

The Virtual Reality

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Are the days numbered for the office-bound PA? Even staff secretaries are turning to the Virtual option... and so are employers.

There has been an explosion in the secretarial world. It is so significant that even the most staid and boring national newspapers have begun making brief references to it, although the top-level managers who read such papers may not yet have clicked to the real importance of it.

It is the sharp rise of the off-site secretary.

When the 'tele-working' explosion was first predicted some years ago, it was foreseen that working away from an office would be fine for salespeople and certain 'creative' types (like your Editor!), but that secretaries and essential admin. staff would probably remain in the conventional office.

Well, that was all wrong. There are now thousands of freelance secretaries and PAs, known as 'virtual assistants', and it is suspected that more are preparing to leave full-time employee status and join them. There are half a dozen support organisations catering for them, some of which exist to distribute work, and even an online 'university' to coach the new VA.

There is even evidence that some corporations are now looking to VAs rather than temporary staffing agencies.

Who's a VA?

Two organisations claim, in their own ways, to have been first on the block to support VAs. These are IVAA and GAVA, and both are American.

At IVAA, Chris Durst of Woodstock, Connecticut, has been credited with founding the VA support industry.

We estimate a thousand VAs worldwide - Chris Durst

'I saw that the trend toward small business startups accelerating to keep pace with technology - it stood to reason that the needs of the workplace would be changing as well. So I launched the first virtual assisting practice "My Staff", to test the theory and see if it would fly.

'In no time My Staff was turning away clients, and at the same time getting an avalanche of people asking me how they could start a practice like mine. Next thing you know later I founded Staffcentrix.com to incubate VAs, and a non-profit parent association, IVAA, to promote the healthy growth of the industry.

'At May '99 research told us there were around 100 VAs worldwide, mostly US-based. We now estimate a thousand worldwide - there are 500 in the Staffcentrix.com and IVAA communities also.

At GAVA, Julie Hewett also saw the trend coming some years ago.

'I spent a great deal of time researching business opportunities online, and found several websites offering traditional secretarial services electronically, so I decided to give it a try. A couple of months later I received a newsletter from CoachU entitled "The Top Ten Ways to use a Virtual Assistant" - was the first time I had heard the phrase, which was written by Thomas Leonard in his book "World Wisdom" (Bard Press, 1997).'

Slightly confusingly, as well as the IVAA there is also IAVA, which appears to be the first European based organisation.

'We could not find the same level of service provided in the US in the UK,' reports Carol Golcher. 'When asked the US based organisations about help, training, etc., they said they did not deal with the UK. Three of us first met when a teleconference call was set up to discuss this issue, and over the two weeks we have had over 150 new contacts.

'Because we have been contacted by more businessmen and businesses than we can handle personally, it now seems a good idea to give them a central point at which to find their 'perfect' VA. We will take commission from the businesses and an annual membership from the VA.'

What does a VA do?

There is an argument that a VA does best by offering specialist services rather than general secretarial ones. Typically, Judy Vorfeld of Ossweb, Arizona, has concentrated on text-editing for corporate customers.

'It's okay to be a generalist, but I've learned that branding myself as 'someone who works with writers' gets me more serious inquiries.

'Many business owners fall for the common misconception that they can do everything now that they have an intelligent PC - well, PCs may be intelligent, but they are rarely wise! Business owners, having paid a considerable sum for these computers, felt they could handle their own business documents without help... they hire accountants to handle their finances, but feel guilty if they hire someone to edit a one-page document that, if written skilfully, could mean thousands of dollars of income.

'One now wonders how much money was never seen because people didn't place enough value on their written presentations.'

Through perseverance, Judy has now built up a worthwhile business putting this right, and the vast majority of her work is now online.

In England, Barbara Edwards is Virtual Solutions of Guildford, and turned to working for herself after years of taking bags of files home from her job.

'For the last six years I have been doing public relations research, market research, I answer calls, send out promotional literature for an Australian businessman, and liaise with British newspapers and freelance journalists in Japan - the time difference makes this difficult for him.'

Remote book-keeping is becoming a popular outsourced activity, and Julie at GAVA says that when

set up properly, it is secure for the employer, and will increase as electronic banking becomes more common.

The typical VA, says Chris Durst at IVAA, is female, and will stay in her traditional job while they look after hours to find their first client and then set up their home-based business.

'Military spouses who are subjected to the nomadic lifestyle that comes with military life, find the chance to have a "portable" business that does not depend on their geography. The VA with a disability can work in a place that is customized to their needs - their own home.'

The work traditionally comes from other small companies, but IVAA reports corporate human-resources managers now cautiously researching the option, as a more flexible than agency temps return, the Americans suggest that new VAs earn about USD35 an hour, while those with experience can charge USD50 to 75.

What hazards are there?

GAVA suggests that exchange rates can make competitive pitching for work a little difficult, but see evidence of American businesses using foreign VAs to take advantage of the lower labour costs. Others are not so sure.

'Occasional leads come through from GAVA, always for work in the USA,' reports Kathie Thomas of Clayton's Secretary in Australia. 'I tend to be tender for some, but I find that many of these clients are still unsure about how remote work can be done... funny, because here I've had approaches from Japan, Papua New Guinea, and Malaysia!'

Judy Vorfeld worries that the biggest difficulty is in transfer of payments.

'I have a small business, and cannot afford a merchant account, so I require either a money order or wire transfer. Both methods are inconvenient to a client, and for a wire transfer both of us may pay the equivalent of USD15-20 service fee. If the entire job is under USD200, it's hardly worth it - but I'm investigating a new online checking account (X.com) that may be the answer.'

What is the support?

A wonderful new word, which we on this magazine love so much, is now part of an association title in Buffalo, USA, Pat Kozma is president of the Executary Network, which she began to help others through the issues of marketing, maintenance, and management. She is currently finishing the construction of her website before opening for membership shortly in July, and targets a membership of 1,500 in five years.

'My vision grew from personal experience of developing and managing an 'off-premises' secretarial service, pre-Internet,' she told us. 'I learned a lot about what many feel is an intimidating proposition to entrust a job to someone you don't "know."'

'My own success in doing this suggested to me that the Internet simply requires a different definition of what it means to "know" someone, and I believe quite strongly that issues of trust can be dealt with very effectively.

'Our Apprenticeship Program is designed to accommodate folks who do not necessarily feel ready to advertise their services on the Internet, but who nonetheless wish to benefit from the experience of others in the business, professionals who can answer specific questions they may have, and from the possibility of subcontracting work from others or even bidding on their own contracts which may be advertised on our Bulletin Board'.

Kathie Thomas of 'A Clayton's Secretary' in Australia says that she received early back-up from HSS (Home Secretarial Services) which went online in 1996.

'Linda, who runs HSS had been operating on a local level with homebased secretaries for some years before going online. I was HSS's first international member and Linda and I regularly refer members to one another.

'But there are support professional associations like ABSSI (Association Business Support Services) of which I am a member - their directory of members and their regular newsletters are worth getting.

The major support for VAs may come from AssistU, the 'virtual university', run by Stacy Brice from Baltimore, Maryland. She says she was America's first VA in the early 1980s, worked with the Coz organisation which invented the VA term before launching her own training, and has now trained many VAs so far, although all from the States.

Part of her programme involves a weekly teleconference call, which she does not see as a bar to international training.

'International rates are getting lower almost daily, and the cost of calls to the US isn't at all a con for them - it's still often less expensive than travelling to an in-person class.

'Our reason for not having already expanded internationally has nothing to do with the cost. It's simply because we recognize that there's just so much to do here in the US, and this is still our fo

The AssistU course is a 20-week one, involving assignments.

'We have very high standards regarding the people we accept - less than half of the people who a get an interview, and of those that do, about 80% will be accepted into the Virtual Training Progr The reason we have only a one per cent failure rate is because of our upfront screening.

'We only train people who have several years experience as admin assistants or executive assista or related backgrounds. So the program isn't about how to do a spreadsheet or a mail-merge - th already have terrific admin skills. Our program is far more of a Master's level finishing school, wh they learn to create strong businesses, how to work virtually, how to create relationships, how to themselves in a way that corporate America never did.

'We take them from A to Z, through all the things a micro business owner needs toknow, and rare does. There's also an incredibly rigorous, eight-week long client-simulated experience, where thei skills and talents and abilities are tested, there are books to read, research to be done, writing exercises, cyber-exercises, role plays, and a whole lot of very deep and hard thinking - by the tim someone graduates, they have nearly 400 hours of experience.

'We've blazed a trail, and we've revolutionized the way people work together - an absolute shatte of the traditional Boss/assistant paradigm. We've trained hundreds of women to be the best VAs i world.'

The AssistU website also includes the Daily Assistant, a regular update of helpful tips for the VA.

Useful Websites:

www.ivaa.org

www.gava.org

www.iava.co.uk

www.asecretary.com.au

www.executary.com

www.assistu.com

www.staffcentrix.com

www.ossweb.com

www.abssi.org