

Starting a Virtual Assistant Business

Interested in starting one of the fastest-growing homebased businesses around? These existing business owners' advice can help you get started.

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When Wicked Wordcraft^[1] president Angela Allen-Parker started her online business in 1999, she admits her parents feared she'd made a horrible mistake. Allen-Parker is a virtual assistant, and her decision to become one was more than a career change^[2] - it was a lifestyle change.

A single mother of three, Allen-Parker left her marketing post at a cancer research organization to start her new venture and moved her family from the city to a 25-acre farm in rural Kentucky. "I knew I had to succeed because there was no 'Plan B,'" says Allen-Parker. Now she serves clients in the United States, Canada and Spain. She specializes in what she knows best-marketing. Her farmhouse is paid in full, completely financed through her work as a virtual assistant.

A critically ill daughter was the reason Pamela Braue became a virtual assistant last year. Working full time in a law office was no longer feasible so Braue decided to take control of her earnings potential. The paralegal enrolled in an online training course at Virtual Assistance U^[3]. Specializing in realtor support, Braue opened PS: We Assist^[4] from Jackson, New Jersey. Before completing her course, she'd already secured six clients.

Allen-Parker and Braue are just two of an estimated 2,000 virtual assistants worldwide. Although one is a veteran and the other a newbie, both say hard work is the key to building sustainable practices. Both also agree that aligning experience with solid business plans and training are basic requirements.

Some say the virtual assistant industry has become so popular because it helps women become entrepreneurs yet also achieve a work/life balance. Business trends forecast an increase in service demands, startup costs are minimal and the profit potential is good. According a survey by the Virtual Business Alliance^[5], a global consortium of virtual assistant trade organizations, the average full-time virtual assistant working in the United States grossed \$39,452 in income last year.

Before packing up the office cubicle and giving notice to your boss, know that becoming a virtual assistant isn't an easy job that just anyone can do. Sharon B. Williams of The 24-Hour Secretary^[6] cautions, "To become successful, you need a good marketing strategy in addition to that phone, PC and Internet connection." Many virtual assistants work between 14 and 18 hours a day during the startup phase. Even after establishing solid practices, one-third of these business owners admit to working nontraditional hours, including weekends and holidays.

Virtual assistants are independent entrepreneurs who work remotely and use technology to deliver services to clients globally. Most work from their home offices and receive their project instructions by phone, fax, e-mail or even instant message. Although many virtual assistants offer secretarial services, as more people with diverse backgrounds and skills enter the ranks, virtual assistants who specialize in such areas as marketing, graphic and Web design, IT support or even translations are becoming more common.

Clients are most likely to hire virtual assistants to save money-virtual assistants pay for their own equipment, taxes, training, healthcare and insurance-or because they need help with a temporary project. Industries most often hiring virtual assistants include the real estate, coaching, financial services, accounting and legal.

If you're wondering how to start a business^[7] as a virtual assistant, Elite Office Support^[8] founder Susan Totman offers these tips:

1. Decide just what type of services you want to offer, and analyze your background to ensure you have adequate experience.
2. Determine your business niche-consider specializing in just two to three services.
3. Determine how much time and energy you have to commit to your venture. Do you want to work part or full time?
4. Conduct thorough industry research to determine a need for your services in your local area.
5. Outline who your clients are, where they are and how to access them.
6. Do a market analysis. Find out the needs for your niche and focus on how you'll apply that to your business.
7. Know your budgetary constraints-projected expenses, expected income and how long you can "float" until your business is running successfully.
8. Prepare a business plan and review it often to manage growth and change.
9. Examine your equipment, software and work space to ensure they meet client needs.
10. Wrap up all legal and financial aspects of startup before securing your first client.
11. Market your services 24/7. Just because you've built a Web site or placed an ad in the Yellow

Pages doesn't mean clients will come knocking on your door.

You might want to consider joining a professional organization or networking group. This will give you the opportunity to network, build camaraderie and have access to a knowledge bank for solving technical problems.

Progressive Leadership's^[9] Carole Nicolaidis, a Columbus, Ohio-based business coach, has helped a number of virtual assistants match their talents with sound business planning. "Enthusiasm for your work propels you to rise early, work weird hours, and can even make you feel a tinge of guilt for getting paid for doing something you enjoy so much," says Nicolaidis. Wouldn't we all like to have such a guilty pleasure?

To find out more about the virtual assistant industry, check out the following resources:

Worldwide Organizations

Networking and Support Groups

Free Worldwide Directories

Certification Programs

Books

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1. <http://www.wickedwordcraft.com/>
2. <http://www.secondact.com/work/careers/>
3. <http://www.virtualassistanceu.com/>
4. <http://www.pseassist.com/>
5. <http://www.allianceforvirtualbiz.com/>
6. <http://www.the24hoursecretary.com/>
7. <http://www.entrepreneur.com/startingabusiness/index.html>
8. <http://www.eliteofficesupport.com/>

9. <http://www.progressiveleadership.com/>

10. <http://www.mondaveinc.com/>