



How to Be a Virtual Assistant

Congratulations. You are interested in building a new career, a new business, and a new life! Have you thought it through? This section raises many questions that you will need to think about. Remember, be honest with yourself. If you are still truly excited about becoming a VA when you finish this document, you are on your way to a successful new practice!

Are you VA material?

At the most basic level, being a VA has nothing to do with the qualifications you bring to the table. Forget about your work experience and skill level for a moment and think about your work-style and personality.

Being a VA sounds great to a lot of people. The freedom, flexibility, and pay scale makes it an attractive career choice. You may even think that it will be a great way to spend more time with your family.

The reality is that VAs are isolated. Virtual. If you think that you will miss chatting around the water cooler or sharing your coffee break with an office buddy, being a VA might not be the best career choice for you. Some people just miss sharing their day with others. On the other hand, if you are someone who dislikes distractions, can't stand office chatter, and just likes to dig in and work solo, being a VA could be the best career choice for you.

Another thing to consider is your family. Not just VAs, but anyone who works out of the home and runs their own business, typically works more hours than they ever did at their corporate job. Think about it. Now you are the one managing the bookkeeping, ordering the office supplies, complying with local regulations, running to the bank, and promoting your business. If you were doing a lot at your corporate job, remember that you are doing everything when you run your own business.

I don't say that to scare you away from being a VA, but that is the reality. You may need to work 40 hours a week as a VA to meet your family's needs. You will spend even more (unbillable) time taking care of your business. For some people, that will cut into their family life.

And, I'm sure that there are many work-at-home Moms out there that can testify to the fact that it gets pretty darned hard to stop the baby from crying when your phone is ringing off the hook.

There is a definite balance to working at home, not just for VAs, but for everyone. Before you take the plunge, think it over long and hard. Your life, and your family's life, will change.

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Common Client Complaints

What do clients complain about? Plenty. If you want to be a top notch VA take a look at this section and make sure that you don't make the same mistakes that others have made before you.

I can never reach my VA when I need to!

Just because you work from home and make your own hours, doesn't mean that you can let every call go into voice mail. Clients will expect you to keep some regular hours—no matter what time of the day they are. They need to know when and how they can reach you. If you are out of the office a lot, invest in a cell phone or pager. Follow up with clients as quickly as possible.

And as for e-mail ... don't let your in-box fill up. Set up filters so that you can get important client messages quickly and respond in a timely manner. The turn around time for e-mail should be absolutely no longer than 24 hours, unless you have discussed longer times with your client in advance. Check your e-mail at least four times during the course of your regular business hours.

If you have clients that seem to chat or e-mail too much, perhaps using an instant messenger to communicate with them in short bursts will help. They will soon get tired of typing and learn to condense their messages.

The quality of work is much poorer than I had expected.

If you need the spell and grammar checker—use it! If you need a reference book by your desk, get it. If you need to brush up on your skills or invest in further training—do it. There is absolutely no excuse for poor work. Not stress. Not rushing to meet a deadline. VAs are expected to be technology experts. Many are high end administrative assistants that have left the corporate world to start their own business. Make yourself and your client look good. Make the industry as a whole look good. If even your basic clerical skills aren't up to par, you have no business being a VA.

The time taken to complete projects is much longer than expected—and my bill is very high!

Padding the bill is a big no-no. The client shouldn't be paying for time you spent chatting with a friend on the phone who interrupted the dictation project you were in the middle of, or bathroom breaks, or throwing the laundry in the dryer. Use some sort of time tracking software, and punch in and out accordingly. Make adjustments when necessary.

Even if you aren't padding the bill, and your client is constantly complaining the projects are taking too long, you have two things to consider. One is that the client is being unrealistic about project completion times. Two is that your skills or technology are not up to speed with the task at hand.

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Be very critical of your abilities and your equipment. Are you working too slowly? You need to be as efficient as possible. If you have a project that you don't enjoy doing, outsource it to another VA who can finish it more quickly, or find ways to make it go faster. The idea is always to do more in less time and be as efficient as possible.

Sometimes investing in programs that can do work for you (like talk-to-type speech recognition software or optical characterization scanners) make all the difference. Projects that took hours could take minutes.

Sure, you invest a lot of money in a program that only cut your billable hours down, but chances are the client will be so impressed with your forward thinking that he/she will just fill those empty hours with new projects—maybe ones you will actually enjoy!

The policies of my VA's practice seems to keep changing. I am confused as to what his/her office hours are, when I will get billed each month, and what services he/she provides.

Even if you don't work with client contracts or agreements, you need to have written policies in place. It will keep both you and your client on track. Don't wing it! You will frustrate clients to no end.

Keep some sort of schedule. Here are some examples: Only update your policies quarterly or annually. Bill on the same day of each month. Keep regular office hours—whatever works for you.

Always have a thorough and updated copy available for your clients—whether it is through your web site, or simply by emailing them a copy. Get as detailed as you need to be. They will appreciate it.

I am forced into working on retainers and contracts. Where is the trust in this partnership?

Sometimes VAs get a bad client—one who doesn't pay! It is easy for them to get defensive with anyone new who comes on board and demand retainers and contracts.

The first thing to consider is how well you check out potential clients. If you are at all wary of their business practices, have them provide some professional references of their own. Remember, you are interviewing them as much as they are interviewing you. It is a partnership and you are both equals.

Secondly, you might change your policy to only work with new clients on a retainer for a three month period. If an adequate level of trust is built up with the client at that point, you can offer to let your client to pay after you have performed services.

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Thirdly, evaluate your contracts. Do you really need them? Are you worried that your new client will leave you in the dust after a month? If you are, then chances are they aren't a good match for you. Use your judgment and don't put too much pressure on new prospects. You might be scaring away "a diamond in the rough."

However, don't ever let a client bully you out of an agreement that you feel is a must. If you are creating or designing something exclusively for them, you have a right to accept payment first. You can simply let them preview the final project. Think about artists and writers who always protect themselves in this manner.

My VA is so indecisive on putting systems into place. He/she talks in technical circles.

Sometimes VAs feel the need to educate a client on what steps they are taking to put systems into place. Clients sometimes feel that VAs are wasting time and talking in circles—they just want a decision made on something that will work for them. If you have a client like this, ask them point blank if they want you to explain everything or if you can go ahead and just use your judgment.

This can be a difficult balance to strike—especially if you are spending a client's money. Perhaps a good practice is to say, "It is my professional opinion that we should go with option A. Do you want me to explain why?" See what kind of feedback you get. Some clients want to know all the details while others don't care as long as everything is working.

My VA exercises too much control over my business. I am in the dark as to what is going on sometimes.

This is the opposite of the question and answer above. Don't assume that you can exercise too much control over your client's business—even if they have asked you to. If you are spending money on their behalf, you should probably get some sort of written agreement that states you are exempt of any problems that occur as a result of those decisions you have made. Ultimately it should always be the client's decision. Protect yourself and your client by simply helping them make their own decisions.

Creating Your Niche

When starting your practice you need to think about what types of clients you want to work with and what skills you really want to push. After all, you started this business so you could do what you love. Maybe you enjoyed creative tasks like desktop publishing in your corporate job but disliked answering the phones or filing.

Some VAs decide to promote themselves as people who perform general administrative duties like scheduling, contact management, word processing and customer service to name a few.

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Others take it to the next level and really hone in on a niche that they can build their practice around.

Again, the first step in building your niche is to think about the type of client that you want to work with. Have you always enjoyed writing? Maybe you would be happiest working with authors and speakers. Perhaps you are fascinated with the entertainment world and would love working with professional artists that need help with promotion and scheduling. Pick the industry that feels right for you and you will be a happy business owner. The possibilities are endless!

The second step in building your niche is to look at your skills--honestly. Perhaps you would love to work with writers but your own writing skills aren't the best. Working with entertainers might sound wonderful too, but you will really need to know how to promote them and understand how their industry works to help them successfully. Be honest with yourself about your capabilities.

If you need to work on your skills while you build your niche, try to find clients that you can learn from while you get yourself up to speed. Get online and do some research on the industry that you want to be involved in.

Sometimes VAs want to build their niche around a particular skill more than an industry or type of client. For example, many people like the creative side of administrative work. Having skills like desktop publishing can be a real asset and put you in front of professionals in any industry. After all everyone needs graphics, fliers, and business cards.

The important thing to remember about building your niche around a skill like this, is that you might find it in your best interest to take it to the next level. Again, if you are promoting yourself as a desktop publisher, and finding that a lot of clients aren't interested in your services, you may want to find a way to expand on your creative skills. You could apply your knowledge to web design and get savvy with creating online documents like PDF files. Shifting your focus a little can bring in new clientele while keeping your creative niche in tact.

If you just aren't sure where to start, think about what really motivates you as a person. Think about things that you love to do administratively. Even if you aren't creative you may have superior bookkeeping or customer service abilities.

A highly recommended book on creating your niche is [*Nichecraft*](#) by Dr. Lynda Falkenstein.

Expenses

Don't think for a minute that if you have a computer that you have everything you will need to start your practice. If you are serious about building a great virtual business you will have to spend some money to get there. Technology is key in the virtual world. It can also be expensive. Here are some pieces of equipment to consider:

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Computer: Get the best computer that you can afford with plenty of speed, power, and memory.

Monitor: Don't drive yourself crazy. After an eight hour day you'll be happy you got the 17" minimum viewable screen.

Speakers: Not only will they will notify you when "you've got mail!" but you will also be able to listen to audio files from web sites and more.

Back Up: This is a must. Forget the floppies. Invest in a CD burner, tape drive or secondary hard drive. If you don't want to clutter your office with equipment, sign up for an on-line backup or download an inexpensive backup program that automatically runs in the background.

Printer: Laser isn't necessary unless your client's work demands it. Inkjets work fine. Think about what type of documents you will be printing. Remember, you may be e-mailing more documents than you print, so don't go overboard.

Fax: An e-fax will work fine unless you think you will be faxing hard copies on a regular basis. Plain paper faxes are preferred. Win Fax Pro by Symantec is another good option.

Phone: If you can, get one with a speakerphone so you can write down voice-mail without holding the handset.

Phone Headset: Talk and type. Time management at its finest.

Software: MS Office, Wordperfect, ACT!, Quicken, and Eudora Pro are all great choices to get you started.

Other things to consider:

- Filing cabinets
- Misc. paper & office supplies
- E-postage meter
- Web access

Further expenses will include:

- Training/Certification
- Marketing/Promotion
- Phone Bills
- Taxes
- Accounting & (possibly) Legal Fees
- Business Licenses & Permits

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The bottom line is, work yourself up a business plan and calculate your estimated expenses before you start your practice.

Expectations

Jumping into a new career can be both exciting and a little scary at the same time—especially in an industry that is relatively new to most people. This section will explain some of the things that you can expect from the industry today.

What to expect from clients ...

Questions! Clients—especially clients new to virtual assistance—are going to have a lot of questions for you. Remember, you're going to be communicating by phone and e-mail for the most part. You can't impress them with your new business suit or eager smile (unless you have a web cam—and most of us don't).

So, to get ready to handle a client you need to prepare yourself to answer the tough questions. What should you expect? Check out the list in the Client Considerations section for a great list of questions that will help you to prepare for your first calls from prospects. These are the tough ones, and they will help you to get organized and prepared for those first calls.

One other thing about interviews with prospects—remember, you will need to interview them as much as they will be interviewing you. If you get a bad feeling about a prospect then chances are they either aren't a good match for your work-style or your personality. Even more red flags could signal that they don't take your business seriously enough and may be lax at paying their bills on time.

No matter how desperate you are for clientele, don't just pick up any client. You will thank yourself in the end. Pick clients that you can have a mutual respect for and trust with. It is tough sometimes to hold out for the right clients, but remember, you got into this business because it is something you love to do. Don't let it turn into a bad situation. If you do that you might as well go back to your corporate cubicle and sulk.

Be smart. Be choosy. Ask your own questions! You will find the right match if you know who you are looking for. Don't know who you're looking for? Check out the section on Creating Your Niche.

Building trust. How does one build trust with someone they may never meet? Sell yourself as a true professional. Policies or contracts are a good way to start. They lay everything out there for both partners to agree on. If nothing else, make sure that you have a good billing policy. Most clients are most concerned with the money-end of the partnership the most. Another way to build trust is to explain to clients what your work-style is. Exactly how do you separate and keep track of the time spent on each client? What about other expenses that you

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incur on the client's behalf? By answering questions like these, you will impress a prospect who may be afraid that you "pad your bills".

How else can you build trust? Simple. Work hard and work efficiently. Prove to them that working with you actually saves them money over other methods. They will thank you! Remember, they can't keep an eye on you while you work. They will only see the results. Your excellent skills will bring the client to depend on you to get the job done.

Reactions to your fees. Again, this is especially true for clients who are new to virtual assistance, but you may find some prospects wince a bit when you tell them your fees are set between \$30 to \$50 per hour.

Don't sell yourself short. A good rule of thumb is to double the salary that you were making in the corporate world to account for your taxes, benefits, and all other expenses. So, if you were making \$15 per hour you will now have to charge \$30 per hour.

If they still wince after you remind them of your business expenses remind them that they don't have to worry about paying for any of these expenses on their own end and they are also saving the time that they would have expended getting your benefits and paychecks in order--not to mention supplying you with a desk and equipment. Point them to the US government labor statistics page on www.work-the-web.com for a good example of what employers really pay when all is said and done and then check their reaction.

If they are not willing to pay you what you are worth--dump them! You are wasting your time. Find someone (again) who "gets it".

Another selling point for the skeptics: they're not paying for coffee or smoking breaks—just every second you spend on them. Isn't that what every client really wants—true value for their money?

Until this industry really heats up--and it is, hang in there--you will find that type of reaction typical. The client that is skeptical but willing to pay you anyway, will most likely end up doubling or tripling what they pay you every month after they realize what an asset you are and how much you really can do for them in a short period of time. Some of them just need to be convinced. That's fair.

Industry Awareness ...

Misleading information. As much as I love this industry, there is some real misleading information out there. The good news is that it doesn't seem to be coming from the leaders. People who work virtually every day and run online communities, certification programs, and referral services generally have honest and clear content on their web sites. Some sites might not give you the entire picture, but you will get a good sense of what to expect as a VA. Any good organization will tell you that you need to work hard, that you are a business owner, and

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you need a great way to market yourself. The best organizations also give you the resources that you really need to get started.

The things to look out for are the people who are not directly involved in the industry, but are trying to report on it. I have seen some very misleading articles on the web that really doesn't speak for the professionalism for the virtual assistance industry. Further more, you may even find articles that tell you all you need is a computer, and you're in business? Don't believe it! Serious VAs are serious business owners and it takes a lot more than a computer to set up shop.

If you think that you have read something that seems "just too good to be true", it is. Period. The best articles to trust are the ones that offer a lot of information and direct quotes from industry leaders. These are the people you really need to listen to.

A lot of people are jumping on the idea of working virtually. Some of them aren't taking it seriously. If it sounds like a "get rich quick" scheme with a VA twist, ignore it. You are going to have to work hard to be successful. That doesn't mean that virtual assistance doesn't come with a lot of perks--there are many! Just remember that even the best careers take time, research, effort and planning!

Industry Standards. First lets talk about fees. You already know that you are going to have to at least double your corporate salary to compensate for your expenses, health insurance, and retirement, among other things. You may want to charge even more if you are providing a highly technical skill like web development. Do your research. See what others in your skill-set are charging. This is important so that you don't sell yourself short.

Hopefully you aren't just looking for any old client, but someone who will grow with you and pay you what you are worth. Remember that old line, "You get what you pay for."

One thing you may find--which leaders industry-wide are trying to discourage—are VAs undercutting their prices just to pick up some clientele. This is so bad for the industry. It makes VAs seem unprofessional, and look like they are not worth what they should really be paid. You may also find a lot of people out there who are claiming to be "VAs", but are really more like online temps who have drastically reduced rates. Online temps are fine, but they need to be recognized for what they are. It is important to separate yourself from these people. Point to your experience, certifications or other training, professionalism, and above all--commitment --to your prospects and clients. They will see the difference. Again skilled, serious VAs can't afford not to start at about \$30 per hour.

Now let's talk about policies. Even if you decide that you don't want to make your clients sign a contract, it is always a good idea to put some general policies in place. If you don't have an outline of what clients can expect of you up front, they will be wondering where they stand. A simple policy outline can make a client feel at ease and seal the deal for you.

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Policies can simply state things like your work-style, boundaries (office hours), billing procedure, a confidentiality clause, and other general information that they can expect from your work. Policies don't make a client feel "trapped" like a contract sometimes can. They can also serve as good reminders to clients that "forget" what your billing methods are, or when your office hours end. Get a signed and dated copy from your client and you will both be happy.

We also need to talk about the different types of virtual partnerships. Some people will say that if you take on random projects, or work on short term commitments with clients, that you are not truly a VA.

It is true that most "real" VAs work with clients on an ongoing basis to build strong partnerships. This creates a relationship where the client relies on their VA constantly, and allows the VA to maintain a steady income. While you may not want to "keep all your eggs in one basket" and go for that one perfect client that is going to give you at least 40 hours per week, the ideal situation is to have a few great clients that will stimulate your creativity and fill your workload. Having many clients (more than five) can also make your workdays too spread out depending on the types of tasks you have taken on. The more people you have to take care of, the more organized, efficient, and focused you have to be to keep them all straight--and happy! Five or less with a steady workload is a good number.

If you drop a client you can still maintain an income from the others while you fill the gap. If you only have one and they drop you--you are back to the drawing board. If you have too many people, you will be juggling so many workloads you will soon be pulling your hair out.

Back to clients--a lot of Newbies ask how many clients are really out there looking for VAs and willing to pay them? The truth is that the real awareness of virtual assistance is just starting to heat up. The more small business owners and entrepreneurs that turn to the web to work virtually, the more prospects will turn to our industry for help.

Every time I see an ad with an entrepreneur sitting on the beach with his laptop video-conferencing with someone on the other end, I grin. Working virtually is catching on in a big way. Teaching the public that there are qualified assistants out there ready to help them grow their business efficiently and effectively is the next step.

I would say that in terms of awareness that the prospects coming through have doubled over the last year. Doubled from what you say? To be honest most referral services out there aren't getting flooded with hits. People don't know what they're looking for. They do know that they need an assistant who can provide them with administrative duties, so they run a web search. They don't find much. It probably doesn't hit them to type in the keywords "virtual assistant". Let's face it--it's not a household name—yet!

Industry leaders are the ones pushing the craft. VAs, of course, are too. It's those who are really savvy with web design, development and marketing who are going to reach the most prospects. Look for prospects everywhere but mostly on the web. It just makes sense. That's where virtual work is done.

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So, to answer the question—how many clients are really out there for VAs? The truth is there are more than enough clients to go around. The clients just don't know it yet. You will have to get creative and market yourself diligently to find them. They are out there. They are coming in slowly and spreading the word—slowly. They aren't clogging the search engines with keyword searches for "VAs" yet, but they will be.

If you join an organization that offers a referral service most likely they will tell you up front that they can't guarantee that you will get one client. They can't. No one is generating that kind of interest yet. If you think that these companies are just going to bring the clients to you think again before pursuing this as your career. You might want to wait a year or two to see how the industry progresses. I can't stress enough that at this point you are going to have to work hard to bring in your own clients.

This leads to the next question—where are the clients coming from? They are coming from the web. They are coming from your hometown. They are coming from a referral from a colleague or friend. They are coming from everywhere! Most likely they will find you somewhere on the web but even if their business isn't web based, they may have a great interest in the benefits of working virtually. Don't necessarily look for the "net-preneurs" to fill your practice. Anyone from a small business owner to the CEO of a booming corporation can use a VA.

But again, they are most likely coming from the web. They are running online searches for someone that can help them. They are the ones that read the cutting edge articles on business technology and e-commerce. Others are hearing a colleague brag about how cool it is to work with their "VA". Some are reading about this new concept in home office magazines. Ultimately they turn to the web to do the research, so this is where you may want to focus your marketing efforts.

Virtual Assistance isn't a household phrase. You will see a lot of wrinkled noses, raised eyebrows, or blank stares when you tell people that you are a Virtual Assistant. They simply haven't heard the term before. Sounds catchy though!

Most likely you will at least get their attention long enough to explain what you do. The typical reaction is something like "cool" or "interesting". They may even throw some questions at you if they are unfamiliar with the kinds of traditional administrative skills that can now be applied to the web.

Some people (who are web savvy) will "get it" instantly. Others will only "sort of" get what you are doing. Others just plain won't be able to picture it in their head.

All I can say is try to explain it as simply and clearly as you can and use a just a few good examples of what you do during a typical day. If you get too technical with people they won't remember or understand what you do, and more importantly they won't be able to pass the information on to others without being embarrassed because they really don't know how to explain it. Getting them to spread the word is the key.

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Almost every reaction to virtual assistance is great, especially if you push yourself as a professional business owner. Some may smirk at you and have visions of you surfing the web all day. These are the ones that won't take you seriously. So what if you work through half your morning in your PJs? They don't need to know that! Impress them with a recent project that you just aced for a new client, or some other victory and see them suddenly become more interested with your now very impressive career.

Virtual Associations & Online Communities ...

What is being a member of an online community really like? Since everyone is virtual in these types of relationships, and everything is done via e-mail, most members of such organizations that chat in e-groups or post to message boards like to keep things brief. Think about how many members are out there and how much email is flooding their in-box all day long. Getting your message across in a short-and-to-the-point manner will win your colleagues over.

For the most part these communities are all business. People post questions asking for help on the latest program or for recommendations on business services. Anything to do with jokes, charities, and the like are forbidden. There is a bit of well placed humor floating around but it is important to keep it politically correct and brief. The other thing to remember is that when you hit "reply" everyone on your list will receive the message. If it's really not for everyone to see, remember to be courteous and only send it to the intended recipient.

Nothing against you guys out there, but it is also true that most members of VA communities are women. It's just the way the industry is right now. In any case, everyone is typically very happy and excited about what they are doing—even the Newbies.

Is networking worth it? As I said before, most of the chatting and posting that goes on in a virtual community is professional. There aren't a lot of aimless notes out there that are going to clutter your in-box. Networking is definitely worth it. VAs constantly share new techniques, ideas, and resources. Most people even go out of their way to offer their help and support to others.

Aren't VAs competitive? In a sense, you could say that VAs are as competitive as any other business owner. The problem right now is that administrative assistants who are jumping on to the VA bandwagon need to learn how to be smart marketers. If one client comes along those less skilled in marketing themselves may jump on the opportunity because they are desperate for business. Yes, these Newbies can sometimes be competitive.

The VAs who have been in the business longer and have their own ways of building their practice tend to wait for the perfect client to come along before they make their move. They are not worried about others who may have a better skill level. They know that they can do the job and more importantly, they know that they can build a great rapport with the client because they

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have a similar work-style. Somehow, the VA and the client just 'click'! Veteran's know that it's hard to compete with someone else's personality. You just need to match yourself with the right person.

What are VAs really like? VAs are typically warm, giving people. They are happy about what they are doing and have satisfying careers. Many of them even try to recruit others by telling them how great of a career they can have. Since there is so much new information that pours into the industry constantly, it is often better to share information. VAs know that they only succeed when they all help each other and pool ideas. "Back-stabbers" and people who withhold important information are rare if non-existent!

What kind of advice am I going to get? What kind of advice do you want? People are so generous that they will encourage you to hang in there until you get your first client, offer tips on new techniques and software, tell you about helpful web sites, warn you about scams, sites and services to avoid, announce industry victories, point you to small business information ... the list is endless!

Ask and most likely you will receive, especially if you become a member of a large, active group. Someone out there will have an answer to your question, or tell you where to find it.

Will I really get client referrals from virtual organizations? There isn't a company out there that can guarantee you that clients will come your way. Sometimes it is because companies aren't getting a lot of traffic to their site. Sometimes it is because there just aren't that many people out there looking for VAs. Maybe (heaven forbid!) clients aren't interested in your practice. Most companies simply are not flooded with requests from people looking to work with a VA yet. There needs to be more media coverage for the industry.

If you are thinking about joining an organization that offers a directory listing or promises to refer clients to you as they come along, check with them to see how many inquiries they get per week to evaluate whether or not their services are worth your time and money. The more hits they get, the more likely you are to be contacted.

That is not to say that such companies don't have other great reasons for signing up—like a buzzing virtual community where you can network with others, or a great resource section that will get you started. Only you can evaluate their worth as it applies to your business.

If you are looking for clients in today's market don't be fooled into thinking that a referral service is going to keep you busy. More than likely you will get more e-mail from those looking to break into the business than people wanting to work with you.

I don't mean to sound critical of companies that offer such services. They really are doing all they can to bring clients your way. The bottom line is: the more press they get, the more prospects you will see heading your way. We are in the early stages of a booming new industry. Hang in there.

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Are the industry leaders really knowledgeable? Yes. From what I have seen on the web, the people who are paving the way for your new career are very knowledgeable. Many of them have years and years of hands on experience in the corporate world. They, just like you, wanted a better alternative to 9-5, traffic jams, and expensive business suits.

They are entrepreneurs who are passionate about virtual assistance as a career and work very hard at spreading the word to the world. They bring that same excitement to you when they teach and advise, and recently I have seen many leaders working together to set some real industry standards and eliminate misinformation.

If you have any questions about the leaders of certain communities or companies check out their "about" sections on their web sites or drop them an e-mail. You will be surprised at how much they will go out of their way to impress you and answer all of your questions. They know that just like clients that can sometimes be skeptical about a virtual partnership, there are people curious about breaking into the industry that aren't sure if they want to make the virtual leap.

Every leader that I correspond with (and there are many) does a great job of giving you honest answers of what you can expect as you pursue a career as a VA, and knows how to answer the tough questions about where the industry is heading. If you feel that you aren't getting a straight answer, find someone who will give you a second opinion. In fact, ask for a second or third opinion anyway. It is always in your best interest to hear all sides of a story. You will find that answers on some subjects do vary quite a bit.

Virtual Certifications ...

How much dedication is involved in getting certified? That depends on which program you go after. Some programs are very intense and take months of training. If you are working full time, take care of children, or just have a full life, think carefully before you jump into a training program. You could get a lot of homework and much of it will be researching ways to get your business jump-started, so you will need a clear head. You will only get out of a program what you put into it.

There are other options. Some programs aren't as lengthy or involved. You need to decide which type of training is right for you and how worthwhile a certification title really is to you as you try to attract new clients.

Coaching is another option. A good coach who can work with you one-one-one will keep you focused and motivated. More importantly they will show you how to achieve your goals one step at a time. This is a great choice for those of you who are honest with yourself and know that you need discipline to keep yourself on track. Be choosy in the coach you partner with. Find someone that knows about small business and the virtual workplace.

There are also professionals that act as mentors. They aren't certified coaches, but typically veteran VAs who know the ropes and are now offering their work experience in the form of

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consulting. Some people find that learning from a veteran is a great way to go, however, you won't get a formal certification this way.

Again, whether you go with an intense training program, a business coach, consulting, or other options, you will continually be learning how to propel yourself as a business owner and find ways to market your services. This takes a lot of time. Make sure that you are prepared to spend several hours per week (if not per night) working on your new career.

How much of an investment is involved in getting certified? Again, it depends on the program that you choose. You could spend very little money or thousands of dollars. The list of all such companies can be found on the Industry Organizations page on www.work-the-web.com. This will give you a great overview of what to expect from each program and how much it will cost.

Make sure that you evaluate each program carefully so that you will get the most value for your money. Try to find out if there are any future benefits to joining one company's program over another. Some offer free ongoing training sessions on certain topics after you become a member or graduate successfully.

Self Evaluation. Before you invest a lot of time and money into being a program ask yourself some tough questions. Even if this isn't the best time for you to join, you can always come back to see what new benefits training companies have to offer down the road.

Are you willing to cut into your "down-time" on nights (and possibly weekends) to do your homework? Are you focused enough right now to really get the most out of the program or would you feel better about joining at a later time, when you aren't so stressed or busy? Are your family and friends there to support you and give you the time that you need to do your work?

As always, be honest with yourself. Virtual assistance isn't going anywhere. Join a program when you are ready. If you are too busy or stressed to undergo training you can always join an online community or e-group that will allow you to participate when you have time. It will also allow you to receive valuable information from others while you are getting yourself ready to take the plunge.

Future Benefits. Again, find out if there are any future benefits in joining one training program over another. Do they offer special classes for Newbies that are building their practice? Do they offer advanced classes for graduates who need to upgrade their skills in a particular area? Do they host chats or send out new information as it becomes available? Gather a list of the resources that each company will provide for you in the future before you join. Who knows? You may end up joining several programs if they all cover material that is important to you. Training companies tend to focus on different parts of the industry that they feel are the most important. For example, the good use of ethics may be a crucial training element to one, whereas advanced software may be the focus of another. There are many angles to consider.

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How do clients and prospects really view certified VAs? It honestly depends on how current each client is on the industry as a whole. They may have heard of a certification program by one company, but not another. They may not know that certifications even exist. In general, having a certification certainly doesn't hurt. Adding CPVA, MVA or another credential to your title will make you seem more professional. Most likely it will spark some interest in a client that knows nothing about certifications and give you an opportunity to explain what that means.

Being certified also shows clients that you have a real interest in your profession and that you are willing to keep improving yourself as you pursue your career further. You are on top of the latest training virtual training techniques—not just administrative work—if you are certified as a VA.

What they don't cover—investing in further education. If you want to be a VA, you have to stay current on the latest technology and continually improve your productivity. Just as you did in the corporate world, you will have to train yourself on new versions of popular software, learn your way around new gadgets and keep up with new web trends.

Most likely, you will not be formally trained on these new techniques, but if you join a program or e-group that allows you to network with your colleagues on a regular basis you will learn from them.

VAs love to share new resources with their colleagues and are constantly announcing new tricks, trips and gadgets that they found surfing the web. Follow their lead. They will point you in the right direction.

Industry Certifications

Certifications

If you are more comfortable working with a VA that has been prescreened by a virtual organization, you then need to find the organization that meets the standards that you are looking for. When researching the different companies offering certifications, keep the following questions in mind:

- How much hands on work experience do VAs need to qualify for the program?
- What percentage of applicants actually get into the program?
- How intense is the program, in term of length and workload?
- What types of skills are certified members learning--software, general administrative tasks, internet/Web navigation, and/or how to effectively communicate virtually?
- Do VAs have to become re-certified after a certain time period, or is their certification good 'for life'?
- After becoming certified, are VAs supported by an online community where they can share information and continually learn from their colleagues?

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- Are there any testimonials from satisfied clients that have worked with VAs from a particular organization?
- Are the standards particularly high?

Work Experience

Hands on work experience is very important. It is the basis on which VAs build their skills. How they apply that experience to working virtually is equally important. To find out more about your VA's work background, consider asking the following questions:

- How many years did you spend working in the corporate world and how many industries did you become familiar with?
- Do you consider yourself to be a self starter?
- How much time do you dedicate to teaching yourself new skills, or attending classes and seminars that enhance your skill levels?
- How do you stay on top of 'tricks of your trade'?
- How resourceful are you, and how do you approach web research?
- Do you have colleagues that you collaborate with on a regular basis that keep you in touch with your industry?
- Have you developed a niche that you are dedicated to building your practice around -- based on prior hands-on experience?
- What has your experience in the corporate world taught you that a virtual certification program cannot?

Office Set-Up

Here is some information on office forms to get you started.

Office Forms & Files

As VAs volunteer samples of files that they use on a regular basis, you will be able to access them and download them to your own computer by going to work-the-web.com's Yahoo!® Group. Here's how it works.

- Click [here](#) to go to work-the-web.com's Yahoo! Group Files.
- If you are prompted with a sign in screen simply enter your Yahoo! ID and password.
- If you are not a Yahoo! member you will have to sign up with them by following the prompts on your screen.
- If you have difficulty signing up please refer to [Yahoo!'s help section](#).
- If for some reason you do not go directly to the Files section of the group, click on the **Files** link on the far left of your screen.
- Click on the folder of your choice.
- Click on the file of your choice and follow the prompts on the screen to download the file.

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You may also upload sample files that you want to share with fellow VAs by following the prompts on the screen.

Enjoy the e-group and the sample forms posted by your generous colleagues. In addition, here are some links to forms online:

General Forms

- <http://www.officedepot.com/BusinessTools/forms/default.asp?SID=&PP=1>
- <http://www.busserv.ucsb.edu/forms.htm>
- <http://www.myworktools.com>

Legal Forms

- <http://www.ilrg.com/forms/index.html>

Form Kits

- [Proposal Kit](#)

Promoting Your Practice

You've got the skills, resources, equipment, and gumption. Now you need a client. Good business owners know that they get no where without a great marketing plan. You will need to learn how to promote your business to bring in inquiries, and eventually a growing clientele.

Just because you work virtually doesn't necessarily mean that you should start by promoting yourself virtually. Ask yourself what you are more comfortable with and take that route first.

If you are somewhat shy or unconfident in your new role, word of mouth marketing isn't going to work for you. Until you get your confidence up and really dedicate yourself to becoming a successful VA, you will need to promote yourself online as much as possible. Get a web site with a catchy domain name and keep submitting it to search engines and tweaking your meta tags until you have top twenty placement. Ask for reciprocal links from other web sites, and join web rings and directories where people who work virtually are sure to find your business.

Joining a virtual community that has a viewable directory and participating in discussion groups and message boards will also get you good exposure. If you are a good writer send out press releases and articles about your work. There are many sites out there that are starving for fresh content, or just need people that they can swap material with. Look for companies with sites that compliment rather than compete with your own. You may both benefit in the long run if you are able to advertise on each others sites by swapping banner ads, links, and logos.

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Network. You might have good luck joining your local Chamber of Commerce or the nearest [BNI](#) chapter. There are lots of associations full of small business owners that needs VAs and don't even know it! VAs are getting a lot of exposure these days but haven't quite become a household name ... yet!

While you're working on your online promotion, think about how you can pitch your business in twenty words or less to people that know nothing about virtual assistance. People tend to be curious about the subject and you can easily impress them with a brief and accurate account of your expertise.

Tell everyone you know, starting with family and friends about your business. Leave business cards everywhere. If you are still working for someone else, tell business colleagues, suppliers, and other people that you encounter on a daily basis about the business that you are working on. Even if you think a particular person wouldn't ever become a client, you don't know who they might mention your services to.

Referrals in this industry are contagious—almost magic! In fact, go out of your way to ask for referrals. People are usually more willing to help than you would think. Ask for testimonials if you are a little shy about bragging yourself up (although you should never be). A potential client that reads about how great you are from a third party is icing on the cake. It's better than any resume or pitch that you could make yourself.

Make sure that you are an effective communicator. If you really are a shy person, it is something that you will need to overcome. Even though you work at home, you will need to have superior phone skills and be able to have confidence in your voice when you interview potential clients. Above all things, they need to understand that you work with them, not for them and are a business owner just like they are. Even though you assist them, you demand not be treated like an employee.

Once you master the art of great communication, clients should come easily to you. Learn how to sell yourself and command respect from people you want to work with. They will admire you and regard you as a highly effective communicator and want you to be their VA.

For more on promotion and online marketing, visit the article library on www.work-the-web.com.

Qualifications & Skills

The best administrative assistants make the best VAs. It just makes sense. If you already have a great work history then transitioning into a virtual career could be a relatively easy for you.

Clients look for VAs that are reliable, proactive, organized and very Net savvy. It isn't enough to know the latest office programs. It's a good start, but it won't cut it in the virtual world. You need to know your way around the Internet. Period. After all, how can you work virtually if you can't figure out the most efficient way to run a research project on the web, or walk your client

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through a technical issue with their web site? You may not have all the answers, but you need to know where to get them.

The bottom line is, make sure that you are current on the latest web trends and really know how the web works. You may have great marketing or bookkeeping skills, but if you don't know how to apply them to the Internet, your clients will see those same skills as weak.

If you are at all doubtful about your web skills, get certified. If anything, it will reinforce what you already know and show you the next skill level that you are ready to move on to.

Keep your resume up to date. Clients may not ask for it when you discuss a virtual partnership, but on the other hand they might. References and testimonials are also handy when closing the deal. Being able to quickly shoot off this information in an e-mail will impress the person you are looking to work with.

The Corporate Jump

There is no easy way to break out of the corporate world, especially if your income helps to support your family. Every VA is different in so many ways. Some have children and others are single. Some have husbands that can support them as they fulfill their dreams. Others have to struggle along and get creative. The bottom line is that there really is no magic solution that will help you transition from the corporate world into that of small business ownership. There are a few things that you might want to consider however, as you start your journey. Ask yourself some questions like ...

Are you willing to work evenings and weekends for clients until you have enough income to break out of your corporate job?

If you are, this may work out well for you as you build your practice around clients that are quite flexible with the way that you meet their needs. The downside is that you may burn yourself out. Make sure that you aren't taking on more than you can handle. It will show in your work.

Are you willing to take on a part time job, if you need to, while you build your practice further?

Sometimes you may land a great client that will get you started but who knows when the next one will come along? If going back to a full time office job is going to interfere with the work you are doing for your first client, you may want to consider taking a part time position that will give you some flexibility to build your practice while maintaining some steady income on the side.

Do you have enough equipment and materials to really get started?



Keep your corporate job until you have bought everything you need to run your business. You don't want to accept a client and then have to turn them away later because you don't have the equipment that you need to meet their needs. You will be left with nothing.

Are you working on a marketing plan for your business?

Business cards, web sites, word-of-mouth, joining business associations ... this will all lead to your first client, and your first client will get you out of the traffic jams and into your home office. Make sure that you have a plan for getting clients, keeping clients, and picking up new clients. Look at the promotional section on this site for some great ideas.

Do you have another means of finding clients?

Sometimes joining an association or organization specifically for VAs will bring in clients for you. Take a look at the organizations listed on this site to see if they have a referral program that meets your needs. Consider local organizations like your Chamber of Commerce as well.

Could your current employer or business contacts that you interact with every day become your clients?

There have been cases where administrative assistants who decided to go virtual were so valuable that their employers were willing to pay them as independent business owners rather than keeping them on the payroll. This is probably the easiest way to transition out of your corporate job.

Are you comfortable with asking for referrals?

Ask. Many, many VAs have built their practices mainly on referrals from other clients. Consider offering an incentive to your current clients so that they will bring referrals to you, as a way to build your practice.

Are your fees going to cover your needs? Are your benefits going to be taken care of?

You're not going to charge a client the same way that you would expect your employer to pay you in a corporate job. You're paying for your own benefits now. Don't sell yourself short. VAs typically start at \$30 per hour because they are forced to worry about taxes, insurance, retirement, and more.

Some VAs have spouses with family plans. Make sure that you have enough income to plan for health problems, taxes, retirement, and other benefits that you will be giving up in the corporate world.

Do you have your family's support?

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Hopefully you do--even if money is tight--and they are cheering you on every step of the way. Leaving your job will affect them greatly so pick clients that you trust will be willing to build a long-term partnership with you so that you can count on some steady income.

Are you willing to take a leap of faith?

Landing your first client could be the key to you walking away from your corporate job. Make sure that you are comfortable with your new virtual partner and that you have a good sense of trust. If they decide that they don't need you after a month, and they are your only client, what will you do?

Are you willing to work hard?

As a VA, you're a business owner. Even though there are many organizations that promote VAs and help lead clients to them, it is ultimately the VA that has to work hard at satisfying their clientele and finding creative ways to build their practice.

The VA Mind Set

You're Not an Employee

A virtual partnership is just that—a partnership. Just because someone calls you their assistant or VA, doesn't mean that you are their employee. Sure, they are the ones ultimately paying your salary at the end of the month, but don't fall into the trap of feeling the same way you did in the corporate world. You are a business owner. Your client is a business owner. You are equals. Make sure that they understand that.

As assistants, VAs can sometimes "feel" like employees—especially when starting out. It takes a while to shake of that corporate feeling when you are doing similar administrative work for clients on your own. I have heard that some Newbies almost "feel bad" for charging so much, or for so many hours. They hold back a little, when they shouldn't and keep themselves stuck in that corporate mindset.

Shake it off! You don't have to struggle for that raise that is going to give you an extra buck an hour—and more importantly you are worth it! Give yourself a raise if you think you deserve it. Clients who don't see you as a real business owner that takes care of his/her own expenses are not the ones for you. Get someone who will feed you with confidence—someone who "gets it".

Set Boundaries

As a good VA, you will want to constantly support your clients, and sometimes go out of your way to make them happy. That's great, but you are going to have to set some boundaries if you really want to earn their respect.

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You're on your own clock now and its time to draw the line between work and home. Don't let them take advantage of you—at all! Clients who are on a different time zone (an earlier one) are especially famous for this.

Here's an example: It's 4 PM their time, 6 PM your time. You finished your work day at 5 PM (your time). The phone rings and it's your client desperate for something they could have asked you for yesterday, but "forgot". You hesitantly listen to the message that they leave on your voice mail. Good for you! At least you didn't answer the phone. What's next? Do you tell your family or friends that you're going back to work on something urgent? Do you charge the client "overtime" and do it anyway? Do you ignore the message and phone them first thing in the morning? Do the latter. If you give in once you will always be giving in and that midnight oil gets old very quickly. They will respect you more and see you as a true business owner if you set your boundaries up front.

Time Management Tips

How many hours a week will you dedicate to your clients, and how many hours a week will you dedicate to your business? Sound like the same thing? Remember, you are handling your own paperwork. Will it cut into your family time? Are you really disciplined enough to stay on track? Read through this section to find out.

Discipline is the key to time management when you're a VA. Remember--you're the boss. There won't be anyone looking over your shoulder to make sure you're not aimlessly surfing the Net, playing solitaire, or chatting with online buddies.

That doesn't mean that you have to be chained to your computer. After all, you're a VA! Make technology work for you so that you can enjoy your spare time instead of burning the midnight oil playing catch-up.

The first thing to consider is how you manage the time you will spend on each client. Before you select clients you will need to decide how many you can handle and find out what their expectations of your time really are.

If you and a client develop a great virtual partnership, chances are that they will be willing to invest more. They will request more and more time. There are many clients that start out with VAs who they think will only be working ten hours a month for them. Once they are comfortable with things, and see what a VA can really do virtually, the workload may more than triple. Be cautious in taking on too many clients at once. You will only disappoint them if you can't really dedicate the time to them that they need.

Think about your workday. Will you work early in the morning for a client in a particular time zone? Maybe you will save tasks for another until the end of your day for some other reason. Do you have a client that has his/her own dedicated phone line in your office? If you are answering calls for him/her all day you will have to develop a way of tracking the time spent on

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each call, especially if it interrupts the work you are doing for others. Maybe you only want to answer that dedicated line between certain business hours. In any case, you need to make sure that each client is getting billed for the right amount of time and track your workload accordingly.

Many VAs use a piece of software called [TraxTime](#) from Spud City Software. It is a type of punch clock that sits on your desktop. You can set up "projects" for each client and punch in and out as you complete tasks. There are others available in the resource section for you to check out, but this one seems to be the most popular. Whatever system you develop, make sure that it is accurate. Most clients don't request "time studies" but for your own files, you should be able to go back and check on your billing records.

What about errands? You're a business owner now. You're taking care of the postage, the billing, the trips to the bank, and the ordering of office supplies, among countless other things! To make the most efficient use of your time you need to make your business truly virtual.

Start with routine errands like trips to the post office or carrier drop off boxes. Electronic postage is a beautiful thing--stamps right from your desktop from a company like [Simply Postage](#), and for larger packages a carrier like [FedEx](#) that will deliver packing materials and pick up any shipment right from your door is perfect. I especially like FedEx because they have a system that allows your client to sign up for account where you can log in with the client's password and send packages from your home office. The charges get billed to your client. You can even print out air bills from their site and track everything in one place. Yes, I am a big fan of FedEx.

What about trips to the bank? One thing that you can do is get comfortable with online banking and having your bills paid electronically. You may even be able to download bank statements to your computer for easier accounting. You might want to consider accepting credit cards if you aren't happy with clients writing checks or sending in money orders. Check out [Practice Pay Solutions](#) (a US based company) in the resource section for a good deal on credit card payments.

You need office supplies. Before you trek down to [Staples](#) or [Office Max](#), check out their virtual stores. They usually have everything a home office needs and will deliver right to your door (even furniture) with no shipping costs on most orders. Links to these supplier and others are in the resource section as well.

There are other things that you will need to consider as well. Get savvy with programs that type for you as you speak like [Dragon's Naturally Speaking Preferred](#). Dictating to your computer while you are filing or organizing your office is a great way to stay on top of your workload. Set up your computer to work for you. Tell it when it needs to perform regular back ups, check for virus update files, and send routine e-mail.

Organization and great resources are also key to time management. Building an extensive reference file that suits your business will increase your efficiency and productivity. The

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resource section on this site is a great place to start. Keeping your bookmarks and files in a handy place will save you so much time--and impress your clients. Remember to back up everything somehow so you always have a reference to fall back on.

If you do need to leave your office and can't bear to be out of touch investing in a portable web phone might be a worthy investment. Not only will you stay on top of things but you will be enjoying your freedom as well. Remember--great time managers enjoy lots of free time.

If you want to become completely virtual you can even cut your routine errands for your home. You can do everything from sending electronic greeting cards to buying groceries online. You may never leave the house again!

If you have a hard time disciplining yourself or just need to get organized, there are several books in the resource section that are highly recommended. Learn tips and tricks from others who have streamline their workdays and are truly profiting from their great time management skills.

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