

“The top-notch how-to advice along with wisdom from real-life virtual assistants make this book a must-have manual for anyone contemplating this exciting and growing field.”

Ellen Parlapiano and Patricia Cobe, authors of *Mompreneurs®: A Mother's Step-by-Step-Guide to Work-at-Home Success* and *Mompreneurs® Online*

Sample



Virtual Assistant

THE SERIES



Become a Highly Successful, Sought After VA

*A complete reference guide
to starting a successful
and PROFITABLE virtual
assistant business*

Diana Ennen and Kelly Poelker

Foreword by Mary Goulet
Co-Founder MomsTown Inc., Radio Host, Author

What others are saying about this book:

The book is fabulous! I'm serious. This is the kind of book that I wanted to see for the industry. Congratulations on a job well done. I endorse this book highly and it is required reading for all VAU participants.

**–Janet Jordan, MVA
Virtual Assistance U**

I just wanted to say thank you so much for taking the time to write this book. It has been a godsend to me while starting up my business. I now consider it my business bible and will keep it close at hand to consult when necessary. Thank you!!

**–Donna L. Elliott
A Plus Virtual Assistant**

Kelly and Diana have done a great job detailing every aspect of starting your own VA business. The book breaks down by chapter what to do, who to target, what has been successful for others. I got a lot of great ideas for my own business from this book, and I HIGHLY recommend to anyone who is even thinking of starting their own business. This book and the stories in it will encourage and inspire you to DO IT ... RIGHT NOW!!! Thanks Diana and Kelly for being such an inspiration to us fledgling entrepreneurs.

–Lanette Cirisi

I bought it after a bizymoms chat, wanting to hear more from Kelly, but needing to get to bed. I took it with me to just skim the table of contents, next thing I know it was 3am. And even then, I couldn't sleep, I was too full of new promotional ideas and the other VAs experiences!

**–Crystal Clayton
GeekGyrl Inc.**

Kelly Poelker and Diana Ennen have written a book on VA start ups that is well worth the time to check out. I particularly liked the Internet related and marketing sections as well as the "In Their Own Words" sections at the end of each chapter.....suggestions and observations from existing, successful VA's. Good Reading!

–Wayne

I received your book a couple days ago. It's perfect! It's exactly what I need and very informative. I can't wait to get my business going."

–Amy

About the Authors

Diana Ennen – Author and President of Ennen’s Computer Services since 1985, Diana has been actively involved in both the word processing and virtual assisting industry.

One of her main passions is helping others start their own home-based business. She offers online consulting and mentoring and is extremely active on boards and groups such as IAVOA.com, HBWM.com, Bizymoms, VANetworking.com, etc. She also is able to help others with their start-up questions by responding via e-mail and sending out a free booklet that she has written, sample letters, etc. that she has found useful in her business. Visit her website at: <http://www.virtualwordpublishing.com>.

She’s the mother of three great kids Jeremy, Amanda, and Amber and the wife of a very supportive husband Greg. Her greatest accomplishment is raising such wonderful kids and having the opportunity to work at home with them.

Kelly Poelker – Master Virtual Assistant, author, wife, and mother. She is President of Another 8 Hours Inc., which was founded in 2000. She started her practice while working full-time and in just ten months was able to leave that full-time job to pursue her dream as an entrepreneur.

Kelly shares her knowledge and expertise in the virtual assistant industry as an Expert Coach for Virtual Assistance U, in addition to hosting a weekly chat on Success as a Virtual Assistant. She is a co-host of the annual VA Conference where she is also an industry speaker on various topics for starting and growing your virtual assistant business.

Kelly is the mother of two wonderful children, Kelsey and Kory, and wife to a very supportive husband, Randy.

Other books by Diana Ennen and Kelly Poelker

- *Virtual Assistant – The Series: Become a Highly Successful, Sought After VA* (first and second editions published as “*Up Close and Virtual*”)
- *The Bizymoms Cookbook*
- *Bizy’s Guide to Starting Your Own Virtual Assistant Business*

Other books by Diana Ennen

- *Words From Home: How To Start and Operate a Successful Home Based Word Processing Business*
- *Success From Home: The Word Processing Business* (published by Adams-Blake Publishing)
- *Virtual Assistant Solution Pack*

Virtual Assistant – The Series

Become a Highly Successful,
Sought After VA

Diana Ennen and Kelly Poelker

Third Edition
Revised

Foreword by
Mary Goulet

Visit us online at:
<http://www.VirtualWordPublishing.com>
<http://www.VA-TheSeries.com>



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Become a Highly Successful, Sought After VA

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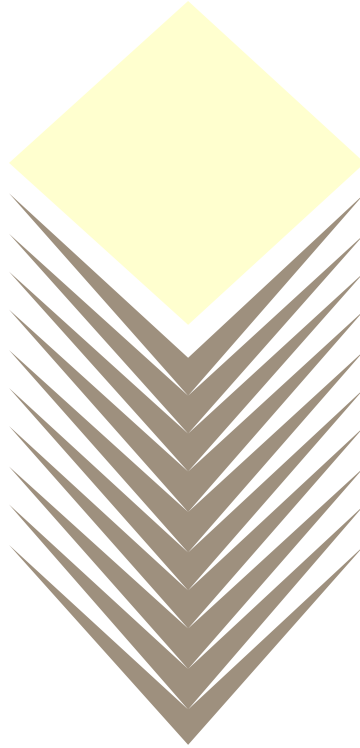
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"If you love your job, you haven't worked a day in your life."
–Tommy Lasorda

Understanding The Concept



What is a Virtual Assistant?

A virtual assistant, or VA, is a highly skilled professional who provides administrative support and other specialized services to businesses, entrepreneurs, executives, sales professionals, and others who have more work to do than time to do it.

VAs work as independent contractors, most from their own home, some from outside the home. VAs use leading edge technology to communicate work assignments via the Internet, e-mail, disk transfer or such traditional methods as regular mail, overnight shipping, and even pick-up and delivery in local areas. A VA's services typically include Internet research, word processing, medical or legal transcription, database management, e-mail handling, reminder service, bulk mailings, information processing, and any other tasks typically given to the office secretary. Many VAs also provide web development, design and maintenance; meeting and event planning; desktop publishing; bookkeeping; and business start-up consultations. The services are endless, depending upon the VA's knowledge, skills and creativity.

The late Thomas Leonard, who founded Coach U and later Coachville, coined the term "virtual assistant." Thomas Leonard was a nationally recognized coach and speaker who bought a Winnebago and traveled all over the US from meeting to meeting; and therefore, no longer had a brick and mortar building. Kelly interviewed him via telephone and was able to learn the following: Thomas had an assistant whom he had never met that managed his business, and his life, from afar. Since he had never met this assistant, he once referred to her as his "virtual assistant." From then on he used this term when encouraging other coaches and speakers to utilize the services of a virtual assistant. Before he passed away recently, he had partnered with several virtual assistants—most, if not all, of which he never had the pleasure of meeting face-to-face.

While there seems to be no dispute over who coined the term "virtual assistant," you might find controversy over who was the first "official" virtual assistant. There have obviously been home-based secretaries and word processors dating back to the 1980s. However, when you consider the meaning of the word "virtual," in the computer science sense of the word, you think "computer." Until the popularity of computers, home-based secretaries may not have been thought of as being virtual until the mid-1990s, and that is only if they began to utilize this powerful tool called the Internet or if they even knew the term existed. The word "virtual" would also indicate no physical presence, therefore adding more meaning since we are not physically located in our client's office.

When comparing the role of a secretary to that of a virtual assistant, you will see similarities. However, the two can differ greatly. A secretary is thought to always be at the beckon call of her boss to administer such tasks as handling correspondence, maintaining files, fetching coffee, etc. It took many years for secretaries to begin getting the recognition they deserved as assistants to executives and other levels of management. As time goes on, more and more assistants are developing their skills, allowing them to become vital and trusted members of the business team. A virtual assistant working remotely doesn't allow the boss the luxury of having someone at his beckon call or to get his coffee, but they can become a vital part of the business team if the VA manages their business and the client relationship properly.

In Their Own Words:

Janice Byer: A virtual assistant is the small business entrepreneur's answer to a personal assistant without all of the costs of hiring in-house. A VA provides assistance with administrative tasks to help entrepreneurs handle their everyday running of their businesses. Our specialties are all different, but we pride ourselves in being a one-stop shop by utilizing the specialties of other VAs when necessary.

Julie McMann: A virtual assistant provides services (of their choice) via a remote location—typically the home. In my opinion, a virtual assistant can provide a full spectrum of services or specialize in a particular task or industry. The possibilities are virtually limitless.

Kimberly Mann: In a nutshell, I consider us to be independent entrepreneurs who provide a host of services including, but not limited to, administrative and secretarial, business communications, desktop publishing, travel logistics, website services and word processing services remotely via the Internet, phone, fax, e-mail and snail mail. We can offer services as basic as typing up letters, sending faxes, sorting e-mail and processing the monthly invoicing to designing the company logo, marketing material and website. Because VAs have widely differing skill sets, we can offer virtually any type of service virtually!

Andrea Pixley: In the traditional office, they are known as Administrative Assistants, but in the online community, they are known as Virtual Assistants. VAs work from their own offices, use their own equipment, and provide services to businesses, entrepreneurs, executives, or busy people. Assignments are usually communicated through e-mail, phone, fax, or mail. Whatever the project, information is easily transferred between client and virtual assistant.

Benefits to Clients

The benefits to your clients are numerous, as a good VA can actually make or break a business. You will be instrumental in your clients' marketing and promotional work and also in keeping their office running smoothly and effectively. Many clients realize that they are spending too much time taking care of busy-work that they can't bill clients for, but that still needs to be done, such as scheduling trips, planning meetings, researching the Internet for information, tracking expenses, paying bills and taxes, balancing the books, maintaining files, screening calls, and answering e-mails. A VA can save the clients' time because they will be spending less time doing that work and more time growing their business, having quality time with their family, or just plain relaxing. It's important for you to realize these benefits so that when asked, you can outline these benefits to your clients.

Scott Stratten is a speaker, trainer, and coach who encourages the use of VAs to his clients, in addition to utilizing his own VA. Scott had this to share with us. "It amazes me when I talk to some clients about hiring a VA to help ease their stress and time management issues. They usually throw up the wall of 'can't afford it' or 'I don't have time to find one'. In reality, those are the reasons WHY YOU NEED ONE! I teach people to value their time and delegate tasks that aren't crucial to be a part of. If they have too much on their plate, they need a VA to sit at the table with them and help clear it or they'll never finish." Scott is the President of Un-Marketing (<http://www.un-marketing.com>) and Work Your Life (<http://www.workyourlife.com>).

Additionally, your clients can escape the hidden costs of having an employee, such as payroll taxes, sick time, chatting around the water cooler time, down time, and breaks. Since all VAs have their own office, clients don't have to pay for additional office equipment, computers or software. Also, clients no longer have to pay vacation time, holiday pay, and expensive benefit packages.

My clients have realized the importance of having someone outside the office handle all those tasks they can't seem to get done with their current staff, if they even have a staff. I have built partnerships that allow my clients to put their faith in me to handle routine tasks while they concentrate on what they do best.

If you're ever faced with a potential client that can't decide if having a VA is a good idea, ask them to take some time and jot down a list of what they like and dislike doing in their office. Review the list with them and explain how having a virtual assistant to take over all those tasks frees up their valuable time for more important matters, like generating business. Further explain that VAs can also take on tasks that clients don't mind doing, but should probably be delegated. We also recommend having potential clients complete a Client Self-Assessment form. See the sample provided by Janet Jordan of Virtual Assistance U, located in the Appendix.

Once a client realizes the benefits of partnering with a VA, the question then becomes "where do I find a VA?" Many clients who are seeking long term help look for a VA who has graduated from one of the VA training programs such as Virtual Assistance U or AssistU. Other great places to find VAs are virtual assistant organization member

directories. The following is a sample listing of directories. This list is not meant to be exhaustive by any means. Head over to your favorite search engine and search on the keywords “virtual assistant directories.” There, you will find the most current and accurate listing.

- International Association of Virtual Office Assistants or IAVOA (<http://www.iavoa.com>)
- VACertification (<http://www.VACertification.com>)
- Virtual Business Group (<http://www.virtualbizgroup.com>)
- International Virtual Assistant Association (<http://www.ivaa.org>)
- Staffcentrix (<http://www.staffcentrix.com>)
- Canadian VA Network (<http://www.canadianva.net>)
- Canadian Virtual Assistant Connection (<http://www.cvasuccess.com>)
- Alliance of UK Virtual Assistants (<http://www.allianceofukvirtualassistants.org.uk>)
- Executary Network (<http://www.executary.com>)
- Executive Virtual Professionals Association (<http://www.evpa.net>)
- Virtual Professionals (<http://www.virtual-professionals.com>)
- Worldwide Listing of Virtual Office Assistants (<http://www.elitewebstudio.com>)

You will want to list your company in most, if not all, of these directories.

Veteran VA Janice Byer, author of *SurfinTheNet*, also offers the following reasons why it's beneficial to hire a VA:

- They save money by not having to worry about the added expenses that are associated with having an in-house assistant (i.e., office space, equipment, employment related expenses)
- They also save money by only paying for time worked. Most VAs bill on a minute-by-minute basis and do not bill for any idle time.
- They can concentrate on increasing their revenue and building their client base while the VA handles their non-core tasks.
- They get experienced assistance when they need it.
- They don't have to worry about training.
- They can count on working 'with' a professional who is dedicated to helping their business grow.

When speaking to prospective clients, keep in mind these few things that VAs can do to benefit their clients

- Type all correspondence, transcription, etc.
- Bookkeeping: invoice customers, receive and pay bills, reconcile bank statements, and keep track of expenses and tax records.
- Create and maintain electronic mailing lists for e-newsletters and correspondence.
- Maintain the company website.
- Receive, screen, and send e-mail, faxes, and regular mail.

- Make and return phone calls.
- Schedule business and personal appointments and interviews.
- Maintain files for vendors and clients.
- Research and plan both business and personal trips.
- Create efficient office systems to create more space and streamline tasks.
- Make marketing calls and do other promotional work.
- Reminder of important dates.

Andrea Pixley states when asked, “Who can benefit from using a virtual assistant?”

Small and home-based businesses

Your office will run more smoothly with scheduling and reminder services, and you can concentrate on expanding (instead of catching up) when you let us do your data entry and word processing.

Non-profit organizations

You can have your events planned, publicized, and organized for you.

Students

You no longer need to spend time researching topics or typing papers.

New parents

You don't have to make time to send out your personalized birth announcements and your family members can view your family photos on your own website.

Engaged couples

You can receive help with your wedding and reception planning and organizing. Have your announcements sent to local newspapers, invitations designed, printed, and mailed, thank-you notes written, and travel arrangements for the honeymoon taken care of.

Family, alumni, and military members

You can have your reunions planned and organized, video slide shows created as mementos, and newsletters sent out so you stay in touch.

I rounded up a couple of my clients to get their feedback on the benefits that they have found and here's what they had to say:

John Finch, President, Resolve Associates, Int., an International Recruiting Firm

John, what are the main benefits of hiring a VA?

The first is time. Essentially it frees me up to do other things. Also, I don't have to be in the office. Whether I'm interviewing a client in Mexico, or composing a Candidate Profile here at home, it doesn't matter. I can leave with confidence knowing that all my business obligations will be fulfilled.

The second is image. In today's environment you can't afford to make mistakes. Having a professional proofing my documents and also recommending changes

when necessary is extremely beneficial. It's like getting a second opinion on your work. They can provide you with comments and suggestions on how to make the best impression.

They also get to know your business personally and are eager to help you succeed.

Overhead: I don't need to have an office set-up.

Having someone 24/7.

John, what services does your VA provide?

Well, I don't type. I have her handling all correspondence and other important word processing. Responding to e-mails for me.

I can call-forward my phones when I'm out of the country and she can keep my business running successfully from her own office.

As I have a specialized program made specifically for my profession, I needed someone who could work with the program. Through PCAnywhere she is able to connect right into my computer.

Any disadvantages:

The camaraderie. Not having someone in the office to chat with.

Immediate projects. If something comes up that you need it typed immediately, it can be a problem if she isn't home or working on another project for another client.

Sharon Simoncini, Vice-President, S&R Transfer

Sharon what are the main benefits of hiring a VA?

I always receive high quality work and I don't have to spend time correcting mistakes or overlooking the work that goes out. Also, she knows our business (sometimes even better than I think we do), and provides ideas and suggestions on how we can best succeed.

Also, she has all the equipment she needs so I don't have to worry if something breaks down that I'll need to fix it. Since it's her own business, she keeps everything in running order.

Plus our business is seasonal and we only have to pay for the time she works. In the summer we don't have a lot of work, but come January we are extremely busy. It's nice not to have to pay someone for time we don't need them.

In Their Own Words:

Renaë Bolton: They don't have to pay any benefits, no paid time off, no absent employees. They only pay for time spent specifically on their projects. Also, VAs are usually versatile so they can easily go from one project to the next or do several at the same time and the customer never has to worry about the project not being in the employee's "job description."

Bernadette Davis: My clients benefit in several ways that they have repeatedly discussed with me. One client wants to do a business plan. He gave me his notes and sat and talked with me about his idea. At the same time he has to continue working and cannot devote the time required to get his idea on paper in a professional format. I work on this and contact him on his cell phone when I have a question. When he temporarily has to redirect his funds: I stop work and start work at his convenience. I am a lot less expensive than if he were to have it done by business planners who do that sort of thing as their sole profession. Another client is an uncomplicated businessman. He owns houses and rents them out. I am like a property management agent and we talk when we can on his cell phone since he is always on the go.

Julie McMann: Using a virtual assistant allows clients to outsource any projects that can be done from a remote location. It allows them to accomplish more with less time. Since time is so precious to business owners, anything that frees up time and keeps the business moving ahead is extremely valuable. It's also convenient to be able to hire and utilize a virtual assistant whenever you need them. One month you may have more projects than another. It's much less expensive than hiring a full-time employee who doesn't get used to their full potential. Clients also benefit by not having to worry about providing employee benefits such as insurance, 401K, vacations, etc. Finally, office space and equipment are provided at the expense of the virtual assistant, which again saves the client money.

Jill Sharkey: A virtual assistant is what I would call off-site clerical support. Without today's technology, I could not be such an assistant. I have never physically seen the vast majority of my clients or contacts. Very seldom do I get to put a face to a voice over the phone.

Melana Tautkus: Not having to pay for extra office space, computer hardware, employee insurance benefits, Federal taxes, paid time off for sick time or vacation. Clients also benefit by having the option to pay "per project." Once you have developed a relationship with a client, he or she has the confidence that what has been assigned to the VA will be performed to the client's specifications and will be completed on time. This leaves the client with the freedom to do what they do best.

I think using a VA is the best of both worlds for the client. They get the administrative support that they need to enable them to accomplish more with less stress. The VA is available only when they want or need the service as opposed to employing an assistant part-time, but not having enough work to keep the employee busy.

It's always easier to talk in the broadest terms about what you do and how you do it. It's even easier when you have a ready source available to refer potential clients to or offer a visual tour that presents your industry in a professional manner. An international team of practicing virtual assistants, on behalf of the entire virtual assistance industry, has developed such a program.

In June 2003, a VA industry wide promotion campaign called the Alliance for Virtual Businesses was initiated. The campaign's mission is to advocate globally on behalf of the virtual assistance industry and to promote the growth of free enterprise between virtual assistants, entrepreneurs, small businesses, corporations, associations and other business enterprises.

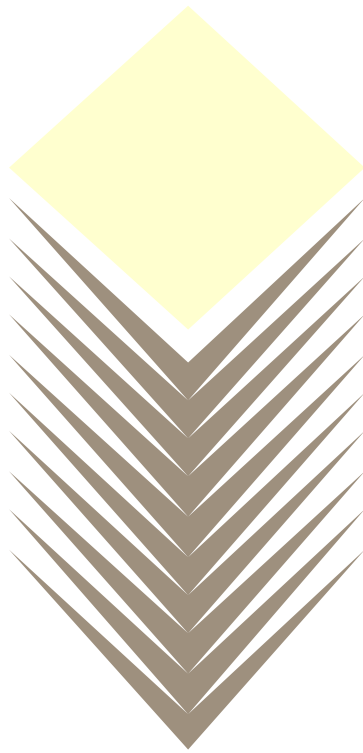
As industry advocates, the Alliance recognizes that with the growth of new and innovative administrative capabilities, businesses are often unaware of the time saving and cost effective tools that improve operations and impact their financial outlooks. The Alliance for Virtual Businesses® promotes the advantages of working with a professional Virtual Assistant. We advocate on behalf of our members' knowledge of new technologies and practical administrative processes that give businesses the freedom to expand and individuals the ability to enhance their lifestyles. Reaching across the globe, virtual assistants work without boundaries.

The Alliance has developed a proactive communication model consisting of regularly scheduled media releases and appearances. It also includes a media and business friendly website that defines virtual assisting, identifies various industries we serve, the benefits derived from working with virtual assistants, examples of various duties we perform and much more.

The website (<http://www.allianceforvirtualbiz.com>) contains press information, industry demographics and statistics, descriptions of new technologies and how virtual assistants use them to enhance their service offerings, client testimonials, free resources and educational information, an interactive voice-activated community, a VA-industry advocate magazine, and much more. Virtual assisting organization(s) information is available for membership consideration. The Alliance is a one-stop, resourceful site that contains a wealth of information specifically geared to promoting the virtual assisting industry and describing how virtual assistants work with their clients.

By promoting the industry, virtual assistants actually promote themselves. If you are tired of seeing the "blank look" as you describe your business—join the Alliance for Virtual Businesses PR campaign, subscribe to its magazine—The Virtual Alliance (<http://www.thevirtualalliance.com>)—use the PR resources we've made available to explain the industry to your potential clients. Join a scheduled "Tour of the Virtual Assisting Industry" and let your potential client(s) learn about virtual assisting the easy way. Contact Alliance leaders at info@allianceforvirtualbiz.com for more information on how you can help promote the industry. By doing so, you actually promote yourself.

Do You Have What It Takes?



Self-Employment Considerations

Here are some things you need to consider before you decide to start a business. We in no way want to discourage you from following your dream. However, we want you to be aware of these considerations, make sure they are not a problem, or if there is a problem, it's one that you can deal with and have the solution for prior to that starting date.

Even though your pay rate might be higher if you work at home, which it definitely should be, you won't have paid benefits, a pension plan, sick days, paid holidays, and other traditional employee perks. You will also be responsible for your own taxes. Let's examine some of these.

- **Taxes**—you will be responsible for your own taxes. It's important to be able to put money aside regularly for this. At some point, you will probably need to be paying quarterly taxes. You need to be disciplined to doing this. Many fall into this trap. You will be receiving a check for the work done. If you continually spend that full amount, come tax-time, you won't have the money put aside that you will need to pay your taxes and then your wonderful business becomes an overnight nightmare.
- **Insurance**—for many you don't need to worry about insurance, as you will be covered under your spouse's plan. However, if this is not the case, then it is a consideration that you want to address prior to starting your business. I know many insurance plans for a couple and one child can run \$500.00 to \$600.00 a month. That is a major expense. We go more into detail later on in this book. However, for this chapter, this is another consideration.
- **Time**—you have to be disciplined. Many find it hard to leave work when it is only a few feet away or right down the hall. Most of the time, you can still hear the phone ringing and the tendency is to go look and see whose calling. What if you didn't finish something? Can you let it go and enjoy dinner with the family? These are things you want to address. You'll find that those "just a few minutes" add up. Soon you're spending the night in your office and your family is feeling neglected.
- **Family Support**—your decision to be self-employed is something that you should discuss in detail with all family members, not just your spouse, as it does affect everyone. Naturally, more time should be spent with your spouse. Don't get defensive. Keep in mind that although this is your dream come true; to them this is a paycheck that isn't coming in, a different lifestyle than they are accustomed to, and perhaps sacrifices that they aren't ready to make. If you go into this as a team, your chances of success are all the greater.

In Their Own Words:

The question was posed to VAs, “What obstacles did you face?”

Janice Byer: Cash flow. I was laid off from my previous position and starting a home-based business was not something I had thought about until that point. So, I didn’t have a nest egg set up. It was a challenge for the first couple of years, but I survived.

Kimberly Mann: The only obstacles with starting part-time is that it takes longer to get things done as far as researching and starting the business initially, the type of services you offer, as well as the clients you can take on. For instance, I would love to offer a telephone answering service, but because I have that 9-5er job, I am not able to do so.

Kathy Ritchie: I didn’t find the support I needed from my family and friends when I first started full-time. It wasn’t until the last 2-3 years that they can see and now respect what it is that I do.

Barbara Rowen: The first obstacle I faced was residing in an area that had little idea of what a VA was, let alone how their business could use one. I chose to focus on the local community, as I saw a huge need right in my own backyard. From the beginning I was educating the local business community on the benefits of utilizing VAs, and it appears to be working. The second obstacle was being virtual. I was unable to secure clients until I left the safety of my office and actually met them face-to-face, through networking groups and by word-of-mouth. Once the business owners started meeting me and finding out about virtual assisting, they have been more than happy to give me their work.

Are You VA Material?

We're asked this question a lot. Someone is eager to start a business, but skeptical that they have what it takes. One of the first questions we reply with is, "Are you motivated and want to make this work?" If the answer is, "You betcha!" then we proceed to ask about their skills and knowledge of the business world. With the right motivation, most **CAN** succeed—(especially with the help of our book)! However, if the answer is, "Well, I own a computer, I have access to the Internet, and I own a few software programs with a printer—I can be a virtual assistant, everyone else is doing it," then we have to question the motivation for becoming a VA.

I think the dream of owning your own business and the freedom that comes along with it can sometimes cloud the reality that we might not be choosing the right business to start. Now is the time to do some real soul-searching and determine if becoming a VA is really what you want to do in life. A better way to look at it is to ask yourself, "If money were no object, am I choosing a career that allows me to do what I love to do?" Further, when you choose to start your own business it should not be considered a hobby. Yes, you might start part-time, but the commitment and desire for being a long-term viable business is highly important. If you don't take your business seriously, how can you expect others to do the same?

The virtual assistant industry is rapidly expanding and the desire to become a virtual assistant is fast becoming reality for a great many people. For this, we are thrilled. But, how many of those businesses are still around after six months, a year, or even two years? Did those who didn't make it take their business seriously? Did they constantly improve their skills, seek the proper training, and partake in the necessary networking opportunities? We have to remember that other professionals rely on us to help their business grow. Are you ready for that responsibility?

Not only do you need to have the skills to handle the services you will offer, but you must also have what it takes to be an entrepreneur. Let's first take a look at the characteristics of an entrepreneur:

- Do you have a desire to achieve?
- Are you willing to take risks?
- Do you possess self-confidence?
- Do you have a "passion for the business?"
- Can you accept challenges?
- Do you strive to be the best?

Next, consider the following personal traits

- Are you a self-starter?
- Do you like to work with dynamic people?

- Are you confident about your ability to get the job done?
- Are you creative?
- Can you adapt to rapid change?
- Do you have good problem-solving skills?
- Can you set goals and follow them to completion?
- Can you handle multiple tasks at one time?
- Can you anticipate the needs of others?
- Are you a leader?
- Can you learn from your past mistakes?
- Can you work through problems and not dwell on them?

How did you do? Now would be a good time to ask yourself what additional positive traits you have and how you can best put them to use.

Here are some things you might ask yourself when you're contemplating whether or not to start a VA practice:

- **Are you a good time manager?** The impact of those two words will amaze you. Talk to any virtual assistant in business today and they will tell you just what an impact it can have on your business. You have to know how to manage your time. DEADLINES!! INTERRUPTIONS!! FAMILY CRISES!! SHOPPING!!! (Only kidding, just wanted to see if you were listening!) It's crucial to have your day planned out in advance. You need to be the type of person who can do this.
- **Do you have excellent typing and proofing skills?** This is very important to your business. You are your business; therefore, you want to do your absolute best in ensuring that all documents are as close to perfection as possible. That includes correspondence with potential or existing clients, as well as your VA associates. Don't feel that you need to be a super fast typist—that's not necessary. The main key is to be a good typist and a good proofreader. Your speed will increase with time.
- **Do you already know several people who could utilize your services?** Many VAs are fortunate to already know clients who want to utilize their services. It can be past employers, friends or acquaintances at church. This is definitely an added plus because you then have money coming in immediately.
- **Are you capable of making a great income and will stop at nothing to make it happen?** I always knew when I was working at my secretarial positions that I should be making more than I was, and I wanted to make more. However, in the typical secretarial jobs you were lucky to get a \$1.00 to \$2.00 raise a year. I loved it when I was finally able to tell people that I was making \$30.00/hr. Now that's what

I'm worth. How about you? With your skills and experience, how much do you think you're worth?

- **Do you enjoy helping people?** What a wonderful feeling it is to help other businesses succeed. I have always targeted new businesses and in doing so I am able to see them grow and become great successes. My experience enables me to help develop their business image in a positive manner.

Naturally, the more skills you have, the better off you are. However, keep in mind that you can customize your business to fit your individual skills. The good thing about owning your own VA business is you get to choose your clients. What clients could best use your particular skills?

If you are re-entering the workforce after an extended leave, you might find that a few of your skills are a little rusty, but you still excel in other areas. Start off by offering only those services you excel in while you catch up on those rusty skills, and learn some new ones.

We recommend visiting <http://www.brainbench.com>. Brainbench is a skills testing site offering certification in areas such as MSWord, MExcel, Business Writing, Written English, and so on. The tests are timed and taken right over the Internet with the results returned to you immediately. The results of the test will reveal your strengths and weaknesses in the topic chosen, as well as how you ranked against others that have taken that test. And, you can retake the test to improve your score. Brainbench keeps a transcript of your test scores that you can send to potential clients or employers. Once you have passed a test, you can receive a certificate by mail and you will have access to graphics that can be placed on your website attesting to your certification. You can also add a link to your online transcript.

You may find that your skills are right but you're just not sure how to approach the virtual assistant industry without the proper training. At the time of writing our first book there were just a few VA training programs. Today, there are a great number of training resources dedicated to becoming a virtual assistant. We recommend Virtual Assistance U, or VAU (<http://www.virtualassistanceu.com>). See the chapter on Training for additional information on Virtual Assistance U. Other VA training programs to consider are AssistU (<http://www.assistu.com>) and IAVA (<http://www.iava.org.uk>). For training specific to supporting real estate agents, you'll want to check out The Virtual Training Center (<http://www.virtualtrainingcenter.com>). For a broad range of subjects beneficial for the virtual assistant you'll want to check out <http://www.my-ecourse.com>.

While other training programs exist, we recommend that you check out them out very carefully. Consider the following when seeking a qualified training instructor or program, and be sure to check the references of former students:

- Is the instructor a practicing VA?
- What is their background?
- How long have they been in business?
- Do they have prior experience in training?

Skills Required

Every virtual assistant has his or her own unique skills and experience that enables them to start their business. The right skills are those that you have perfected and can perform well. As you further develop your skills, you can expand your service offering. It is not recommended that you offer services that you are not able to support. Should a client ask you to perform a task that you are not proficient at, consider one of the following:

- Advise the client that you do not offer that service but you would be happy to find them a VA who can.
- Establish a network of other virtual assistants with complementary services and subcontract the work.
- Advise the client that you do not offer the service but you are willing to learn. Leave it up to them if they are willing to go through the learning process with you. You'll also want to consider lowering your rate or not charging the client at all for the learning time if it is a skill that will benefit your overall service offering—not if it's something exclusive to this client's line of work.

Accepting a job that you do not have the skills to support can get you into trouble. It's often hard to say no when we are desperately seeking income and that first client. To be up front with the client and offer alternative solutions, like referring to another VA, is much more professional. They will respect you for not entering into a task you cannot perform.

VA skills range from the basics, such as typing, to highly specialized areas like web design, graphic arts, technical writing and more. A professional VA will be proficient in the Internet, computers, software, word processing and spreadsheet applications. In addition to the technical skills, a professional VA will have good business management skills as well as knowledge of marketing, advertising, record keeping, and public relations. Business management skills not only help you in operating your own business, but also allow you to aid your clients in running theirs.

VAs must be motivated. You can't get discouraged when you experience minor setbacks. Start fresh each day. If the phone didn't ring yesterday, make it ring today. Failure is not an option. You need to know that you're going to make it and stop at nothing short.

I think Jan Melnik says it so well in her book, *How To Start a Home-Based Secretarial Services Business*, "High energy level and good health should accompany your own motivation and drive to succeed."

Good organizational skills are also important. You will need the ability to juggle multiple priorities, work assignments and often children at the same time. What I have found that works well is to stay focused. Don't jump ahead to the other assignments that need to be done or think about your son's baseball game. Concentrate only on the work you are working on now. Once complete you can move on.

In Their Own Words:

Shane Bowlin: In 1997 I enrolled in the Virtual Training Program at AssistU.com. I earned their Certified Professional Virtual Assistant (CPVA) designation.

Janice Byer: I spent 15 years in the corporate world doing a variety of administrative tasks as well as other managerial tasks. I also spent 5 years running my father's small business.

Jeannine Clontz: I've been in business five years. When I first started out in 1998, I took a refresher course in Secretarial Studies through "At Home Professions" to be sure that I was still at the top of my game, and in touch with new technological advances. I also took a class in Legal Transcription at our local community college. Since then I have focused on VA certifications. I have my IVAA CVA (Certified Virtual Assistant through IVAA.org); MVA (Master Virtual Assistant through VACertifications.com); EthicsChecked™ (through Staffcentrix, now being offered at IVAA.org); CRESS (Certified Real Estate Support Specialist through IVAA.org); PREVA (Professional Real Estate VA through REVANetwork.com); and CRVA (Certified Realtor.com Virtual Assistant through Realtor.com). I purchased a club membership at my local New Horizons Training Center, which has provided me with in-depth software training in many of my Microsoft and Adobe software packages. I feel that if I want to market myself as an "expert," I actually have to be able to back that up!

Having worked as a professional proofreader for over 10 years was a big plus—when I offered my clients free grammar, spelling and punctuation correction that was my proof that I knew what I was doing. When I wasn't working as a proofreader, I was an administrative assistant, which gave me a good set of organizational and phone skills that were very helpful.

Sharon Lee: I have been in management, accounting, sales, business proposal writing, managing private and public funded accounts, and clerical prior to starting my own business.

Gwen Males: I have been in business for five years and my skills and experience prior to this were about seven years experience first as secretary/ receptionist and eventually executive administrative assistant. I have very strong word processing and data entry skills.

Julie McMann: I obtained my MBA with an emphasis in market research in 1991. I minored in computer science, thus performing Internet marketing was a natural transition. I've worked in the marketing industry since 1993 in a variety of roles from marketing assistant to regional marketing analyst. I've worked from home for the past three years, first as a telecommuter, then a freelancer and now by owning my own business.

Patty Shannon: My last job before I went out on my own was with a pharmaceutical advertising agency, and almost all of my corporate proofreading customers now are pharmaceutical advertising agencies. So I have a lot of background in medical terminology. I even transcribe interviews, seminars, etc.—although I beg for any

backup materials they might have when I do them! My clients joke with me that I don't have any idea what they're talking about, but I know if it's spelled correctly, and that's all they ask. I have taken a couple of word processing courses, especially to get up to speed in Microsoft Word, since my program of choice is WordPerfect.

Jill Sharkey: My prior skills include earning an Associates Degree in Secretarial Science in 1976. I've held various secretarial/clerical positions over the years. Skills included clerical skills such as typing, filing, and simple bookkeeping. Later computer skills included word processing, data processing, and desktop publishing.

Barbara Rowen: I have worked as a word processor, litigation secretary and legal assistant for sole practitioners as well as small and medium-sized law firms for more than 25 years. I was confident I could provide the kind of services small business owners needed. Once I finally decided who I really wanted to work for (and who I didn't want to work for), the rest was easy. I've always had the ability to pick up computer concepts and programming quickly, which has definitely worked to my advantage in this ever-changing environment.

Melana Tautkus: I have been in business as a full-time virtual assistant for two years. I started part-time as a virtual assistant in 1997 after 14 years experience as an administrative assistant in various industries. When asked what skills and experience did she have prior to starting this business, she states. "I have been trained in all of the office software programs for Mac and PC including several word processing, spreadsheet, database, and presentation programs. Since I have worked for sole proprietors as well as international corporations, I had a good perspective of specialist and generalist functions. In a nutshell, this meant that I had to perform any task that the owner did not have time to do as though it were my own business. Often, I trained managers, business owners and other employees what I had learned in software classes."

Janice D. Byer, MVA
Docu-Type Administrative & Web Design Services

“To be a happy, successful person whom others can admire and want to learn from.”

This is the Mission Statement of a very determined and passionate entrepreneur who has taken her love of creating unique and professional end results for her clients and turned them into just the right criteria to be the recipient of several prestigious awards.

But, let’s turn back the clock a bit and find out how this successful business started.

In 1997, Janice Byer was running the office of her father’s lawn care company from her home. At the time, she was the mother of a happy two year old and the wife of a small business owner. Working from home made her very happy and she enjoyed being there for her family. But, there wasn’t any passion for what she was doing.

Then her father decided to retire and sell the business. Of course, he gave her first refusal on the purchase of the business but she didn’t see herself in the lawn care industry for the rest of her life. So, she began to research what she could do as a career from her home. She looked into all those get rich quick schemes, as well as legitimate businesses, and then came across the concept of “virtual assistance.” It was perfect! She could do what she has done all of her career but do it for many clients instead of just one boss. And, she could do it from her home. Thus, Docu-Type Administrative & Web Design Services (<http://www.docutype.net>) was born.

Janice’s first task to help her business succeed, and to be sure that she offers the best services to her clients, was to apply for and be accepted into the Self Employment Assistance (SEA) program, sponsored by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC). The program involved in-class training and resources, taught by successful entrepreneurs, to help aspiring entrepreneurs launch their new businesses.

Then, it was full steam ahead! She spent countless hours researching and marketing her business and along the way learned the benefits of having words of wisdom from those who were already running successful VA businesses. Because of this she began to help others, as much as her time would allow, to get a jump start on their careers.

It took a couple of years of trial and error to build her business to a point where she was happy with its success and all that the success can bring. There were many trials that became definite errors; and still others that produced the exact results that she had envisioned and helped in building her client base and her reputation as a passionate business owner.

Along the journey, Janice continued to help others become small business owners, especially in the Virtual Assistance industry. She has volunteered her time as a Board member at A Virtual Solution; as a reviewer for VA Certification.com; as a contributor to many books, including *Momprenuers Online* and *From The HomeFront*; as an author of many published articles; as a mentor to many up-and-coming VAs; as a member of the marketing committee with the Brampton Board of Trade; and is now an Executive Director

and website designer for CVA Success, a new organization for Canadian-based VAs. She has also added an abundance of information to her website to help aspiring entrepreneurs, including a "Becoming A VA" page. And, she answers every inquiry she gets from those who need some words of encouragement or advice.

As one of her clients (and an aspiring VA), Niki Hampton of The Simple Plan (<http://www.thesimpleplan.com>) said, "Thanks a million Janice. I also took a few moments to view your site and found a lot of VERY helpful advice. You are so successful because you are a good person inside, which always shines outside."

In 2000, Janice was honored to be the recipient of the Most Successful Start Up award, presented by the Pinnacle Awards for Business Women of Distinction. A few months later, she received the Home Based Business of the Year award, which was presented to her by the Small Business Enterprise Centre in Brampton, Ontario, in conjunction with the City of Brampton and the Towns of Caledon and Orangeville. And, in 2001 she received her certification as a Master Virtual Assistant (MVA).

She celebrated her fifth year in business in 2003 and, as a way of giving back, she has compiled an Ebook that has over 1200 links that she has used to build her business to the success it is today. More information can be found on her website.

Janice's passion and dedication to offering the best services to her clients and a helpful hand to aspiring entrepreneurs has made her mission statement of "To be a happy, successful person whom others can admire and want to learn from" come true for her, in more ways than one.

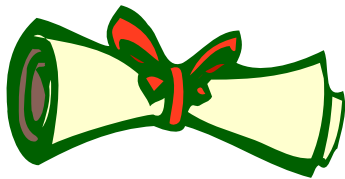
Contact Janice Byer, of Docu-Type Administrative & Web Design Services by visiting her website at <http://www.docutype.net> or by e-mailing her at jbyer@docutype.net.

Training

The Small Business Administration reports that small businesses startups continues to grow at an astounding rate, making up more than 22 million small businesses across the country. According to IDC (International Data Corporation), a top national research firm, there are between 34.3 million and 36.6 million home office households in the United States alone. Do you want to be one of those people? If so, then you have to have the proper training.

There are many avenues you can take with regard to training. Let's first focus on getting training as a virtual assistant. Most VAs have received a great deal of training through current or past employers. Some have received formal education through secretarial schools as well as accredited colleges. A great many of us have gained a vast amount of knowledge through numerous channels, including the school of hard knocks. It could be that you know everything there is to know about being a business owner, and an assistant, but you just aren't sure how to apply your knowledge and skills to the "virtual" world. There is hope.

The following information was provided by Janet Jordan of Virtual Assistance U. (<http://www.virtualassistanceu.com>).



Virtual Assistance U provides coaching and training for emerging Virtual Assistants through state-of-the-art virtual online classrooms. The exclusive virtual classroom eliminates any long distance charges for participants and encourages enrollment of international emerging VAs. VAU assists participants in establishing unparalleled VA practices by providing the most comprehensive VA training available worldwide.

For continued growth in the 21st century marketplace, adapting a new business paradigm is critical. VAU team leaders and expert coaches will help make that paradigm come alive for those desiring to establish thriving practices. Currently, anyone desiring to become a virtual assistant can do so. The caveat to starting your business on that kind of foundation is that as the virtual assistance industry grows the demand for standards and best practices will emerge. In any industry, the more training and product knowledge you have, the more successful you will be. Education is an investment in your future in whatever discipline you may choose. Pursuing a comprehensive focused training program for virtual assisting will provide invaluable dividends.

When presenting an idea to an audience, using visuals can hold their attention up to 30 times longer. Even more important, the audience will retain three times the amount of information for up to 10 times longer than an audio only or teleconference presentation.

This applies to lessons in life, lessons in the classroom and lessons at VAU.

Since VAU classes are conducted online in real time, voice interactive, virtual classrooms, interaction by all participants is the end result. Audiovisuals are implemented in the room to reinforce the audio interaction. Tactile learners may also print out the pages instantly and make notes as desired. Participants also enjoy the Internet tours and exploring hyperlinks.

Graduates of our virtual assistant training program receive additional credits toward the prestigious PVA and MVA designations offered by VACertification.com. VACertification.com is the only recognized independent certifying organization in the VA industry where membership is not required in order to receive certification. VACertification.com requires excellence in education, references and experience prior to and after entering the VA industry.

Virtual Assistance U provides the following features:

Collaborative learning environments (WBT, CBT and VOIP), in which students can obtain information about instructors and specific content areas, share ideas with other students and instructors in chat rooms, and participate in online text based and voice interactive discussions. VAU also offers a unique 50-seat discussion forum for current participants, graduates and expert coaches to network and collaborate about best practices and emerging industry trends.

A virtual resource library where students can access a variety of course and industry reference materials, including relevant content links to other parts of the Internet - any time, day or night.

Participants create intranet areas including private rooms and chat areas for clients and a place to store document files. Participants are encouraged to obtain their own individual VOIP meeting rooms to facilitate meetings with their clients in the future.

A virtual bookstore where students can purchase course related materials such as books, videotapes, audiotapes, and software programs.

Red Deer College offers a Virtual Assistant Certificate that will provide opportunities for students to gain entrepreneurial skills, attitudes, technology skills and related knowledge to adapt to providing office services virtually from their home offices. Students will learn how to create and market a viable home-based business using their technological skills to contract office support to for-profit businesses and not-for-profit agencies. Optional specialization will allow students to select from other major support areas: Automated Accounting, Web Design, and Electronic Spreadsheets. There are two intakes: beginning September and January of each year. Each course is 14 weeks in length. Contact admissions@rdc.ab.ca or 403-342-3400.

For medical, legal, business basics, software, and other training, you can take classes at various adult education classes, online or at a very well-known school called At-Home Professions. It has an excellent reputation in the following specialties: Legal Transcription, Medical Transcription, Secretarial/Word Processing, Bookkeeping, Paralegal Training, and Computer Basics. They provide all the needed materials including books, lessons, and learning aids. It requires a minimum of a four-month commitment, but normally runs six months or longer, depending on your schedule and the class you are taking. They are located at: At-Home Professions, 2001 Lowe Street, Fort Collins, CO 80525, (800) 333-2846.

Coaching is an excellent means to obtain training. It enables the VA to get individual personalized attention and to get answers to questions as they arise. The personalized touch is very appreciated by the VA as they are able to get specific help in targeting their market more effectively, generate a proposal for a client, identifying your niche, and much more. We both offer coaching and have found it very beneficial to the VA to jumpstart their business.

Certification

Becoming certified in any profession indicates to others that you are held to a certain level of standards for your particular industry. The virtual assistant industry is no exception. By obtaining certification, you will receive the recognition and respect from clients and peers that you possess a higher level of experience in the industry. In addition, you will be telling clients that you take your business very seriously and that you are committed to upholding the standards of the VA industry.

Here are some groups who issue certification in the VA industry:

- International Virtual Assistant Association (IVAA) members can take an exam to become a Certified Virtual Assistant, or CVA. <http://www.ivaa.org>
- AssistU graduates can obtain one of two different designations based upon the level of training they receive through AssistU and the number of hours working in the industry. AssistU designations include that of a Certified Professional Virtual Assistant, or CPVA, and the Certified Master Virtual Assistant, or CMVA. <http://www.assistu.com>
- Accredited Secretaries Online - ASO with ACS is committed to promoting its accreditation process and its accredited members through government bodies, bureau, corporations, suppliers, general media and the industry at large. Such an approach enhances: (1) Credibility - Recognition as a professional in the industry will attract the respect of suppliers and buyers; (2) Awareness - The wide promotion of ASO accreditation will identify the individual as an achiever; (3) Career Path - ASO accreditation lies with the individual and is therefore portable as and when the individual changes jobs within the industry. It should be recognized as a mark of professionalism by clients, employers and potential clients and employers; (4) Self-Esteem - A sense of achievement contributes to self-esteem, confidence, high standards and ethical practice; and (5) Promotion - Status as an ASO will enhance promotional opportunities, which will help win business. <http://www.asecretary.com.au/>
- CVA Success offers the Certified Canadian Virtual Assistant as a member of their organization. <http://www.cvasuccess.com>
- VACertification.com is the most unique and the best qualified to issue certification, as they do not require membership or a required investment in training to gain certification. You can obtain a Professional Virtual Assistant (PVA), or a Master Virtual Assistant (MVA) certification. These two designations show the public that your accomplishments have been independently evaluated by other MVAs and that you are at or near the top of your field. There is no test taking to get certified by VACertification.com. All applicants submit an application and verifiable documentation as to formal education, knowledge, skills, and experience. I was required to submit a rather extensive resume, and a list of training programs attended over the years that helped me achieve my level of experience. I had to prove my knowledge of business management outside my virtual assistant

practice. The certification is based on points and weighted by importance. A team of three reviewers evaluates the whole package. VACertification.com gives point credits to existing CVAs (IVAA certification) and AssistU graduates. Credit is also given for graduates of Virtual Assistance U. <http://www.vacertification.com>

What Services Can You Offer

When starting a VA business, one of your first considerations is what services you want to provide. What you want to do is match your skills and talents with the right clients who can best utilize them. Think about a year or so from now, who do you want your clientele to consist of? Who is your ideal client?

Following is a sampling of services you may want to consider, along with a brief description of each. These services can be combined or specialized in any manner depending upon your skills.

- **Transaction Coordinator:** Realtor listing management, marketing/mail-out program coordination and contract-to-close processing. Can involve use of online transaction management programs.
- **Writing:** Business, technical, academic, resume, and ghost writing. Includes formatting papers and manuscripts, as well as business plans and reports.
- **Competitive Research:** Research clients' competitors and report findings.
- **Editing/Proofreading:** Editing and proofreading client documents.
- **File Conversion:** Convert files from one format to the other. Example: Word to PDF format.
- **Digital Imaging:** Digital photography, graphic design, scanning of documents, photographs, etc.
- **Graphic Design:** Designing images for use on the web or in print.
- **Interpreting:** Translate from one language to another.
- **Web Design, Development and Maintenance:** Design client websites. May include development of copy and ongoing maintenance.
- **Word Processing:** Many of the chapters in this book deal with this including Legal Transcription, Medical Transcription, Targeting Writers, etc.
- **Desktop Publishing:** Design and layout of business cards, newsletters, flyers, catalogs, brochures, menus.
- **Transcription:** Transcribing standard and micro-cassette tapes. Medical, legal and general transcription.
- **General bookkeeping:** Process and mail invoices and statements. Bill paying, checkbook balancing, collection calls, bookkeeping, etc.
- **Meeting Planning:** Organizing all or various aspects of a meeting. This might include arranging meeting space, A/V requirements, speakers, food and beverage, sleeping rooms, contract negotiations, and transportation.
- **Event Planning:** Organizing all or various aspects of an event. This might include arranging for a venue, food and beverage or catering, contract negotiations, special transportation, security, and entertainment.
- **Presentations:** Preparing slide presentations in a program such as Microsoft PowerPoint. Requires knowledge of the application, as well as presentation techniques. Might also include preparation of handouts and transparencies. Slides can show birthdays, business/marketing, graduations, weddings, etc.
- **Realtor Support:** Includes desktop publishing, bulk mailings, database management, letter writing, thank-you card writing, and making phone calls. See also, Transaction Coordinator.

- **Information Processing:** Combination of word processing, data processing, database management, spreadsheets, and resume preparation.
- **Internet Research:** Research and report findings on specific topics. You can do academic research, business and marketing research, locator services (alumni, family, military, etc.)
- **Photocopying:** Black and white or color copies, including transparencies.
- **Association Management:** Meeting minute transcription, meeting reminder cards or calls, database management, meeting agendas, meeting and convention planning, newsletters, mailing services, bookkeeping, and banking services.
- **Concierge Services:** Dinner recommendations and reservations, tickets, travel research and arrangements, transportation arrangements, directions, gift buying, car rentals, general errand running.
- **Organizing Consultant:** Rearrange office space, plan and pack for relocation, develop procedures, set up filing systems, time management, and office automation.
- **Contact Management:** Maintain client database of contacts using a variety of applications like ACT, Goldmine, Lotus Organizer, Outlook and Maximizer.
- **Public Relations:** Writing and submitting press releases. Arranging interviews with the media. Promote the general “image” of the company.
- **Systems Management:** Manage system network.
- **Reminder Service:** Remind clients of important dates and events.
- **Executive Personal Assistant:** Combination of duties with a high level of decision-making, coordination, purchase authority, on behalf of the company executive(s).
- **Scheduling:** Arrange and manage schedule for meetings, deadlines, appointments, and possibly personal activities.
- **Technical Support:** Hardware and software installation, maintenance, troubleshooting, and tutoring.
- **Internet Administration:** Administration of chat rooms, message boards, and online groups.

In Their Own Words:

Shane Bowlin: I work primarily with authors, speakers, and celebrities to offer a variety of Concierge Services. For example: coordinating all aspects of travel arrangements, detailed complete itineraries, accommodations, tracking frequent flyer and guest programs. I also work hand-in-hand with publishers, agents, publicists doing the following: book tours, media promotion, follow up reimbursements, marketing, off-line and on-line print and broadcast media, books, tapes, misc. products, off-line and on-line distribute marketing materials, following up on leads and generating new ones, presentations, book signings, and speaking engagements.

Janice Byer: I specialize in Virtual Assistance and Website Design to Desktop Publishing, Proofreading, Transcription, Database Development, and basically any service that an in-house assistant can provide.

Jeannine Clontz: I allow businesses and departments to develop, market and promote their business by providing "as needed" administrative support. I offer word processing, desktop publishing, transcription (trained for legal), manuscripts, database management, mailing services, resumes, general bookkeeping, Internet research and more!

Bernadette Davis: I provide business start-up, property management, record keeping, general secretarial, document management (set-up file systems), resumes and portfolio designs. I create business card and brochures (more on the wording than the designs). Other stuff, but these are the most important jobs that I enjoy doing.

Nancy Hayes: I offer Database Management (mailing lists), Desktop Publishing (brochures, flyers, business cards, postcards), Mailing Services, Repetitive Letters (mail merge), Transcription, Word Processing and I also offer a really unique service of handmade greeting cards that include seeds from the flowers I grow.

Julie McMann: Effective Results provides research, Website design and Internet marketing services for small and home-based business owners. In addition, the site offers assistance in selecting and pursuing the best work-at-home solution for its visitors from telecommuting and freelancing to starting a business.

Gwen Males: I provide customized administrative support. I specialize in confidential material, correspondence, word processing, editing, proofreading, Internet research. Design of newsletters, brochures, and promotional materials. Creation and maintenance of databases.

Kathy Ritchie: Complete virtual office assistance to include: Word processing, Desktop publishing, graphic and Heraldic Designs, Spreadsheets, Internet research/ investigations, Crossword/Wordsearch Puzzle Creation, Manuscripts, Manuals, Newsletters and more.

Barbara Rowen: I provide administrative and secretarial services to small and home-based businesses in the Treasure Valley area of Idaho, including business writing,

word processing, editing and proofreading, desktop publishing, Internet research and contact management services.

Tisha M. Silvers: Services range from traditional secretarial/virtual assistance (word processing, transcription, resumes, etc.) to meeting and event planning to technography, website design, etc. My company is what I coined and consider to be an administrative design firm, rather than business support because the wide variety of services and clients we support.

Melana Tautkus: Basically, I offer any administrative service that is requested. Of course, this includes the typical services like word processing, editing, data entry, straight typing, spreadsheets, presentations, database creation/maintenance, reports, payroll, accounts payable, accounts receivable, customer mailings, mail, e-mail, voicemail prioritizing, and travel arrangements. But I also offer computer coaching and software instruction. This is tailored to the individual's needs. Some people prefer step-by-step lessons and others just want the information necessary to perform a specific job. If I'm not familiar with a program that someone requests help with, such as industry-specific software, I am able to quickly learn and teach.

Services to Complement Your VA Practice

Paralegal: This is another perfect opportunity for a VA to expand her services. You can easily do most aspects of paralegal work via the Internet. You will want to emphasize this on your website. The attorneys at the offices that I work for simply e-mailed the information that needed to be compiled into a pleading; the paralegal composed it and e-mailed it back to the attorney's office. They have done this on numerous occasions.

You can be instrumental in doing their researching as well. You can research, then summarize your findings and e-mail it to the attorney's office. Many paralegals are responsible for complete pleading preparation. One thing that many do state though is that they often get weekend work and rush jobs. Given the nature of your business, you should decide if that would be an inconvenience.

Referral Services: Many word processors have capitalized on this by offering referral services in addition to their virtual assistant business. If they can't do the job, then they refer it to someone who can. The person accepting the work then pays a small referral fee.

Nina Feldman, of Nina Feldman Connections, has been brokering to other word processors/desktop publishers since 1981. She is known to have "invented" this type of service. She states:

"We all know how hard it is to turn down work. In order to avoid sending those extra customers into the 'wild blue yonder,' during my first few years in business I developed a small network of independent word processors with whom I could share the overflow. When clients call me with jobs for which I'm too busy or that require a software or skill I don't have, I find word processors in my network who fit the clients' needs."

She has set up her referral service to collect 15% of the job once completed. She prefers this arrangement over subcontracting the work out because when you subcontract, the work that leaves your office must meet your own high standards. This requires proofing the work before giving it to the client. If the subcontractor is sick or does a bad job, you end up typing or correcting the assignment.

If you think you'd like to speak with Nina in reference to this, please contact her via e-mail at connections@ninafeldman.com or stop by her website at <http://www.ninafeldman.com>. She also markets the Brenner Pricing Guidelines.

Personalized Specialty Letters: Many VAs now spice up their businesses during the holidays. Personalized Specialty Letters are not only a treat for children but also a good source of revenue for VAs. Letters can come from Santa, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, or whatever you can imagine.

Success and repeat orders for Personalized Specialty Letters is achieved by one's ability to remember the age of 4 or 5. To produce a quality letter, one must be able to think like the child, and also be prepared for some diligent work. This is not something you can whip out in a few minutes. There is a lot to know and do in creating and marketing letters that will be

taken to school to show off to peers. You must also remember that when marketing, you need to do your marketing well in advance so that the actual letters, etc. will be received at the appropriate time.

Newsletters and Other Publications: Many VAs also enhance their practice and share their expertise by creating newsletters. It's an excellent addition, especially for those who love the creativity.

One such newsletter is the official newsletter of IAVOA called *RSS Herald*. Kathy Ritchie of Ritchie Secretarial Services publishes the *RSS Herald*. Each publication is full of exciting news, tips, and fun activities. You can view the latest edition at <http://www.rssherald.com>. It is considered essential reading for new and established virtual assistants. This is a free newsletter published monthly by industry leaders. The *RSS Herald* provides tips, advice and encouragement for virtual assistants, and is a place where VAs turn to for the latest news.

Docu-Type's Virtual TidBits is a bi-monthly newsletter designed to help all small businesses succeed, especially virtual professionals. Available in an eye-catching PDF format, Virtual TidBits includes articles, resources, and profiles with a little fun and inspiration thrown in. Subscribe Today!!! <http://www.docutype.net/news.htm>

Cornerstones of Success is a bi-monthly online newsletter helping those who want to work from home. "Cornerstones" provides the reader with valuable information ranging from how to prepare leaving the workplace to work at home strategies for the established business owner. Emphasizing family, balance, and priorities, Cornerstones strives to provide solid building blocks leading to success. <http://www.CornerstonesOfSuccess.com>

Print Broker: Ideal source of additional revenue for those who offer desktop publishing, or typesetting requiring the services of an outside printing company. Contact a couple printers and set up an agreement with the printer for commission, or a discount on all jobs you source through their company.

Online Transaction Coordinator: Working with the realtors and becoming a Transaction Coordinator is an exciting field you can look into. The VA and the realtor work together by managing the many facets associated with buying or selling a home. Working with either the buying or selling agent, the VA maintains all the listing information, coordinates inspections and appraisals, gathers all the necessary documents to the transaction, provides necessary follow-up, and makes all responsible parties accountable for their tasks. (See Chapter on Real Estate Industry)

Determining Your Rates

Determining what to charge for your services can be one of the most challenging tasks you will encounter. Do your homework; take the time to research competitors in your area. You might consider searching for various positions in the target area on Salary.com (<http://www.salary.com>). You can also consult the Industry Production Standards publication distributed by OBCAI (<http://www.officebusinesscenters.com>).

Connie Champagne states, "I have chosen to use different rates for different services, reasoning that clients should expect to pay more for tasks requiring higher level of skills and experience." However, an interesting analysis of this subject can be found at: http://desktoppub.about.com/library/inkspot/bl_price_001.htm.

Don't sell yourself short. Be confident in your pricing. Nothing can shout "**AMATEUR**" more than talking with a potential client and being unsure of your rates. Don't be timid either, as you are providing a valuable service. It's up to you to convince your client that you feel strongly that you can help make their business better and you deserve top dollar for doing so. In addition, support your claims by showing the client a comparison of partnering with a VA versus hiring an employee.

Determine the price you want to be paid based upon your own skills and experience. Our research shows most pricing is centered on a base price of \$25 per hour and can be as high as \$100 for more specialized services. However, the rate does depend on the services you provide and also how long you've been in business. Premium services deem a premium price. Another consideration is the area in which you live. You will receive more in some areas than in others.

There are different ways in which you can charge for services: by the hour, by the project, by the page, or for something like meeting planning you could charge a certain percentage of the total event cost. Many VAs offer reduced rates for a monthly retainer option. With a monthly retainer, your client commits to a certain number of hours per month at a predetermined rate. If you work less than the committed number of hours you are still paid the same. If you work over the committed number of hours then you would bill the client for the additional hours at that same rate or whatever is agreed upon. Following the philosophy of partnering with clients, the retainer agreement can prove to be the most beneficial for all parties. Your client benefits from knowing that they are guaranteed a set amount of your time each month while enjoying the cost savings. You benefit from the guarantee of monthly income and can better manage your time based upon your various client needs.

Clients who hire you for a specific service are easy to bill. Those clients who use several of your services that might have different rates are a different story. In those instances, I take a look at the different services and come up with an average to do them all. There will also be times that clients ask you to perform a task that you have never priced out. Don't be too quick to quote a price when you are not sure what the job entails and how long it will take you to complete it. Ask the right questions and even get a sampling of the work to be performed. You don't want to get in a situation where you have under priced your services.

Remember, you are running this business and can charge whatever you want for services. It's also important to remember that you want to earn an income from this business. Not pricing your services correctly will make a huge impact on your bottom line. When doing the market research for your business plan, you should check out other VAs, as well as local businesses with similar services. By checking local businesses, you can determine what the market will bear in your area of the country. You may also find various pricing studies that have been conducted on a particular service, as well as established industry production standards.

We consulted Robert Brenner¹ of Brenner Information Group who shared this information with us on pricing.

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What should a VA watch for when determining price?

Pricing is one of the most challenging things that a business owner faces. It's part art and part science. And most small business owners do not do a very good job at pricing their work. They typically try to set rates below that of their competitors. But what if each competitor entering the market is doing the same thing? Prices consistently get lower until owners begin to realize that they are losing money each time they do a job.

Here's what VAs need to do to establish their price. First determine your cost basis for each task that you do. The budgeted hourly cost concept is a good model to follow. Once you know what it costs to do each job, adding a percent profit to the number lets you generate a baseline price that you can charge. At least then you know that you are covering your costs and making some money for your efforts.

The second thing that you need to do is determine what price the market will bear. Collecting prices or buying an hourly price listing is how you start. Make a chart showing how many competitors have rates at each price point. This price distribution chart will show you the lowest price, highest price, and how prices are grouped. These groupings define a market, and you need to decide which market you want to sell to. This determines the top and bottom price you can charge.

Lastly, see where your baseline price fits on this chart. This may show you which market segment you must enter. It also shows you how much flexibility you have in setting the price that you quote.

¹ Professor Robert BrennerPresident of Brenner Information Group, lecturer, teacher, and author of over 75 books. You can reach him through his website at <http://www.brennerbooks.com> or by telephone at (858) 538-0093

So you analyze cost and you analyze the market. And then you set your final price based on sound business principles. And this is how it should be.

Is it best to use a flat hourly basis or price according to the task?

Pricing by the hour or pricing by the task depends on the uncertainty in the work and how many times you've done the task before. If you simply aren't sure how long it will take to do a job, or if your client often changes the scope of the work, or alters the time schedule, you may want to charge by the hour.

If you've done this job many times before, and you know how long it will likely take, then you can price by the task or by the complete job. For example, suppose you can proofread between 4 and 20 pages an hour (about 10 pages an hour typical). If your hourly rate is \$20 an hour, then you should be charging about \$2 a page to proofread documents. Do you?

Likewise if you can typically scan and color correct about 4 full page scans an hour, you could charge \$5 per scan based on a time and rate basis.

For those who charge \$15 an hour, what are they REALLY earning?

If you earned \$15 working for someone else, you cannot charge \$15 an hour and run a viable business. Here's why. When a company pays you, they are actually billing out your work at a much higher rate. This is because they must pay taxes, insurance, benefits, and other overhead out of what they charge. For example, when I worked as an engineer, I was paid about \$30 an hour, but my work was being billed out at \$100 an hour. The company needed to make a profit on everything that I did for our client.

In addition, productivity plays a major role in how much net income you can earn for your company. Let's say you can work 2,080 hours a year. But if you are a sole proprietor, one-person company, you can't work all the time. Part of the time you must be looking for more jobs, and part of your time you will be doing the company paperwork and invoicing and trying to get paid. It's called the "30-60-10" rule. Thirty percent of the time you are performing billable work; 60% of the time you are marketing for more work, and 10% of the time you are trying to get paid. A small business owner typically works 100% of the time, but charges for only 30% of the time.

There's an interesting chart that I put in my pricing guidebooks showing how much you really earn. For example, at \$10 an hour, the maximum possible revenue you can earn is \$20,800 a year. This is for working 100% of the 2,080 hours each year. But if you're only 30% productive, you actually earn just \$6,240 a year. And this is BEFORE taxes. Remember, if you're a sole proprietor, and if you are married, both of your incomes are combined for taxes so your tax bite can be huge. Deduct expenses and taxes from your gross revenue and your earnings could be only \$4,000 a year! This is like

paying yourself \$1.92 an hour! You could make more money flipping burgers down the street!

Let's say you have one really stable client, and you can work 70% of the time. Your possible earnings are \$14,560 a year. After expenses and taxes you could realize \$11,000 each year. This is equivalent to \$5.29 an hour. Now how do you feel about charging just \$10 an hour?

Now do the calculations at a billing rate of \$15 an hour. At 100% productivity you can earn \$31,200 a year. Get realistic and analyze this at 30% productivity, and you are now pulling in \$9,360 a year. After expenses and taxes are deducted, you could have \$5,990 to keep. You're actually paying yourself \$2.88 an hour. At 70% productivity, you can earn \$21,840. After expenses and taxes are removed, you could have \$13,978 left for you. This is equivalent to \$6.72 an hour. This is much better and certainly more realistic.

There are a number of ways to improve on this bottom line picture. You can increase your rates. You can increase your productivity. And you can hire lower paid part time support.

We recently conducted a VA industry survey to find out what is real in earnings and pricing. The results are an eye-opener. For information, contact the Brenner Information Group offices (brenner@brennerbooks.com).

How can VAs use industry production standards when most VAs are not performing task-oriented services?

The two most likely questions that you'll get from prospective clients are "How much will it cost?" and "How long will it take?" If you can't give a quick estimated response to these questions, you'll lose your sale before you even get to your pitch.

Pricing tables and hourly rates books can help you understand what your competitors are charging. And industry production time standards enable you to give a quick ballpark estimate as to how long a job will take.

Naturally the number of hours a job will take depend on many factors: your current work load, the value of the job, the number of interruptions you experience, the resources that will be required, your skills, and how motivated you are to work today. This is why being able to tell a client (or prospective client) that it typically takes between XX and YY hours to do this type of job is useful. It sets the bounds of expectation in the mind of the buyer. They can mentally budget the job and be more receptive when you give them the price.

Another good use for industry production standards is in generating a flat rate so you can bid on any project. If you know how long, and you know how

much, you can estimate any job. And you will know how much money you'll make, or how much room you have to negotiate. A "standard" performance time is critical in this model. And it works.

How would industry production standards come into play with VAs who have long-term relationships with clients?

If you have few clients, one or more of whom have been clients for a long time, you can develop a historical record of how long each of their jobs have taken. Breaking each job out into tasks and recording how long each task takes lets you develop a good basis for future estimates. This makes it easier to estimate the time you should allocate to each job when it is repeated.

In the book, *Desktop Production Time Standards*, there is a method that shows how to determine the number of times you must complete a task before you can define a "time standard." The more times you perform a task, the better you get at estimating how long it will take.

Industry production standards play a key role in establishing baseline prices and estimating what flat rate price to quote on new projects.



In Their Own Words:

Ginger Brown: (Manuscript Typing) Rates are \$1.25 per double spaced page plus postage.

Janice Byer: Since starting my business 5 years ago, I have raised my rates as my skills grew and as my services became more in demand. My original pricing was a result of research into what other VAs were charging. I took the advise of many great VAs (including the two respected VAs who authored this book) and based my pricing on what my local market could sustain, what was the going rate amongst my competitors, and my skill level. I did not want to have my prices too low or that may have cause others to think I do not have the right qualifications and I did not want to go to high and have no one be able to afford my services.

Again, as my talents grew so did my rates (slightly) to reflect the quality of what my clients receive. Every project is unique and usually requires some form of unique payment schedule. For designing a new website, I base it on a quotation and generally require a deposit and then the balance prior to handing over the design. For other administrative tasks, it all depends on the project but most are based on my hour rate. And another option (as I use with one of my clients), is a monthly fee and I do pretty well everything, from answering his phone to designing his website, under that monthly fee. We keep track of work done and hours worked and he analyzes that every once in a while and offers more money if he feels I deserve it. I have never had to ask for more money. He is just that way. I sure got lucky on that one. Depending on the size of the project and when they want it done, a rush fee may apply or I may just chalk it up to great customer service. For just a little work, I may not charge anything. For some I will charge my rate. And for others, I have charged a rush fee along with my rate.

Extras that I charge for include postage, long distance, mileage, ink & paper if it is a large project, and any other things that I give to the clients. Again, sometimes I include this in the price that we agree upon but sometimes it is over and above my rate.

Jeannine Clontz: Most word processing and general secretarial tasks are invoiced at \$28-30/hour. Desktop Publishing is at \$45-55/hour, and general bookkeeping is at \$40-50/hour. Faxes are \$1.15-1.30/page, and phone calls range from \$.50-.75/each (based on a 5-minute call). I arrived at my prices through market research, industry publications (like Brenner Books), experience within the industry, and by networking with other VA business owners.

Bernadette Davis: When I first started out I put different prices on everything — that is the worst idea ever! Now my wage is \$22.00 an hour for in-office work and \$25.00 per hour if I have to leave my office. Sometimes I have to put a two-hour minimum on for first-time clients because I was surprised at how much work I got done in 1 hour with no distractions! I arrived at this price because I found myself working for next to nothing and I had to provide everything from the paper to the paperclips and stamps. Those things run into money going down the drain if you do not find a way to include it in.

Patsy LaFave: (*Patty specializes in manuscript transcription*). I have been charging the same rates since I started. I haven't increased any fees yet. I see that others want all of us to charge more, but my customers say I'm too expensive anyway and I only charge \$1.15 per double-spaced page, or \$15 an hour for their corrections and changes. For tape transcription, I charge \$25 an hour. All this depends on the content of the manuscript. If it has charts, format changes, bullets, etc., then the price goes up.

Kimberly Mann: I arrived at my current pricing by visiting other VA websites, researching what services they offer vs. what they charge to try and average myself in so that I was over or under pricing myself. I also researched various VA articles, which talked about pricing. I do offer an hourly rate as well as three retainer plans.

Julie McMann: My prices are typically lower than the industry norm. I chose to offer my services at that rate because my primary target market is small and home based businesses just starting out. I realize and understand that cash is limited during the start-up

phase—I was there myself just a few years ago. I envision the Internet as the ideal marketing opportunity for my target market because it is so cost effective and available. I also want to support the small and home-based business industries by helping as many companies become successful as possible. My contribution is offering professional products and personal service at affordable rates so all businesses can start out on equal ground.

Kathy Ritchie: I arrived at my pricing by acting on my own comfort level. When I raised prices the last time, it was actually to slow the growth of my business. I was surprised when each client accepted the raise and I have not stopped growing. I use my own comfort level when pricing. For extras, I charge for long distance, postage, labels and envelopes, and the check paper used for taking payments for clients. I don't have rush pricing, but I do charge more for after hours or weekends. I try to keep all evenings and weekends strictly non-business.

Barbara Rowen: After researching several VA sites, and paying attention to discussions on the boards, I had an idea of what I should be charging for my services. I then checked into various temp and employment agencies in my area to find out two things: what they were willing to pay me and what they charged their client for me. I was shocked at the results. Just knowing what they would be charging a company for me to do secretarial and administrative work caused me to increase my rates, because I was undercutting myself. I believe I am worth every penny I charge my clients, and they are getting an excellent value for their money.

Patty Shannon: I arrived at my pricing through trial and error, and scoping out the competition! My rates for manuscript typing are higher than others in *Writer's Digest*; that's why my ad just says, "Call for brochure and rates." The other secretarial services are a combination of competitor pricing and what I feel my time is worth. My proofreading rates are pretty much industry-driven.

I require a deposit when I accept a job, usually \$100, depending on the size of the job. When I have a final page count, I send the client a bill. When I get paid, they get their work. My rates for 2004 are going to be \$1.75 per double-spaced page if I receive the work in typed form that I can scan; \$2.75 per page if the work is handwritten; and \$4.00 per page for tape transcription. Yes, this is higher than most people who advertise in *Writer's Digest*. But guess what? They still send me work! Secretarial services are currently \$5.00 for a single-page business letter (or \$5.00 per page for any single-spaced copy), and varying rates for contracts and such, depending on how complicated they are. Proofreading for the pharmaceutical ad agencies is at \$40 an hour; if I proofread for authors, I charge \$1.00 per double-spaced page.

Tisha Silvers: Because of the wide variety of services, rates vary wildly. I charge differently for one-time projects than I do for contractual. How did you arrive at those prices? I used two methods: "Hourly Rates for Southern California" by Robert Brenner (<http://www.brennerbooks.com>). I went for the median rates for most services like word processing and transcription. The second method was from what the competition charged, or if there was no competition, as in the case of technography online meeting facilitation, I charged what most consultants charge for their more specialized services.



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