

SMALL BUSINESS

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Virtual assistants get the job done

Office Management; Offshore help charges as little as \$5 an hour

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Feeling embattled? Bugged down by administrative tasks? Behind on invoicing? No time to chase new prospects? Welcome to the world of small business, in which people managing fast-growing companies with tight cash flows are running a week behind schedule. All is not lost. Thanks to the Internet, taking on part-time help has become much easier. Virtual assistants can help clear your backlog -- and stay up-to-date with your to-do list -- no matter where you are located.

Timothy Ferriss raised the idea of virtual assistants in his book, *The Four Hour Work Week*. He says the key to reducing your workload and increasing efficiency is to separate out the mundane, repetitive tasks that take up time but don't earn money. Delegating them to someone else allows you to focus on targeting new prospects, do long-term planning, or even go home early to spend time with your family.

A virtual assistant can provide most of the services offered by a traditional on-site assistant, says Michele Jamieson, founder of the Canadian Virtual Assistant network. "I have had clients mail me the contents of a filing cabinet because they were so disorganized," she says. "I organized it, then mailed it back to them."

Generally, virtual assistants can handle administrative tasks including filing, typing, appointment scheduling, and e-mail management. Some look after more esoteric tasks including running eBay auctions, and even writing blog entries. "Other clients may be project-based, where they have just one task per month that they need handled," Ms. Jamieson says. Virtual assistants often have skills in specific areas such as Web-page creation, marketing, copywriting or graphic design, and many of them maintain networks of contacts to whom they can hand off specific tasks on a clients' behalf.

Lisa Martin would find life very difficult without Ms. Jamieson, who she has used as her virtual assistant for six years. Ms. Martin, who runs a consulting firm for working mothers called Briefcase Moms, delegates a range of tasks each month, some of which may get passed on to Ms. Jamieson's network of administrative contacts.

"They do all the administrative work, from billing to designing PowerPoint presentations," she says, adding this gives her the opportunity to concentrate on the value-added part of her business. "She lives in a time zone three hours ahead of me," says Vancouver-based Ms. Martin, who trusts her assistant enough to give her access to her credit card information, even though they have never met face to face.

A virtual assistant is useful for businesses that cannot afford to employ a full-time PA with the associated overhead that brings, says Elayne Whitfield, founder of the Canadian Virtual Assistant Connection (CVAC). Ms. Whitfield, who is a virtual assistant, has clients from industries including real estate and telecommunications. "It saves the cost of hiring a full-time assistant on the premises, including the space that they would take up, and the training, too," she says.

The cost of a virtual assistant depends on where you go. Mr. Ferriss suggests trying offshore virtual assistants, which can charge as little as \$5 an hour. There is a burgeoning community of companies providing services in India. However, the three Indian firms tested by the Financial Post were slow to respond and difficult to manage.

The quality of many Western virtual assistants is much higher, but you pay for it. "Fees range all over the board," Ms. Jamieson says. "You are looking at anything from \$30 to \$60 per hour, depending on who you are working with."

Depending on the nature of the work, one of the biggest challenges for a small business working with a virtual assistant could be monitoring and managing workload. Ms. Martin used Google's online calendar for a while, but shifted to WebEx WebOffice, which provides online e-mail, scheduling, document management, task lists and database features. She hasn't looked back. "I would not have any work-life balance if I didn't have my virtual assistant supporting me," she says. "I would be up until midnight, trying to do my books. I'm hopeless at that."

All of this comes at a cost, but savvy businesspeople may be able to use the time they save to increase their sales enough to offset the expense. Aside from the increased efficiency, business

people with virtual help may finally get the chance to say: "I'll have my people contact you."
How cool is that?

FIVE TIPS FOR FINDING AND USING A V.A.:

DO YOUR RESEARCH

Ask for customer references, read the assistant's resume, and even, if appropriate, use two or three assistants in parallel for the first few weeks to see which one suits you best.

IDENTIFY YOUR WORK

Understanding the tasks that can be outsourced will help you focus on those that are core to the business. Don't outsource tasks that are quicker to do yourself, but, equally, whenever you do something, ask whether a virtual assistant could do it more effectively.

ENSURE CONTINUITY

Does your assistant have a contingency plan should they become sick, or go on holiday? Make sure their level of availability reflects the needs of your business.

PREPARE FOR AN INITIAL INVESTMENT

You may not have to train a virtual assistant in typing and scheduling, but they may need some time to learn your system, and perhaps even refine it. Be prepared to put in the extra initial hours to help manage that.

DON'T MICROMANAGE

Trust is an important part of the relationship. Once you have learned how to work together, be prepared to delegate tasks without worrying how they are done. Otherwise you may spend more time managing your assistant than you initially did managing your work.

Source: Danny Bradbury, Financial Post