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Home Business

Virtual assistants can be online lifesavers

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One of the fastest growing home-based business opportunities can help other home-based businesses grow their business. Virtual assistants (VAs) function as online lifesavers for offices of all sizes.

VAs are professional office assistants who provide office services and support without being physically present. They provide a wide range of business services through the Internet, fax and telephone. Unlike temporary employees, VAs are entrepreneurs -- just like many of their clients. Since much of their work is done online, they can work locally or globally.

A virtual assisting business can be started virtually overnight with a computer, online connection, Web site and some sharp office skills. Services range from accounting to bookkeeping; from research to transcription. VAs can make travel arrangements, provide desktop publishing, offer mailing services and help with marketing, billing and word processing.

It's estimated that an efficient VA can make between \$25 and \$50 an hour, depending on their skills and the kinds of services offered.

Dan Ramsey, author of *101 Best Home Businesses*, writes that an established secretarial business should be able to bill at least 75 percent of time to clients. He estimates that overhead expenses for a secretarial-word-processing service range from 20 percent to 40 percent including taxes. This means that VAs could probably keep 60 to 80 cents of every dollar they bring in, according to Ramsey.

The term "virtual assistant" began appearing on Web sites about six years ago. As corporate downsizing and budget cuts continue, VAs will likely be in big demand. Since a VA is a contractor, employers don't have to pay taxes, insurance or any fringe benefits. There's no need for extra office space or equipment. And the employer only pays for "time on task."

Virtual assisting lends itself to both full-time and part-time work. For example, Andrea Pixley, the mother of three and a military spouse, uses her VA business to supplement the family's income. She wanted to find a home-based business that wouldn't be affected whenever her family moves.

"I got started as a VA by first researching other VA's Web sites. I felt confident enough with my skills, and I had all the equipment, so I put up my own Web site," Pixley said. "It took awhile to get my first client, but now I have clients all over the country. I live in New Mexico, but my clients include a business coach in San Francisco, a custom rug maker in Northern California and a marketer in New Jersey, to name a few.

"You have to be organized to be a good VA," she said. "It's a lot harder than you think. You have to be able to run your own business and keep track of all your client projects, too. You also have to market your business every day."

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Kathy Ritchie, an Aurora-based VA, says that virtual assistants are in demand, but it takes work to be successful.

"The market is changing and more people are becoming aware of the option of hiring a VA. Self-promotion can be difficult," she said. "A good way to generate business is to build an alliance with a company instead of just getting project work. That way, the company can outsource special or ongoing projects. The ideal place for a VA is to work with a smaller business that can't afford to hire full-time staff."

If you're thinking of becoming a VA, Ritchie recommends getting certified. "It's the equivalent of the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval," she said.

AssistU, an online program affiliated with CoachU, offers training, coaching and referrals for VAs. The Virtual Training Program is an intensive 20-week program. Graduates can earn a Certified Professional Virtual Assistant designation.

The International Virtual Assistants Association, a nonprofit organization, also offers certification. Another certification program is provided as a joint effort of three VA industry leaders: the International Association of Virtual Office Assistants, A VirtualSolution and VirtualAssistance U.

Certification can come in handy when selling your services to people you meet over the Internet, according to Ritchie. "One of the obstacles to hiring a VA, from the client's perspective, is the uncertainty of who they're working with. Trust is something that needs to be built over a period of time," she explained.

According to Staffcentrix, a VA referral service, people from all walks of life are becoming VAs -- including work-at-home moms, people with disabilities, downsized executives, baby boomers nearing retirement, people in rural locations and people who want to reach a global market through the Internet.

If you've always dreamed of having an assistant but couldn't afford an employee, help is now just a mouse click away.

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