

PA to TV's MOST POWERFUL MAN

It was a dream role for Andy McGrath when he landed work with ITV as PA to director of television, Peter Fincham BY KAREN GLASER

"ONCE YOU ENTER, you won't leave," joked the folk at ITV to Andy McGrath.

If only, he thought. It was 2008, and Andy had just got some temporary work as PA to the broadcaster's director of factual and daytime programming. He was delighted. He'd always wanted to work in television, and here he was working for Britain's biggest commercial broadcaster. His job might be temporary, but it was a start, no?

It certainly was. And a start with no end in sight it has since, gloriously, transpired. At the end of his temporary post the broadcaster's sales team got in touch to offer Andy another fortnight's work. And not long after that, the PA to ITV's director of television, Peter Fincham, asked if he could step into her shoes for two weeks to cover her leave period.

"Are you kidding me? Yes, I will absolutely take that. Thank you very much!" was Andy's swift reply.

It was beginning to look as if the folk at ITV had only been half-joking. Once you walk through the door of the London headquarters of Britain's oldest commercial television network, maybe remaining inside was an option, after all.

Then, one week into his fortnight placement, human resources got in touch again. There might

be a more permanent position available for him at Peter's side. "I had one of those moments where I thought: what if?," recalls Andy.

He need not have been so cautious. Before long, Peter had made up his mind and decided that Andy was a better fit for the job than his predecessor. So he popped the question: "Would you like to come and work for me?" Andy didn't miss a beat: "Absolutely. It would be an honour."

DREAM ROLE

Since then, organising Peter Fincham's working life has continued to be an honour, but, as you would expect, the role can be exacting, too. "My to-do list is tweaked several times a day, and there are always changes at the eleventh hour," he explains. "Peter's schedule is very busy with lots of meetings on a daily basis, and I am constantly juggling his diary to make sure it all happens. My job is to ensure he doesn't have to think about anything other than his job." Is that stressful? "It can be, but I like to think that I don't show the pressure, that I deal with it internally."

With that pressure comes perks aplenty, though. Andy's social diary confirms the conventional wisdom that working in television is glamorous. Most months

Andy's day in numbers

Emails a day:
Around 100.

Phone calls asking for tickets to shows:
Constant. Difficult to quantify because different teams get them for numerous shows.

Lunch hour:
10 to 15 minutes, usually at my desk.

Hot beverages:
Two or three cups of coffee. I am not a tea-drinker



he attends a high-profile event such as the National Television Awards, the Brits or the British Soap Awards and he is “privileged”, as he puts it, to go to lots of parties. Plus, he does plenty of recces for new restaurants and hotels in the shiny capital. In short, it sounds as if this 44-year-old gets wined and dined at more bars and eateries than most of us can shake a bottle of single grape Champagne at.

DISCRETION IS KEY

Where are his favourite places to quaff and chow on ITV business? If he has any, he’s not saying. It hardly needs stating that the ability to be discreet is a vital tool in the PA skill set, but Andy has honed the skill to a particularly high level “Well, I had a good training at my diplomatic university,” he smiles.

He is referring to his five-year stint in the Embassy of Ireland’s press office, dealing with, presumably, the sensitive issues of the Anglo-Irish political scene. When he left the embassy, Irish-born Andy went to work as an EA at Coca-Cola. And after that, he became EA to Margot Daly, chief executive of digital music provider Music Choice. He looks back on the period fondly, and says that one of his old boss’s maxims has always stayed with him. “Margot would say ‘change is inevitable, but we need to run with it.’ I learned a lot from that.”

So, presumably, has his current boss. When he hired Andy, Peter had only been at the network for six weeks himself. In October 2007, he had resigned from his post as controller of BBC One, following criticism over the handling of the documentary *A Year with the Queen* in which a trailer was edited out of sequence, and Peter wrongly told the press it showed the monarch walking out of a photo session “in a huff.” It didn’t set him back for long. Within four months Peter had been unveiled as director of television at ITV.

TRUST IS PARAMOUNT

From the outset, the relationship between the two men has been defined by honesty and openness, says Andy. “Trust is the foundation of a good relationship, isn’t it? I certainly couldn’t work any other way.” He also appreciates that his boss gives him what

he describes as “the creative freedom to get things done. As long as they are done, he doesn’t mind how I arrive there.”

But what if things don’t get done?

How does his boss react? Andy can recall

only one such occasion, early on in the job, when an invitation for Peter to attend an event (he won’t say what or where, of course) slipped through the net. “However, at the eleventh hour, I sorted things and Peter attended. I was apologetic, but Peter simply said – ‘but you managed to pull it back.’”

Later on, he describes his boss as “a real gentleman. He is restrained and charismatic.” His depiction concurs with other people’s view of this powerful media figure who, elsewhere, has been described as “smart”, as “charming” and “seemingly relaxed.”

JOB FOR LIFE

How does Peter’s charm and restraint play into the duo’s relationship? How does Peter express gratitude to the man who manages his frenetic working days? “Well, I don’t expect a pat on the back every day. But, yes, Peter appreciates and is thankful. And he has said to me: ‘you are never complacent’. I value that.”

As well as not getting a ‘pat on the back’ every day, he doesn’t actually meet his boss every day either. “We don’t have regular catch-ups, there is just no time. But we email and text each other a lot and I also catch him on the fly.”

He adds that while he always consults his boss, when he and the events team are drawing up ITV’s all important guest lists, they tend to involve Peter at the end.

One area in which Peter probably isn’t so keen to be involved is sorting out his expenses. It is not Andy’s favourite job either. “It’s a monthly task that I find boring and tedious,” he admits. “I’m a people person. I love meeting people, and I believe I am an excellent communicator.”

In a building which houses more than its fair share of egos, those must be useful traits? “My motto is: work with me and we will go places,” he smiles. Places within ITV, that is. Eight years after he entered, it really is hard to imagine the PA who describes himself as “ITV through and through” ever leaving. ■

Above Andy’s boss has been responsible for bringing the likes of *Saturday Night Takeaway*, *The X Factor* and *Coronation Street* to our screens