



THE PLAYBOOK

The Transition

Executive Assistant to Chief of Staff. What the job actually is, what the numbers really say, and how to decide whether you want it.

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The question underneath the question

A webinar on moving from executive assistant into chief of staff drew over a thousand assistants. That number tells you something the job boards do not: this is the question a very large number of people in this profession are quietly carrying around.

Usually it arrives phrased as a career question. How do I become a chief of staff. What do I need to learn. Who do I ask.

Underneath it is almost always a different question, and it is a better one. **Am I already doing more than my title says, and is anyone going to notice?**

That second question deserves a straight answer, so here is mine before we start. Chief of staff is not the next rung above executive assistant. It is a different job, with different failure modes, that happens to share a great deal of surface area with the one you are already doing. Some assistants would be excellent at it. Some would hate it. And a meaningful number of people currently holding the title are doing a job that is functionally an executive assistant role with a better business card.

This playbook is written to help you tell those apart, and to help a founder reading it work out whether they need a chief of staff or a properly empowered assistant, which are not the same hire and cost very different amounts.

A NOTE ON THE NUMBERS AHEAD

Chapter three quotes real compensation data. Every source is a self-selected community survey rather than census data, and I say so each time. They are useful for direction and dangerous for certainty, and one of them explicitly describes its own figures as descriptive medians rather than guaranteed bands.

It is not a promotion, it is a different job

The clearest way to see the difference is to look at what each role is accountable for when something goes wrong.

An executive assistant is accountable for the executive functioning well. The calendar holds, the inbox is handled, the preparation is done, the fires do not reach them. The unit of work is support, and it is measured by whether the person you support is effective.

A chief of staff is accountable for the organisation functioning well around the executive. The unit of work is outcomes across other people's teams, and it is measured by whether things that were supposed to happen actually happened, in departments where you have no authority whatsoever.

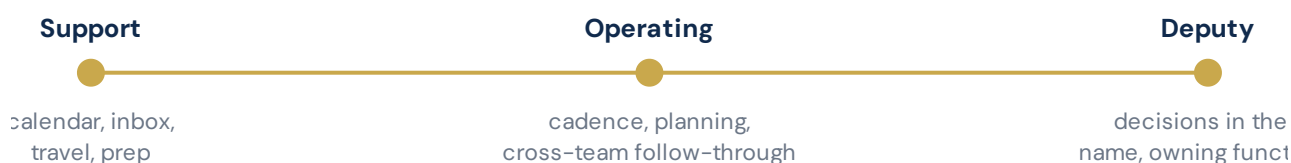
EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT	CHIEF OF STAFF
One person functions well	The organisation functions well
Owns: time, attention, preparation	Owns: priorities, cadence, follow-through
Works through: direct action	Works through: other people's teams
Measured by: is your executive effective	Measured by: did the decided thing happen
Fails when: something reaches them that should not	Fails when: alignment quietly breaks and nobody says

Figure: the same executive, two different accountabilities

That distinction has a consequence people underestimate. As an assistant, you can be excellent largely through reliability and judgment. As a chief of staff you must also be able to **influence people who do not report to you and are not obliged to care what you think.** That is a political skill, and it is the one that most often decides whether the move works.

The spectrum, and where a role really sits

Chief of staff is not a standardised job. Two people with the title at two companies may be doing work that barely overlaps. Before you pursue the role, and certainly before you accept one, you need to locate the specific job on a spectrum.



All three get called "Chief of Staff". Only the middle and right are actually a different job.

Figure: ask which point on this line the role actually occupies

The question worth asking in any interview, and the one candidates on professional forums repeatedly wish they had asked, is simple: on the spectrum from executive assistant to chief operating officer, where does this role sit, and what would I own that no one else owns?

If the honest answer is calendar, travel and inbox with occasional projects, that is an executive assistant role. It may be a good one, well paid and worth taking. But take it knowing what it is, because a title that promises operating scope and delivers support work is the single most common disappointment in this transition.

Three questions that reveal the truth quickly. What decisions can I make without checking. Which meetings do I run rather than attend. And who comes to me when the executive is unavailable, versus who waits for the executive.

What the money actually says

The compensation gap is real and it is large, which is why the question gets asked so often. It is also reported by self-selected community surveys rather than by census data, so treat what follows as direction rather than as a promise.

REPORTED BASE, UNITED STATES

Senior executive assistant

\$76,750 to \$97,250

Robert Half 2026 Salary Guide

Chief of staff, average base

\$167,954 average, \$160,000 median

CoS Network 2025

Entry-level chief of staff averages around \$91,000. The title alone does not carry the number.

Figure: the reported gap, from two different and differently reliable sources

The Chief of Staff Network reported an average base of \$167,954 for 2025, up 8.5 percent on the previous year, with roughly one in four respondents above \$200,000. A separate survey by Ask a Chief of Staff, with 512 respondents, published medians by company stage: about \$117,500 at bootstrapped companies, \$140,000 at seed, \$160,000 at Series A, rising to roughly \$200,000 at public companies.

Notice what that second set actually tells you. The single biggest driver of chief of staff pay is not seniority or skill. It is the funding stage of the company you join. The same job at a bootstrapped business and a public one differs by around eighty thousand dollars.

Two honest caveats. These surveys are answered by people who choose to answer them, which skews toward the engaged and the well paid. And the surveys contradict each other on some cuts of the data badly enough that I would not quote any of them as settled fact.

The four things that do not transfer

Most of what makes a strong executive assistant makes a strong chief of staff. Judgment, discretion, anticipation and reliability all carry over intact. Four things do not, and they are where the transition is actually won or lost.

01 Influence without authority

You will need a functional lead to change their plan when you cannot instruct them and they do not report to you. Assistants often have this quietly, through relationships, and have never had to use it deliberately or at scale.

02 Owning an outcome you cannot personally deliver

As an assistant you can usually fix it yourself. As chief of staff the thing you are accountable for will be done by someone else, badly, on a timeline you do not control. Learning to hold that without taking the work back is genuinely hard.

03 Saying the unwelcome thing to the executive

Support instincts run toward smoothing. The chief of staff role requires telling the founder their plan will not survive contact with the team, and doing it early enough to matter.

04 Working in quarters, not days

The assistant reflex is immediate and responsive. Much of this role is planning, sequencing and consistency over months, where nothing feels urgent until suddenly it is late.

You are not being asked to be more organised. You are being asked to be accountable for things other people do.

If you read those four and felt energised, that is a strong signal. If you read them and felt tired, that is also a signal, and an equally valid one. Neither answer is the better career.

Building the case where you already are

The most reliable route into this role is not applying for it elsewhere. It is being handed it where you already work, because the trust is already built and the context is already in your head. That happens far more often when you have made the case deliberately.

Start by taking one thing that is nobody's. Every small company has work that falls between functions and quietly fails: the weekly business review that never quite happens, the decisions that get made and never followed up, the onboarding that differs every time. Take one, own it end to end, and run it visibly for a quarter.

Then make the operating cadence yours. If you already run the founder's week, extend it outward. A weekly leadership rhythm with an agenda, a decision log and follow-through is the core of the chief of staff job, and you can start doing it before anyone gives you permission.

Keep a written record of decisions and what happened next. This is unglamorous and it is the single most persuasive artefact you can build. Six months of decisions, owners and outcomes proves you were operating rather than assisting, and it survives the conversation where someone says they are not sure you have done that kind of work.

THE CONVERSATION ITSELF

Do not ask for the title. Ask for the scope, in writing, with a review date. "I would like to own the weekly leadership cadence and cross-team follow-through for the next two quarters, and I would like us to look at what that role should be called afterwards." Scope first, title second, is far more likely to succeed and far harder to refuse.

There is also a hard truth in the salary data. If your company is small and bootstrapped, the chief of staff title there may pay near the top of the senior assistant range rather than the numbers in chapter three. That is not a reason to avoid it. It is a reason to take the scope now and the compensation conversation separately.

The first ninety days

Whether you are handed the role internally or hired into it, the first quarter follows the same shape. The failure mode at both ends is the same: arriving with improvements before you have earned the standing to make them.

D 1 Days 1 to 30, learn the real org

Meet everyone the executive works with and ask each of them the same two questions: what should be happening that is not, and what wastes your time. Write it all down. Change nothing yet.

D 2 Days 31 to 60, install the cadence

One weekly leadership meeting with a real agenda, a decision log with owners and dates, and a short written update that goes out on a schedule. Boring, and it is the spine of the job.

D 3 Days 61 to 90, take one hard thing

Pick the problem everybody named in the first month that nobody owns. Own it publicly and finish it. That is what converts a title into authority.

The listening phase is the one most people cut short, and it is the one that pays. A chief of staff who arrives with recommendations in week two is a consultant nobody hired. A chief of staff who arrives with an accurate map of what is broken, gathered from the people living with it, has the standing to fix things by month three.

The decision log is the highest-leverage artefact in this role. Most small companies do not lose decisions because they make bad ones. They lose them because nobody wrote down what was decided, who owned it, or when it was due, so the same conversation happens again six weeks later.

The glorified assistant trap

On professional forums the same complaint appears repeatedly from people who made this move: that the job turned out to be an executive assistant role with a more impressive title and, sometimes, not much more money.

It is a real pattern and it usually has one of three causes.

The company wanted an assistant and used the title to attract someone stronger. This is more common than anyone admits, particularly at companies where the founder has never had either role before and is not sure what the difference is.

The scope was real but the authority never arrived. You were told to drive alignment across teams and given no mandate, no budget and no ability to escalate. The work is genuinely chief of staff work and it is impossible to do.

Or the executive is not ready to let go. Every decision still routes through them, so your role compresses into preparing decisions for someone else to make. That is a support role by function, whatever it says on the contract.

DIAGNOSING IT EARLY

Ask, in the first month, for a written list of what you own outright. Not what you are involved in. What is yours. If that list cannot be produced, the role is probably support work with a different name, and it is better to learn that in week three than in month nine.

None of this makes the job a bad one. A well-paid, well-respected assistant role is a good career and this playbook is not written to talk anyone out of it. But the disappointment people describe on those forums comes almost entirely from expecting one job and receiving another, and that is preventable with three questions asked before you accept.

Whether you actually want it

This is the chapter most career content skips, because it is easier to assume that everybody wants the bigger title. A great many excellent assistants would be less happy and no better paid as a mediocre chief of staff, and that is worth saying plainly.

You probably want it if: you find yourself frustrated by problems outside your remit and privately confident you could fix them. You enjoy the part of your job where you get other people to do things. You are comfortable being disliked occasionally in service of an outcome. And you would rather own a messy result than deliver a clean task.

You probably do not want it if: the satisfaction in your work comes from things being handled properly and completely, and from the direct relationship with the person you support. Chief of staff work is mostly unfinished, mostly other people's, and the feedback loop is slow.

One role is judged on whether the work was done well. The other is judged on whether the right things happened at all.

There is also a third path, which the career content almost never mentions. Staying an executive assistant and becoming genuinely senior in it, taking on operations scope, systems ownership and real authority without changing the title, is a legitimate and often better-paid outcome than a chief of staff role at a company too small to fund one properly.

The title is not the goal. The scope and the compensation are the goal, and there is more than one route to both.

The honest close

The reason a thousand assistants show up to a webinar about this transition is not that they all want to be chiefs of staff. It is that a great many of them are already doing work well beyond their job description and have no language for it, no title that reflects it, and no clear idea whether asking for more is reasonable.

It is reasonable. The profession has been moving in this direction for years, and the compensation data, unreliable as it is, points the same way.

But move toward scope rather than toward a title. Take the thing that is nobody's. Run the cadence. Keep the decision log. Ask for what you own to be written down. Do that for two quarters and the conversation about what your role should be called becomes very short, because the evidence will already exist.

And if you work through all of it and conclude you would rather be an outstanding executive assistant with real authority than an average chief of staff with a better business card, that is not settling. That is knowing which job you are good at, which is worth more than either title.

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