

## Home-Based Success Story

# 'Clayton's Secretary'

*Kathie Thomas shares her experience*

**'Clayton's Secretary' came out of a brochure Kathie was preparing to tell businesses about her new service. She hadn't settled on a name and as she prepared the brochure she finished it with "...let me be the secretary you have when you haven't got a secretary." Immediately came to mind "Clayton's Secretary" and the name has been with her since.**

That was in 1994 and a lot has happened since that day. Kathie had always wanted to be in her own business and had looked at many different types of businesses. But what appealed to her most is being able to stay at home. She needed to earn an income but she desperately wanted to be home with her five daughters.

In 1993 Kathie had been working with a team on the federal government initiative, The Australian Best Practice Demonstration Program and became a very keen advocate of 'Best Practice'. It was a term widely used during the period 1991-1994. Late in 1993 Kathie won the Secretary of the Year award for Victoria through the Institute of Professional Secretaries Australia and was runner up for the National title.

Kathie believes her involvement and interest in the Best Practice Program contributed towards her being given the award. She won the full Microsoft Office Professional package and so her husband bought her a computer on which to use it. That was all she needed to realise she could work at home, using the skills she'd been developing for the past twenty years in widely different areas from the banking field to the Department of Defence, from a furniture store to a research organisation.

Setting up business wasn't an easy process - there was much to learn and information wasn't as easy to come across then as it is today. Small Busi-

ness Victoria was fairly new and there weren't many publications around about setting up a business at home. Kathie had to rely heavily on all the information she'd gleaned from the various businesses and organisations she'd worked in over the years.

Home-based businesses had the stigma of being 'backyard businesses' and Kathie recalls during her first

year receiving a phone call from a lady who'd seen a flyer in her letterbox, asking for some typing to be done. "When she asked how much it would cost her, and I told her, the lady was quite indignant and told me that the 15 year old girl down the street could do it for a lot less. I told her fine, then go to that girl for your typing, but if you're interested in having a professional look after you and provide fast service, then come and see me." The lady commented, "but you're working in your home, aren't you?" and I gave her the reply, "yes, but I'm not a backyard business. I never heard from her again." That episode just made Kathie more



Kathie busy at work in her home office

phones ringing at the same time, faxes coming in, an urgent request from a new client who has left things to the last minute, and they need it now. Modifying a database. Running off to the local printer to get flyers printed for a mail merge. Preparing envelopes and labels for the same mail merge to get out before the mail closes and it's already 4:00pm. Giving advice to someone who is thinking of starting up their own secretarial support service in their home.

All this in an office at the front of her home, that gives one the impression of being 'very busy' as soon as it is entered. "It amazes me," Kathie says, "the number of people who say to me 'oh, it's a real office!' What were they expecting?"

Kathie loves being in her office, which she shares with her husband when he's not out with clients, and so do their family. It's the first place the children come to as each one comes home from school separately. They share a little of their day with her, before moving on to food, homework and time with friends.

The office is where they always know they can find her. It is important to Kathie that her office, as well as being workable, is a place that is comfortable to be in. But, she warns those just setting up, it's important that when starting up, they don't spend more than they can afford to get the equipment they want.

Better just to get what they need to start off with, and then gradually reward themselves as things develop. Rewards are a great motivator! Initially a desk, chair (ergonomic), computer, software and printer. And an answering machine. Later can come the mobile phone, fax machine, filing cabinets, photocopier, visitor's chair, and the myriad of other things they'd like to have in an office.

Today Kathie not only runs a very

**...needed to earn an income but she desperately wanted to be home with her five daughters**

determined to develop a professionalism about her business and not to let people like that deter her.

A typical day sees a couple of

busy home-based secretarial support service, but heads The Internet Home-Based Secretaries Network which was launched in 1996. She'd been receiving phone calls from others who were planning to do what she was doing and Kathie had long had the need to refer work out - things were getting busy and she never liked to say 'no' to a prospective client. It wasn't until she entered the new technological world of the Internet late 1995 that Kathie discovered how she could make the referral system work.

A home-based secretary in Los Angeles had started up a local network called Home Secretarial Services and Kathie emailed Linda regularly for information and advice. They developed an affiliation - both were working towards the same end. It was decided that a network would be set up here in Australia, a business plan was developed and given to Kathie's accountant, approved and the network was launched in April 1996. Until that time, Kathie

couldn't even see how she could possibly run a secretarial business over the Internet.

Today there are members in Victoria, NSW and SA, also the UK and

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an affiliation with the network in several states in the USA. Kathie has also been corresponding over the Internet with others in India and Malaysia and it is hoped networks will open up in both countries soon. It is Kathie's plan to develop a network world-wide of home-based secretaries. Each works as an individual contractor and all that they earn is kept by that contractor.

An annual subscription ensures that they remain a member of the net-

work. "There are many businesses out there, needing the services of a secretary, but don't want to engage a full-time one, nor do they have the need."

Kathie says. "Also, contracting out to home-based secretaries means the client doesn't need to have a separate office or corner for an employee, they don't need to purchase the hardware or software, or stationery, or the myriad of other items that come with the work that is involved. And, there's no workcover, taxation, insurance costs, etc related to engaging an employee. Each home-based secretary is an independent contractor, responsible for their own costs, equipment, stationery needs, etc."

Further, many associations, clubs and networks, are now finding the need to have a 'paid secretariat' and what better way to do this, than to contract someone who already has an office, the equipment and the know-how to operate a membership-based organisation. Kathie should know - she has been pro-

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viding this type of service for some time now. Some of the members registered with the network are also providing this type of service.

Further to this, the network is able to provide 'travel-aid', which means if a client is travelling overseas, they can engage the services of a secretary in that area who can make all their contact calls for them, and set up their itinerary, using their 'local' knowledge. This would certainly be better than a client having to sit up in the early hours of the morning, making overseas calls. A 'local' home-based secretary can do this for them, at the cost of local charges, instead of overseas charges.

Another benefit for members of the network, particularly those just starting out, is the Yellow Pages advertisement and the web page that covers The Internet Home-Based Secretaries Network. It gives new home-based secretaries a chance to get their name out, without having to go to all that expense when they're first starting out. Something that Kathie never had when she first started.

"I haven't really had a 'role model' so to speak, because nobody has done what I'm doing here in Australia on this scale. There have always been small networks of locals in business, but not on an interstate or overseas level in this field. My husband has always been a wonderful support and I bounce ideas off him. Also, I read avidly and listen to motivational tapes."

Some of the books that Kathie has found useful are: 'Networking for Success' by Robyn Henderson, 'Skill with People' by Les Giblin, and 'There's a Lipstick in my Briefcase' by Cyndi Kaplan. She strongly believes in attending networking seminars, checks her local paper for functions happening locally and belongs to a number of professional associations to help keep her informed and up-to-date.

"I love working on my own and being home," she says, "however, it's very important to ensure that you have 'people' contact and keep up with what's going on out there. Belonging to professional associations and making myself go out to meetings, even if

I don't always feel like it, has helped my professionalism and my motivation. Sharing ideas with others and seeing that you're not all alone is a big help. And of course, it gets your name out there!"

Statistics already show that a large number of small businesses are being operated from home and that a good proportion of these are being run by women. Kathie would like to see councils, government and schools accept that home-based businesses are professional and on the increase. Today's technology has gone a long way to contributing to this factor. She believes the government has already taken a step in the right direction with their report that was published in February this year called 'Under the Microscope - Micro Businesses in Australia'.

For further details and information Kathie can be contacted on phone in Melbourne on (03) 9583 8359, mobile: 0413 059 325, fax: (03) 9585 3785 or via her web page at <http://www.asecretary.com.au>.

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