

Could you be a Virtual Assistant?

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On many occasions I've been asked "What is a VA"? In essence it is nothing more than a person that is not onsite that assists another with a task, project, event, venture, etc. While VA's have likely been around for many years, today the field is being recognized as its own profession.

Our connected, high-tech world is the #1 reason the field and opportunities for VA's has grown. After all, the tasks and responsibilities that most VA's accomplish for their clients have been around for years. The change brought about by high technology simply allows them to be done from anywhere! Virtual Assistants have the same responsibilities and provide the same solutions as workers in traditional office settings.

As with most everything in life, there are pros and cons to being a Virtual Assistant. Here are just a few:

Pros:

- Work from the comfort of your own home
- You become an entrepreneur/independent contractor that owns your own business
- Ability to do what you LOVE
- No commute
- No expensive wardrobe required (I can hear some of you crying right now!)
- Set your own hours
- Choose who you work with and for
- Tax advantages (do check with a tax pro.)
- No office politics

Cons:

- One must pay their own taxes (employment and Social Security)
- Lack of social connections (face to face)
- Rarely get to meet your clients
- Expense of equipment/office supplies, etc.
- No benefits (vacation pay, sick pay, health insurance, etc.)
- Loans and other financial "needs" are more difficult being self employed

In my nearly five years as a VA, I've used all the skills I acquired during years working in the administrative offices of a number of different types of companies. Plus I have had to learn a variety of new technology using the internet. My clients have all been entrepreneurs whose businesses are based on the internet. Their businesses range from "one man operations" to teams of VA's working together "virtually" for the common good and success of the client.

As a VA, you get to choose what you do! Imagine not having to do the things you simply don't like any longer. For the optimum control over what you do, I suggest you consider a "niche". In my circle of VA's, many have done just that.

Here are six common niches:

- E-Commerce
- Event Planning
- Customer Service
- Desktop Publishing
- Marketing
- Product Creation

E-Commerce simply means doing business online. It usually involves the selling of your client's products via the internet. E-Commerce has been the single most important advance brought about via the internet that has made conducting business virtually work. The basics of E-Commerce involve helping your client to be found (websites), a way for their customers to purchase (shopping cart, paypal), and delivery of the product (electronic or physical delivery).

Event planning is just that, assisting your client in creating an event. An event can be attended in the traditional live attendance setting or virtually via a teleclass, teleseminar or webinar. These virtual options are increasingly popular as the cost of travel rises.

Customer service takes many forms in the virtual environment. You may be answering a toll free line provided to prospects and customers. Answering emails or queries sent via electronic helpdesk or chat software. It is no different than the customer service at your corner store. Making the customer happy in any business is a key to success.

Desktop publishing involves creating brochures, flyers, catalogs, booklets and handouts to name a few. You may even be asked to format a book to submit to one of the many print on demand publishers now available. This is a particularly fun task if you are the creative type.

Marketing can involve you in a myriad of tasks and responsibilities. Do you like to write? There is no end to the people you can work with if you can write a compelling email or sales letter for a website.

Product creation also means different things depending on your clients. I've personally taken a series of articles a client has written over the years, brought them together with graphics into book form. CDs and DVDs can be created and sold from interviews, teleclasses, live events. Packaged together or on their own they make for great products your clients can then sell via their websites and the usual outlets such as Amazon and Barnes and Noble as well as "back of the room sales" at conferences and events. Your client is the subject expert; the VA turns that output into product to sell.

Now that I've gone over some of the basics of what a VA does and how it's accomplished virtually, along with the pros and cons, let's discuss what it takes to be a VA.

Are you:

- Responsible, Reliable and Dependable? Do what you say you will, be available when you say you will?

- One who lives by the highest of ethics? It is not unusual for a client to share credit card, banking and other very personal information with their VA.
- A self starter? Are you able to get out of bed without having to “make an appearance” at the office?
- Eager to help others succeed in their endeavors? You must whole heartedly partner with your client for the success of their business which directly leads to the success of YOUR business!

So now you want to be a VA!

Great! What next? I recommend that anyone who wants to be a VA look to the internet. Search on virtual assistance, review the many (and growing) numbers of VA associations. Network! Yes, even in the virtual world networking is as important as ever. I’ve personally found my referrals are often from other VA’s that I’ve gotten to know while working with my clients. I have also received inquiries and positions as a result of my membership in VA Associations.

It is also very important that you have your own website! You can look to membership in a VA association for your website solution as many provide low cost options to getting a website created and maintained.

In addition you must expand your knowledge base to include doing business virtually and online. Following are some key areas to study and become familiar with to know how the system of E-Commerce works.

- Shopping Cart: www.1shoppingcart.com and www.wahmcart.com
- Payment Gateways/Processing: www.authorize.net and www.paypal.com
- Phone Systems: www.workeasy.com and www.virtualpbx.com
- Email Marketing/Client Contact Systems: www.constantcontact.com and www.aweber.com

I encourage you to go to these sites, understand what they do and reach out to each company for a free trail so you can actually get to know how the systems work.

The next list of sites represents a variety of solutions commonly used in the VA world. This is just a taste and by no means represents all that are available:

- www.audiogenerator.com – used to capture and add audios to websites. Create audio postcards to be sent via email.
- www.assessmentgenerator.com – create assessments and quizzes
- www.godaddy.com and www.aitdomains.com – domain registrar and website hosting
- www.blogtalkradio.com - a wonderful way to get your client “on air” and building name recognition
- www.googleanalytics.com - to help your client get the most from their websites
- www.lightningsource.com – on demand printing
- www.voiceshot.com - web based voice broadcasting
- www.wordpress.com and www.typepad.com – blogging sites

The next area that you can’t learn enough about is social networking via the internet. It seems there are more and more of these sites popping up daily! This is an incredible way for your clients to network, get known and grow their business.

Check out:

- www.linkedin.com

- www.twitter.com
- www.squidoo.com
- www.hubpages.com
- www.youtube.com
- www.facebook.com
- www.myspace.com

Being a Virtual Assistant is not for everyone. Starting one's own business takes courage and a strong commitment to success.

Personally I absolutely love the ability and opportunity to work virtually. Working with various clients gives my day a good deal of variety. For 30 years I focused on one "client" at a time. During those years my clients were also known as employers. Now I'm my own employer. I get to do what I love! Being trusted and relied on by clients who are also small businesses is personally rewarding. If you've found what I've said to resonate with you, give being a VA a try!

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Peggy Knudson, Director/Owner of Outstanding Virtual Assistance has been a very active Virtual Assistant to a number of companies in the US and Canada and working with vendors around the world since 2004. Her 30 years of experience include a 13 year career with Microsoft in Redmond, Washington. Peggy received her CPS (Certified Professional Secretary) designation in 1991. She taught in 1992 and sat on the Office Studies Advisory Board from 1993 to 1998 at Lake Washington Technical College in Kirkland, Washington.