly, it's for the better. It's no longer just about managing tasks; it's about the strategic leadership of outcomes. The need to make sure the company is getting the most return on investment (ROI) for executive salaries and responding to how complicated organizations are getting has totally driven a critical redefinition of what we do. An Executive Operations Strategist (EOS) is the modern solution—they are basically the executive's strategic extension, building all the systems and workflows and rhythms that translate the big vision into actual execution.

The philosophy holds that the executive is the deliverable. To succeed, the EOS has to be operating with approximately 80% operations strategy and only 20% tactical work, and we need to embrace that.

The journey from “Staples to Strategy” is

our profession's official response to all this change, and it's structured by the World Administrators Alliance (WAA) Global Skills Matrix (GSM). It's a climb up the “Ladder of Impact,” where you move past Level 1 (the Administrative Assistant, which is usually a reactive role just focused on general duties)

to Level 2 (the Executive Assistant, which is more proactive and manages the “foundational four”—calendar, inbox, travel, and expenses). The ultimate goal is to hit that strategic level: Level 4/5 (The Strategists). That's where you become fully proactive, comfortable switching between strategic and operational thinking, owning budgets, and actively participating in leadership discussions. The EOS role operates at this strategic level and is accountable for executive execution and optimization. The days of waiting for your worth to be decided by an outdated job description are over. If the title doesn't fit the impact, change the title.

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The single biggest thing forcing this acceleration is the artificial intelligence revolution. Let's be real—task-based things are going to AI. The administrative job family has already seen a 30 percent increase in AI adoption

in the last three years! This is good because it streamlines the repetitive, low-impact work (like generic emails), forcing us to generate value through high-impact strategic work (like planning huge events or changing company culture).

In this new landscape, just being able to solve problems is becoming less valued. Instead, employers now seek the “Problem Selector”—the strategic partner who can look at a situation and determine, “Is this problem worth solving?” The strategist’s priority is to focus the executive’s precious bandwidth on critical problems, strategically deploying AI to address everything else. You are not a gatekeeper; you are a decision-accelerator. Your job is to drive flow, not block it. This shift in focus transforms the role from being seen as just overhead to becoming absolutely indispensable infrastructure.

To successfully make the leap from executor to strategic operator, we have to adopt the frameworks that translate executive vision into actionable influence. Success depends on core competencies that technology cannot replicate, like high-level emotional intelligence, critical thinking and system design, tech fluency and continuous adaptation and executive alignment. Ask yourself this: What is the cost of your silence? If you see a breakdown in process and don’t speak up, you are contributing to the very chaos you were hired to fix. This human element is essential for the EOS, which acts as the Integrator—the strategic force that owns the Rhythm of Business. The rhythm of business ensures that the executive’s time is intentionally invested, which is a practice that must start with optimizing oneself first.



Mastery of this strategic role is broken down into the 4 Pillars of Executive Operations: Strategic Alignment (making sure the executive’s time actually maps to enterprise priorities), Operational Clarity (designing systems that drive focus, not chaos), Decision Acceleration (supplying the right insights for high-stakes meetings) and Leadership Presence (embedding the executive in the right places). Leveraging operational data to track these pillars yields huge quantifiable results, like protecting 3.5 hours of daily deep work for the executive and achieving a 35% meeting reduction. The most effective way to improve performance is often to refuse to do things that do not align with your executive’s top priorities.

Pull up your own chair

The path to being an EOS is rewarding, and the salaries reflect the shift toward being a peer-level strategic partner. The development of these strategic skills and the consistent application of these frameworks are how we, as administrative professionals, can totally change our narrative. The final lesson is all about personal power and intentionality. Leadership isn’t a title; it’s an action. The decision to show up differently and stop playing small is a choice, not a feeling. The future belongs to the strategic professional who embraces the mindset, “There’s nothing I cannot do; only things I haven’t done yet.” Stop waiting for someone to invite you to have a seat at the table. Pull up your own chair and get to work.

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