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Virtual Assistants **The Buzz**

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The Buzz

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A growing number of people are turning business skills and a home computer into jobs as virtual assistants. Entrepreneurs and their clients are both benefiting from the trend.

"The whole concept is really based on the idea that technology is changing the way businesses operate and that's what makes it possible and desirable," says author and telecommuting expert Gil Gordon.



"It separates certain office work from the place called the office."

Virtual assistants offer services in a range of areas, from bookkeeping, telemarketing, party planning, writing and editing to real estate support, transcription, website design and software and hardware support.

"The virtual assistant industry is as diverse as the people who work in it," says Renee Shupe, a virtual assistant. And she says the industry fits with the downsizing that's a big part of how today's companies operate.

Gordon agrees that the growth is part of change that has seen companies move to more part-time, job sharing and contract workers.

"[VA's] have somewhat flexible hours and can be a half mile or 100 miles away. They are hired for their brains and abilities, not their ability to bring their body to the office at 8 a.m.," he says.

Angela Allen is president of the International Association of Virtual Assistants (IVAA). She says the industry is growing in many different areas.

"[VA's] were used primarily by small business and entrepreneurs for administrative work, but many more technical and creative services are now being offered to a wide range of customers," she says. "It's a technology-created industry."

The IVAA offers members a chance to network with other VA's and potential clients. There are currently 600 members worldwide.

But not all of those doing this kind of work belong to a professional organization. "Stats are a challenge," says Allen.

"I can tell you that doing a search for virtual assistants bring up a greater number of websites than ever before," says Shupe.

Shupe worked in administration for more than 10 years before becoming a VA. She likes the opportunity to control her own destiny and how she spends her time.

Lorraine Carol launched her VA business in November 2002. She loves working at home on marketing, writing and editing.

"I like working flexible hours. I'm single with no kids and don't mind working evenings or weekends," says Carol. "It seemed like a leading-edge type of profession and I like being on the edge."

Because virtual assistants work in the comfort of their own home, they don't have to spend as much money on gas and work clothes.

There are challenges, however.

"You are required to get the work done, so you have to be self-motivated. Your reputation is going to be determined by you," says Belinda Stringer. She is the director of a placement service for virtual assistants.

"You need to have good morals and a good work ethic to succeed in a virtual workplace."

Working as a virtual assistant can be lonely. Experts recommend getting out to meet others in the industry who understand isolation issues.

"I couldn't do what I do, I couldn't handle it, without people interaction. But it's very much there if you're involved in a professional organization where you can create, develop and nurture through a network of peers," says Allen.

For companies that hire virtual assistants, expenses for taxes, rent, supplies, equipment, wages and employee benefits can be reduced.

And virtual assistants are paid only for the time it takes to do the job, rather than a full-time salary.

Shupe estimates the average hourly wage for virtual assistants at \$30 to \$50 an hour, depending on the task and required skills.

Some associations offer their members additional training or even certification. "While this [certification] isn't necessary, it does create the effect of being a professional virtual assistant," says Shupe.

Virtual assistants also need the equipment required to complete their tasks. You'll need a good computer with the latest software. Accessories such as scanners, color printers, headsets and job-specific reference materials are also important.

Allen says many don't realize the job is not just about taking care of clients, but also running a business. "A lot try to do everything themselves. It's difficult when you get started to decide to get the help you need. You end up getting stuck learning web pages or doing your own books."

She suggests VA's trade services with each other and then concentrate on what they enjoy most. "Others are equally happy to do what you don't want to," she says.

It looks like the industry will continue to grow. "People are becoming more and more familiar with the term VA and more comfortable working at a distance to get the services they require," says Allen.

"I can only see the industry growing and growing over the next few years, especially as people are downsized and looking for other alternatives to the standard corporate world," says Shupe.

Links

International Virtual Assistants Association (IVAA)

A professional trade association

<http://www.ivaa.org/>

VirtualAssstants.com

Offers a matching service for virtual assistants and prospective employers

<http://virtualassistants.com>

Specialist Virtual Assistants Club

A meeting place and referral service for virtual assistants and companies seeking VA's

<http://www.svaclub.com>

AssistU

Offers information, training and certification for virtual assistants

<http://www.assistu.com>

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