

 Table of Contents

 Web Only Content

 Daily News Feeds

 Database Searches

 e-Newsletter

 Advertisers

 Archives & Resources

 About Us

TECH CAREERS

Virtual Assistants Fill Staff Gaps

By Susan J. Marks



Synopsis: Businesses large and small now have a virtual solution to their staffing needs. Virtual assistants can help, whether they're part-time administrative aides, occasional IS talent, or full-fledged marketing campaigners. 1365 words

Any successful new business eventually faces growing pains, which can be excruciating for an operation with only a few employees. The era of the Internet and telecommuting is bringing with it a new answer to the question of how to add staff. For e-commerce storefronts, one-person businesses or bricks-and-mortar offices, an online solution to the staffing problem is the virtual assistant (VA).

VAs are independent contractors who provide administrative support or specialized business services from a distance, through the Internet, fax, telephone or another method of communication. They can help a company that needs extra people to meet seasonal demands; provide unique skills for a special project; or step in to meet the demands of business growth, locally, domestically or globally.

"People go into business and eventually, if it is growing, they find themselves at the entrepreneurial impasse, spending as much time being their own administrative assistant as concentrating on the things that drive their bottom line," says Christine Durst, CEO of Staffcentrix LLC (www.staffcentrix.com) in Woodstock, CT. Her company links VAs with businesses.

Businesses can benefit from the help of VAs without having to compensate them with benefits and other costly perks that full- or part-time employees require. They also don't have to find enough work to keep an extra staff member busy.

"You don't pay for downtime, and you don't have to have equipment or space or deal with employee tax issues," says Stacy Brice, a former VA. Brice is now president of AssistU (www.assistu.com) in Cockeysville, MD, which provides a training program, referrals and resources for VAs as personal, executive and administrative assistants.

A Different Breed

The VA is neither an employee nor a temp, Durst

says. "An employee can come and go, and you may have them there more than you need," she says. "Temps come and go, and you may not have the same one that you had last time. You end up having to teach people your business over and over again. We don't like to draw the temp parallel."

Temps are provided by third parties, often for a specific project. In contrast, VAs are self-employed and generally enter into a continuing business relationship with a client. VAs can work on both as-needed and long-term bases. They also can provide administrative support to telecommuters, Durst says.

But don't confuse a telecommuter with a VA, cautions Shane Brodock (www.askshane.com), a VA and AssistU grad based in Fort Lauderdale, FL. "A telecommuting employee is basically an office worker, minus the commute to work every day. A VA helps clients run their business in any way that they can."

VAs prove useful in many types of work. They can, for example, provide general services like word processing and spreadsheet accounting; answer e-mail; or consult in Web design, public relations, paralegal services and language translation.

Using a VA can make sense for large businesses as well as small. Before retiring her own VA practice, Staffcentrix's Durst worked with a company that has 300 offices worldwide. "I supported their field sales team and even appeared on the company organizational chart," she says.

What's more, a VA can provide any business with an international presence, according to Durst. "You hire a VA, and suddenly you have an overseas address, overseas hours and someone who is familiar with the culture to handle your clients there," she says.

Profiles in Assisting

Kate Gorce-Macham

(www.virtualassistant.com.au), based in Bassendean, Australia, became a VA two years ago after working in administrative roles in the health and finance industries. Today, her major client is a U.S.-based educational organization with a chapter in Western Australia.

"I take care of all the chapter administration, membership management and event planning," she says. "I am in constant contact with the international office in the United States and provide feedback to them in the form of spreadsheets and word processing documents. I rarely come face to face with them, except for once per year when we all attend a global conference." Gerri Detweiler, a Sarasota, FL-based author, consultant and education adviser for Debt Counselors of America, hired a VA two years ago. "It's the best thing I've ever done for my business," she says. "It gives me time to focus on the important things."

Her VA is Edwina Adams (edwina@connect.net) of Plano, TX. "Edwina does everything from typing up

articles to researching things and helping me with technology issues," Detweiler says. "For example, I needed a new printer. She researched it for me, bought it for me and shipped it to me." Adams even took over correspondence for Detweiler for six weeks while she was on maternity leave.

Adams performs an equally diverse array of tasks for another client. "I manage his business life, doing things that take time from making his business grow. I interface with his ISP, update his Web site, register his students, put together his manuals and mail them to his students. I send out his monthly newsletter, update his mailing list, subscribe and unsubscribe individuals, mail requests for information and provide computer support for him."

Adams has long-distance relationships with many clients. But some VAs prefer to work with local clients. Jeannine Clontz (accbizsvc@aol.com) has been a VA in Arnold, MO, since August 1998, after working as an administrative assistant for 27 years.

"Most of my clients are in a 30-mile radius of my offices," she says. "A few like me to work in their home-based offices instead of mine. But I do have a few that I've never met." One of Clontz's clients is Don Earl, president and owner of ET Enterprises, a three-person company in Arnold. Clontz does sales canvassing for ET, as well as reports and general business and office work.

A VA usually costs more than someone who does straight secretarial duties, and Earl says cost is the only disadvantage of a VA. But, he says, "You get your money's worth. I have a small business. I don't want a regular full-time staff."

VA charges vary, depending on the person's experience, number and kind of clients, and success rates. "I was probably the highest paid VA in the world; I charged \$110 an hour," says AssistU's Brice. "I was deeply niched and only worked for people who had celebrity."

Adams takes a more modest approach. In a recent month she worked 15 hours for Detweiler at \$25 an hour plus expenses. Arnold's fees range from \$20 an hour for general word processing to \$45 an hour for desktop publishing and general bookkeeping.

Plus and Minus

No type of work is right for everyone, and being a VA offers trade-offs. "The main advantage of my job is that I can balance both family and professional aspirations," Gorce-Macham says. "I work at times that suit me, and most importantly I can choose clients with whom I truly want to work." Other advantages include the ability to receive a fair wage for your professional skill level and the satisfaction of being your own boss.

In some ways the advantages and disadvantages are inextricably linked. "Drawbacks of being a VA

include isolation, long hours -this goes with any entrepreneurial venture - and staying focused and organized in an office situated in a bustling household," says Cindy Wuyek (www.fls.infi.net/~aos4u), a part-time VA in Fredericksburg, VA. Wuyek is keeping her full-time bookkeeping job until the client base for her VA services grows. Another drawback, Gorce-Macham says, "is that people don't quite understand what I do. As I work virtually, I have to rely on a community of virtual colleagues."

One group she counts on is the International Virtual Assistance Association (www.ivaa.org), which recently launched a certification program including an examination that covers basic office skills, grammar, Internet research skills and ethics.

Other nonprofit resources are the Global Association of Virtual Assistants (www.gava.org) and the Association of Business Support Services International (www.abssi.org).

The VA approach is a good one for many workers who'd rather not leave home, including people with disabilities and parents with small children. "The beauty of the VA industry is that it is nondiscriminatory," Gorce-Macham says. "Anyone who does not have access to a traditional workplace that has a marketable skill can work in this way."

ARE YOU VA MATERIAL?
Here are some issues to think about if you're considering becoming a VA. You should be:
● skilled in Internet tools
● a good listener
● comfortable working alone. Although you work in collaborative relationships, your time at home will be spent alone much of the time.
● comfortable in a support role. VAs work <i>with</i> clients, not <i>for</i> them. It takes a strong sense of self to be a successful VA
● able to adapt quickly to change
● proactive in your work and your relationships with clients
● passionate about your work - you'll be more successful and happier
● aware that you won't get rich quick; it takes time, determination and a great deal of work to be successful.

Susan J. Marks is a longtime business journalist based in Denver. She writes on topics ranging from health care to personal finance and technology. She has written for the Los Angeles Times, The Denver Post, The Tampa Tribune, Better Homes and Gardens, Family Money, Health & You, The Matrix, United Communications Group and Health Ink Communications. You can reach

her at sjmarksco@aol.com.

It's Your Turn To Talk Back To MicroTimes.com

Value of information:

- Extremely useful
- Worth reading
- A waste of time

Length of articles:

- Too long
- Just right
- Too short

Technical level:

- Too technical
- Just right
- Not enough

Comments:

Name:

Email:

Company Name:

Send data

[Return to Top Page](#)

Search MicroTimes:

Go!

[Table Of Contents](#) | [Web-Only Content](#) | [Daily News Feeds](#) | [Database Searches](#) | [Advertisers](#)
[e-Newsletter](#) | [Archives](#) | [About Us](#) | [Link To MicroTimes](#) | [E-mail To Webmaster](#) |
[MicroTimes Privacy Policy](#)

©1999 MicroTimes

1300 Clay Street, Suite 820, Oakland, CA 94612, USA

Published by [HPC Inc.](#), a [Primedia Company](#)

All Rights Reserved