

TITLE: Virtually Yours

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Bridget McCrea

The growing virtual assistant industry presents opportunities for aspiring entrepreneurs and business owners alike

WHEN THE TIME CAME FOR WENDY Y. Bailey to promote her one-day coaching workshop earlier this year, she didn't hire a marketing firm to handle the task. She handed over the project to Tonya Thomas, her administrative assistant who oversaw the project from concept to completion.

Using Bailey's handwritten notes, Thomas created an outline of topics to be covered at the event, wrote short descriptions for each topic, and developed e-mail marketing messages that were distributed to Bailey's database of contacts. She then developed a PowerPoint presentation for distribution to seminar participants.

By collaborating with Bailey, Thomas was able to accomplish her tasks and, in many cases, recognize challenges and handle them before they became problems. And Bailey, free of the day-to-day management of the project, was able to focus on the heart of her business while reviewing and approving the administrative tasks Thomas worked on. Each element of the project was completed seamlessly, as if the women had been working together in the same office. But Thomas and Bailey weren't even in the same state.

Thomas, who lives and works in Birmingham, Alabama, is a virtual assistant, a self-employed independent contractor who handles administrative tasks for small offices via e-mail, fax, telephone, and the Internet. Bailey is the owner of Brilliance in Action, an Atlanta-based personal and business coaching firm. She has been using VAs since 2004 as a way to support her growing business. "I look at my VAs as part of my team because they do more than what they're asked to do; they lend their support and creativity to projects," says Bailey.

VAs, one of the fastest growing home-based business opportunities, are often the long-term "growth partners" of the small businesses and independent professionals who hire them. Scores of professional VAs joined the ranks of the self-employed after serving as administrative and executive assistants in the corporate world. Unlike temporary employees, VAs are entrepreneurs, like many of their clients.

The growth of this new, creative labor force is due to advancements in technology. Faster broadband and enhanced communication, such as quick file transfers and video conferencing, are expanding an industry where office professionals can provide administrative and other support services without having to be on-site.

Another factor spurring growth within the VA profession is that small businesses understand the benefits of outsourcing: increased efficiency and reduced labor costs, to name a few. When you hire a VA, you get a computer-trained professional who can provide everything from traditional office support to highly specialized project management.

As small businesses increase their broadband usage, VAs are leveraging enhanced communications tools to become virtual life-savers. VAs can be located anywhere in the country. They work from their computers, many at home, and don't require office space or health benefits.

Thomas, who launched The Small Office Assistant in 2001, got into the VA industry with \$2,500 she used to pay for a computer, fax machine, printer, and a 20-week training program from Assist U, a training, coaching, and referral service for VAs. Armed with administrative experience in the construction and banking industries, Thomas found her first clients by networking at local business groups such as the National Association of Women Business Owners and online through small business-oriented message boards. Today, she works mainly with small business owners (many of whom are home-based), professional coaches, and real estate agents.

Working on a retainer basis only, Thomas collects a flat fee every month from her clients in exchange for a set number of work hours. She says she devotes about 25 hours a week to her business. Common tasks include e-newsletter management, contact management, database maintenance, bookkeeping, and making travel arrangements.

In exchange, Thomas says she earns a respectable living and is also able to effect change in an industry that's still maturing. "When I started out four years ago, I'd tell people that I was a virtual assistant and get a blank stare," recalls Thomas. "Now, when I tell people that I'm a VA, they ask me what services I can provide."

BIRTH OF AN INDUSTRY

The mutually beneficial relationship between VAs and small businesses has created a virtual small office/home office solution for both parties. More business owners like Bailey are turning to VAs as an

alternative to hiring full-time or part-time on-site employees, and VAs are taking advantage of the earnings and job growth potential. For an hourly fee of \$15 to \$35, skilled VAs are cashing in on the opportunity to handle myriad tasks at the click of a mouse.

In an October 2004 report sponsored by the Alliance for Virtual Businesses (A4VB) and titled A Comprehensive Study of the Virtual Assistant Industry, the birth of the VA industry is traced back to the mid-1990s, when entrepreneurs--some of whom had already been working remotely for their clients--began relying on technology to expand those relationships.

Heading up the charge was Stacy Brice, chief visionary officer at Baltimore-based AssistU.com, which she founded in 1997. "It was the first organization for virtual assistants," recalls Brice. A4VB estimates that approximately 5,000 VAs are in business worldwide; 98% of them are women. Combined, they generate about \$132.6 million in annual sales, which is based on the group's average 2003 annual gross sales estimate of \$26,519 per VA. Those working part time average \$13,813 annually, reports A4VB, while full-time VAs average \$38,759 annually.

OVERCOMING THE HURDLES

According to Janet L. Jordan, president of Corpus Christi, Texas-based Virtual Assistance U, the best VAs are organized and adept at multitasking, have excellent communication skills, and possess solid technology knowledge. Many are eager to become successful business owners, says Jordan, who founded VAU in 2000 to serve a growing need for comprehensive, online training for those desiring to launch VA practices.

Minority enrollment in the program is about 30%, with African Americans accounting for about 20% of total enrollment.

But like other fledgling industries, VAs face their set of challenges. Where providing support services to existing companies may seem like a clear-cut business vision, Jordan says many new VAs have a hard time managing their various job functions when providing services to clients for the first time. Answering e-mail messages for a client is one thing, but setting competitive fees, managing accounts receivables, obtaining health insurance, filling the client pipeline, and organizing your day when five different clients are throwing projects at you is entirely different.

Effective planning, done early in the VA's process and updated regularly, says Jordan, can make a significant difference. "At VAU, we explore the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats confronting their practices and develop 'ideal client' profiles," explains Jordan, who advises VAs to look for long-term, retainer-based clients whose needs include marketing, appointment setting, and meeting coordination. "From there, VAs can create a practice that promotes their expertise and sets them apart from others while attracting that ideal client to their practice."

New VAs can also get help from organizations that offer credentials such as VA Certification's Professional Virtual Assistant, Master Virtual Assistant, and AssistU's Virtual Training Program. Obtaining credentials doesn't always require extensive training or education, and some designations are simply given to paying members of an organization.

FUTURE INSIGHTS

A virtual assisting business can be started overnight with a computer, Internet connection, Website, and some sharp office skills. The field is particularly open for African Americans, says A4VB chairwoman Sharon Williams, who notes that minorities have played a prominent role in the industry since its inception.

"Many minorities who now call themselves VAs were actually doing this a long time before the industry was conceived," says Williams. "It's a growing industry because so many small businesses understand that they have to delegate to someone else the responsibilities that they dislike doing or that they don't have time to do anymore."

ADDED MATERIAL

Virtual Assistant Resources

Interested in becoming a VA, or hiring one?

Check Out these Websites for more information:

Alliance for Virtual Businesses, www.allianceforvirtualbiz.com

Canadian Virtual Assistant Connection, www.cvac.ca

Interanational Association of Virtual Office Assistants, www.iavoa.com.

International Virtual Assistants Association, www.ivaa.org

Virtual Assistance U, www.virtualassistanceu.com

Basic Training

If the virtual assistance industry sounds like a good business opportunity for you, here are some pointers to get you moving in the right direction:

EQUIPMENT NEEDED: At minimum, you'll need a computer/workstation, desk, fax, scanner, printer, telephone with voicemail or answering machine, a copy machine, and broadband Internet access. Other items you may want to add: a laptop, Webcam, dictation machine, and telephone headset.

SKILLS REQUIRED: Skills that a virtual assistant may find helpful include bilingual capabilities, any earned degrees or certifications in more than one area (such as law, medicine, science, or entertainment), excellent decision making skills, self-discipline, the ability to work under pressure, and the ability to multitask and prioritize.

CERTIFICATIONS AVAILABLE: No specific certifications or designations are required of virtual assistants, although several organizations offer them. The International Virtual Assistants Association (www.ivaa.org), for example, offers a certified virtual assistance exam for \$150, while www.vacertification.com offers Professional Virtual Assistant and Master Virtual Assistant certifications for \$75 each.

FINDING WORK: Virtual assistants find clients mostly through networking with other professionals. According to the A4VB survey, practicing virtual assistants get the bulk of their clients through word-of-mouth referrals, networking at business functions, and advertising on the Internet via their own Websites. Other strategies include online networking (using industry-related job boards, for example), community involvement, and public speaking.

SETTING AND NEGOTIATING RATES: When establishing rates, be sure to factor in your overhead costs, experience, specialized skill sets, education, and geographic location to come up with a workable number. Also research what other independent professionals are charging and use that as a guide. For example, realize that a virtual assistant with 2 to 5 years of experience located in a rural town in South Dakota may charge \$18 per hour. The same VA in New York City could likely charge upwards of \$37 per hour. Scope out all projects and their requirements before committing to a fee schedule, and always have in mind a lowest price or hourly rate you're willing to negotiate down to.

BAILEY IS GROWING HER BUSINESS WITH THE HELP OF A VIRTUAL ASSISTANT.

THOMAS IS ONE OF A GROWING NUMBER OF VIRTUAL ASSISTANTS