



VIRTUAL ASSISTANTS – WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS FOR YOU?
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What do you do if you're a sole operator or independent professional/executive in need of professional, confidential admin support, but don't want to go to the expense and hassle involved in hiring your own staff?

What if you don't have the space for staff, or necessary expertise to complete a particular job?

Your best office support staff member goes off on maternity leave and you think your only alternative is to hire an expensive and unmotivated temp?

Think again! Virtual Assistants (VAs), also known as Virtual Office Professionals or Virtual Business Operators, provide an alternative, cost-effective staffing solution for businesses of all sizes, including sole operators. They are **not** temps, but small business operators with a vested interest in their clients' success.

You can think of a VA as a "remote" or "home-based" secretary. They are independent consultants who provide a range of personal assistant and office support services for clients - or they might specialise in just one, like bookkeeping or transcription. They are called "virtual" because they provide these services from their own offices - rather than using the office space and equipment of their clients - and because they utilise the technologies made available by the internet, such as email, instant messaging, chat servers and web-based conferencing tools.

VAs provide profound cost-saving benefits to the businesses and individuals they partner with, and have an important role to play in today's business environment, as they form a large part of the growing trend towards home-based business.

Many people have difficulty grasping the concept of a remote assistant, so it is not surprising that understanding the benefits poses a problem. So what are the benefits, **what's in it for you** and who would benefit from the partnership?

VAs can perform the same services as office-based employees but without the associated costs such as payroll tax, worker's compensation, superannuation, sick and other leave, or training. There are no equipment costs as VAs utilise their own equipment, and there are none of the associated costs of wear and tear, office space, lighting, power, telephone and so on.

In addition, the VA is available out of normal hours, on weekends, and public holidays. How much do you lose, both in monetary terms and in terms of productivity, on office politics and staff chatting in the coffee room? Clients **pay only for time on task** when they partner with a VA so there is no time/money lost on these typical office behaviours.

VAs **partner** with clients, which means that a longer term relationship can develop in much the same way as one would with an onsite personal assistant - yet clients do not have the associated costs of an employee mentioned above.

"Professional Virtual Assistance for the 21st Century Professional"

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So why wouldn't you just use a temporary staffing agency to "fill the gaps" in your administrative support needs? Temps do not always offer the most cost effective solutions for clients as on-costs are still factored into the hourly rate by the agency. In addition, when clients partner with a VA they get **consistency of support** - not a different person each time they need assistance, necessitating training of each new temp in their business procedures. The VA has a **vested interest** in helping clients succeed in their own business goals - a temp does not have the same interest, and as they know they'll be in a different workplace next week - or even tomorrow - they are disinclined to do more than the bare minimum required of them, and are certainly not interested in learning about your business.

This partnership with clients and vested interest in their success are two of the areas that differentiate Virtual Assistants from other freelancers you may find on Elance or Guru - and definitely differentiates them from companies found in India, the Philippines or China.

VAs offer a wide variety of office support services including secretarial support, personal and executive assistance, word processing, database management, transcription services, mail outs, bookkeeping, web design and maintenance, desktop publishing, presentations, spreadsheets, customer relationship management, e-newsletters and e-mailouts, and office services such as faxing, email and scanning. Clients have access to specialist skills that may not be available through a temp agency or serviced office, and access to latest technologies including web-based conferencing, online calendar and document sharing and project collaboration, real time chat and digital transcription services.

As Michael Russer puts it in *The Obsolete Employee*:

"Any time you do something outside of your core competency you pay top dollar for amateur results."

With clients across Australia, Singapore, in the UK, Canada, and throughout North America, I seldom see my clients. But with the technology available today including email, fax, instant messaging services, Skype, Twitter, digital transcription technology, internet telephony and internet-based file sharing facilities, I'm as close to my clients as if I was in the next room!

So doesn't that mean that being a VA is as easy as knowing how to type and "drive" a PC? Absolutely not! A colleague recently put it best when she said:

*"The myth is that **anyone** can be a virtual assistant. Being a VA is more than just proclaiming 'I am a VA', logging on to a computer and creating a web site. Professional VAs transition years of office administration experience and specialisation from a corporate setting to running their own successful business. Those experiences can include enrolment in advanced training courses, managing offices and supervising large numbers of personnel - all while acting as the assistant to the owner. Others had responsibility for local area networks (LANs), creating and maintaining corporate web sites, planning major events, etc. These are just a few examples of qualifications that help make a VA a 'professional'."*

For more information on how a professional VA can help you and your business, contact eSOS by emailing lyn@execstress.com or visit <http://www.execstress.com>

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Award winner for Professional Services, and 2006 Thomas Leonard International VA of Distinction Award Nominee - has been in private practice since February 2000 as owner/manager of Executive Stress Office Support, providing remote executive assistant, office support and admin services to independent consultants and professionals around the world.

One of Queensland's most respected virtual assistants, Lyn is also founder of the Australian Virtual Business Network (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), and also serves as Australian representative on international committees looking at standards and certification for the VA industry.