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Virtually yours

Agents are finding that assistants don't have to work in the same city to provide much-needed help.



Read more about [virtual assistants](#).

by Bridget McCrea Lewis Walker knew an operational change was in order when his entire workday was spent dealing with pending transactions. A broker-associate with RE/MAX, The Woodlands & Spring, Walker had a full-time, on-site assistant handling administrative and marketing tasks but was still bogged down by the time-intensive transaction-management process.

“We were trying to do everything here, and it kind of stunted my growth,” says Walker, who several months ago learned of a virtual assistant (VA) who was already coordinating transactions for other agents. Rather than hire a full-time employee, Walker worked out an arrangement with the virtual assistant, who charges about \$30 - \$50 an hour (depending on the scope of the work) for 10 - 20 hours of work every week.

“Once a file goes into pending status, she takes it and runs with it until we’re ready to close,” says Walker, who estimates that his business has grown by 25% - 30% as a result of outsourcing transaction-management duties. “We’ve grown because I’m no longer tied down to the filing cabinet next to my desk.”

Long-distance assistants are a virtual reality

A growing number of agents are finding virtual assistants to be a good middle ground between working solo and hiring full-time assistants who need desks, benefits, steady paychecks, and sick days. Working virtually with the assistance of technology, these independent contractors handle myriad tasks

for busy professionals, including virtual-tour assembly and posting, e-mail campaign creation, e-mail inquiry filtering, administrative tasks, and Web site maintenance.

“Literally anything can be done from a distance,” says Michael Russer, CEO of REVA Teams, a Pleasanton, California-based VA organization for the real estate industry, and president of Russer Communications. He says agents generally pay either \$250 - \$350 per transaction or \$25 - \$45 an hour, depending on the scope of the project.

Walker says the fees are well worth it, particularly because agents pay no overhead, payroll taxes, or benefits for the virtual assistant, nor do they have to worry about shelling out an hourly wage when there’s no work to do. Walker, who recently added a second virtual assistant to take over listing-coordination duties, says the key is to single out a very specific function (such as transaction management, listing coordination, or marketing and advertising development), then locate a virtual assistant who is experienced in that function.

“It’s a good idea to partner with multiple VAs, each of whom specializes in a certain area of the business,” says Anna Baron, owner of Allen, Texas-based VA firm The Virtual Link, which provides marketing services such as Web-site design, presentations, and fliers to a range of clients. “That way, you’ll have multiple virtual assistants working at the same time, getting even more work accomplished.”

When selecting a virtual assistant, Baron suggests looking for one who is already working in your industry, then asking questions to find out if you have a true match. For example, ask them how long they’ve used certain software programs, how many agents or brokers they’ve worked with, and in what capacity.

“Ask who they’ve worked for before, get references that include both past and present clients, and call all of them for feedback,” says Baron, who cautions agents to be wary of the many virtual assistants who advertise their services to the industry but who lack experience and just want to get their foot in the door. “Realize that if someone can’t give you references, either they don’t have the experience you’re looking for, or they’ve had a bad experience with another

REALTOR®.”

You'll also want to ask about credentials, which in the VA industry right now include the GVA (Graduate Virtual Assistant, from Virtual Assistance U), PREVA (Professional Real Estate Virtual Assistant, from REVA Networks) or IVAA (International Virtual Assistants Association) membership. Be forewarned, however, says Kim Hughes, president of VA firm Kim Hughes & Co., in Mineola, Texas, that credentials in the nascent VA industry don't equate to the kind of credentials that the typical REALTOR® holds.

Some designations indicate little more than dues paid to an organization. A better measure of competence and experience, says Hughes, is a direct interview with the potential candidate, based on questions like: What real estate experience do you have? Do you have referrals from the real estate industry as well as from other industries? Do you know what an MLS number is? What does your portfolio look like? What kind of technology tools are you using? Can I see samples of virtual tours that you've created? What desktop publishing programs do you use?

Whether or not your virtual assistant needs a real estate license to perform certain duties is another consideration. Russer, who helped develop ARELLO's (the Association of Real Estate License Law Officials) first online best practices guidelines, says that agents also need to be clear on Texas license laws before handing over tasks to their virtual assistants. "If the VA is going to have any contact with prospects or clients," Russer advises, "then the REALTOR® should research whether that contact does—or doesn't—require a license, before initiating the work."

Keeping in touch with technology

Unless a task needs "legs," Judy McCutchin will outsource it to one of her four virtual assistants. An associate-broker with RE/MAX Preston Road North in Dallas, McCutchin has one on-site assistant to handle office duties and relies on the virtual assistants to handle the rest of the tasks, with the help of technology solutions like Mango Mind (an online collaboration tool), Settlement Room, and WebTrain. Until McCutchin found that last tech tool, which is used for Web conferencing, she says management of the geographically dispersed virtual assistants was

cumbersome at best.

“I found out quickly that if we didn’t meet regularly as a group, the right foot didn’t know what the left foot was doing,” she explains. “Now, we have a virtual meeting once a week. There, the closing coordinator (who serves as the ‘team manager’) goes over the week ahead to make sure everyone is on the same page and attaining our weekly goals.”

McCutchin says Mango Mind, an online platform through which team members can post documents for review by all parties, allows for collaboration with minimal phone calls and faxes. She estimates that the virtual assistants save her about \$150,000 a year, based on the fact that they maintain their own workspaces, use their own equipment, and handle their own tax obligations. Most importantly, they don’t get paid when there isn’t any work to do. “You use them and pay them only when you need them,” says McCutchin.

At 1st Choice Virtual Solutions in Corpus Christi, company president Sylvester Jordan handles marketing support, mailouts, buyer’s books, virtual tours, Web ads, farming projects, and other tasks for \$25 - \$50 an hour, depending on the complexity of the job. To work with clients in a seamless fashion, he uses a password-protected voice-interactive meeting room, toll-free fax, and toll-free inbound direct lines.

Jordan also uses popular real estate software tools like Top Producer and Guru Network, both of which allow for collaborative access. He says such tools are the ultimate facilitators of the agent-virtual assistant relationship. “If the correct technology is in place, then the geographical boundaries are erased,” says Jordan. “If the distance becomes problematic because of long-distance charges or increased postage costs, clients are inclined to hire someone locally.”

Russer, who expects more real estate professionals to use virtual assistants in the future—and more VAs to come on the scene in response to the demand—says agent and broker support is big business right now, based on the sheer number of busy professionals currently working in the market. “You are literally going to see armies of virtual assistants out there,” says Russer, “based on the fact that there

are a million REALTORS® in the U.S. alone.”


To those agents who are unsure about the role VAs will play in their businesses going forward, McCutchin says, “Give it a try—you may like it.” Outsource just one task, such as flier development, and measure the payoff. If it works out, she says, then gradually offload more and more of your non-core activities to one or more virtual assistants. “Most agents flat-out want control of everything,” says McCutchin, “but they also realize that they can’t get to the next business level unless they have some help. Virtual assistants can help fill that void.”

Bridget McCrea is a writer and former real estate agent in Dunedin, Florida. She has written articles for Texas REALTOR® and many other REALTOR® and business publications.

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