



### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

There has been lots of discussion of late on various Virtual Assistant (VA) lists around the world about what VAs should be calling themselves.

Basically, the problem appears to be that after the term 'virtual assistant' was hijacked by outsourcing companies from cheap labour countries like China and India after the publication of Tim Ferris' *The 4 Hour Work Week*, and the apparently wanton bandying about of the term on freelancing sites like Elance and Guru.com, a kind of confusion seems to have descended - apparently - amongst the ranks of potential clients so that when a professional VA answers the question "What do you do?" with "I'm a VA/virtual assistant", s/he is being lumped in so to speak with the cheaper operators. This can lead to difficulties when the time comes to negotiate a contract with the client, who supposedly is operating under the misconception from what they may or may not have heard/read about what a virtual assistant actually is.

It has gotten to the point where many professional virtual assistants are beginning to despair that they will ever be able to grow their businesses when faced with cheaper operators offering their services for a fraction of the VA's charge out rate.

So the question has arisen, should we call ourselves something else? My answer is most definitely no. A quack is a quack not a medical practitioner, and the medical profession didn't stop calling themselves doctors just because someone started selling snake oil.

My belief has always been that **education** is the key. The onus rest most decidedly on professional virtual assistants themselves to educate clients, potential clients and others about the industry and what it is we do - and more importantly what **differentiates** them from their cheaper counterparts.

Note my continued use of the word '*professional*'. I am not meaning to imply that off-shore providers are not professionals, but a virtual assistant - a *professional* virtual assistant - is not someone who can type, has access to an internet-connected computer, and the gift of the gab. A *professional* virtual assistant has usually transitioned years of employment in office administration and specialisation, working in a particular industry or field in a corporate setting, they have honed their computer skills, been involved in advanced training courses, managing large offices, and often supervising junior staff - all whilst acting as assistant to the business owner. They could also have had responsibility for local area networks, created and maintained corporate websites, or been responsible for planning major events.

**THIS** is what sets a *professional* virtual assistant apart.

It irks me no end when I hear business people say they are 'doing a favour' for the people they are outsourcing to at \$2/hour because "otherwise they wouldn't be working at all", or "I'm helping their economy", or some other misplaced philanthropic notion of superiority. (Incidentally, our own economy could use some help right about now!) Call a spade a spade - these businesses outsource to cheaper providers because they want to save money. They're not after **quality** relationships - sometimes not even quality work product. They just want the job done and done cheaply to keep overheads down.

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I even heard one successful businessman say that he would keep the call centre side of the business in Australia because of the negative perception Australians have about calling an Australian company and speaking to someone in Bangladesh, but would outsource the IT or back office aspects of the business because it would save the business money and help out those poor souls who would otherwise be living in the gutter. (Australia's gutters are getting fuller every day.)

Cheaper providers definitely have a place in the market - and frankly they service an end of the market I don't particularly want or need to partner with.

If you're a VA - a *professional* VA - even one with a multi-VA practice, it is **your** responsibility to continually educate potential clients about what it is that sets you apart. There will always be competition. You need to decide what your target market is and go for that. If all you want is volume of work, then reduce your rate and compete directly in that market. But if you want *quality* work, with *quality* clients, who value what you bring to the partnership, then work towards setting yourself apart. Educate your potential clients on your value to them, and show them you're different with continuing education and certification. And put this on your site. If you get certified be proud of your achievement and make sure it's on your site for all to see.

If you're a business looking at your options and are considering utilising a virtual assistant, please do your homework. If you're after **cheap**, then the off-shore companies are probably your best bet - and you get to feel good about yourself at the same time! It's worth doing your homework though and remembering that some of those off-shore providers you are considering outsourcing to have abysmal workplace standards, their workers have limited or no rights, and many are guilty of using child labour. However, if you're after quality, getting the job done correctly the first time, a real partnership with a professional service provider who is keen to see you succeed and takes a vested interest in your business and its success, then look for a virtual business service provider who fits what you need. Start with their website, check references, testimonials, whether they have industry certification, **TALK** to them on the phone so you can ask questions and get a feel for the VA and the way they work. You'll definitely pay more than \$2/hour for their services but you were after quality from the get go, right? After all, you wouldn't want to drink a vintage red out of a cask would you?

Anyone can type these days - not everyone can bring the value to a business that partnering with a professional virtual assistant can.

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One of Queensland's most respected virtual assistants, Lyn is also founder of the Australian Virtual Business Network ([www.avbn.com.au](http://www.avbn.com.au)), is a founding member and served for three years on the steering committee, and speaks at, the annual Online International Virtual Assistants Convention ([www.oivac.com](http://www.oivac.com)), and also serves as Australian representative on international committees looking at standards and certification for the VA industry.