

THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE I HAVE FACED at work, and how I tackled it

by Sonja Bohlander

I chose to interview Daleen Martin, a personal assistant at my company (who together with another PA, Deirdre Searle) was given a mammoth task, to be done unexpectedly and in a very short time period. They acted as project managers putting this challenge to bed in no time

Sonja Thank you for agreeing to share with us the biggest challenge you have ever faced.

Daleen: Thinking back over the past year the biggest challenge was when our Senior Vice President made the decision to give a recognition award in the form of jackets to ALL our employees in Sasolburg (3422!) This was a very unexpected decision with very short notice in terms of getting all the information ready in order to place the order.

Sonja What did you do first? Did you panic? Did you ask for help or did you just plunge headlong into it?

Daleen: Panic certainly came to mind at first and my soul! I am sure if we look in the Oxford dictionary there is just no word describing what went through my mind, except 911, 911!

Part of the instruction was that all 3422 employees must have the opportunity to fit a sample jacket –both ladies and gents cuts in all different sizes, and also make a choice between three different colours. To top it all we were only given 10 sets of these sample jackets which had to be available for all the employees to try on, and a deadline of about 10 days to complete all of this!

I really wanted to run away, but I calmed myself down to a mild panic and took some time to work out an action plan.



To have a project plan in place is just the first step in taking on such a project. Second step is where your network comes into play. Phone; arrange for help; email and line up the troops as this is not a one man (woman) job – I was going to need all the help I can get.

Sonja Did you succeed in getting help?

Daleen: Together with the other two PAs on our floor we came to the conclusion that to make this work we needed all other PAs and TAs (team assistants) in our business to help us with this.

Our site consists of various plants and people working different shifts and we only had two weeks to get everybody to fit and decide what color they want.

Without the help of all the PAs and TAs this project would not have been successful.

Sonja What was the secret that ensured you could tackle it?

Daleen: I think the managing to calm down and accept that the limited timeframe called for teamwork. We were then able to quickly arrange venues where the sample jackets could be made available to all plants; the PAs rallied all their TAs together and so the fitting started. A complete employee list was available which assisted us and the plant teams sent the information through, and we kept the original list from which the order would be placed. Without the teams on the plants this would have been impossible to complete in 10 working days - however we did it as we worked TOGETHER as a well-oiled machine.

Sonja Share with us some of the first key steps.

Daleen: Due to us having a very up to date HR system we could obtain an employee list knowing it was correct. So a list was done in Excel and Pivot tables were used to assist.

Each plant / department was done separately for them to be able to use it to issue jackets later. One final list was then populated with all the information.

Sonja What feedback did you get?

Daleen: Managers were impressed that we managed this project as we did and in time, but to be honest it was a nightmare and everyone involved worked hard and long hours to get it done in the short time we were given.

Sonja If it were to happen now, what would you have done differently?

Daleen: Thinking back, we actually populated the list twice, once on the plant and again into the big list. Now that I have had time to think clearly about the project and how we handled it, I realised that a small program could have been written where the PAs and TAs on the plants could have entered the employees' company number that will pull up his/her details and then there enter their choice.

Secondly this little program talks to an overall list which is then automatically updated with the relevant information - without keeping everybody busy for days on end.

Then you can use the pivot tables to establish number of colours and sizes required. It would have been much easier and less stressful.



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She is a member of PAFSA's AoE 2018, and past Chairman of Presidents' Forum Committee; finalist 2012 PA of the Year Award and received a Crystal Award in 2017.

**Sonja believes that:
Knowledge MUST be shared!**