



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 cheaper labour countries and emerging economies like China, the Philippines 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 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", the client immediately thinks of these cheaper operators. This can lead to difficulties when the time comes to negotiate a contract with the client, who can be operating under the misconception that a virtual assistant equates to "cheap" and a lack of understanding about what a virtual assistant actually is.

To make matters worse, Productivity501 posted on their blog that "The most common perception of a virtual assistant is someone working in a call centre in India". (Actually it is more correct to say this is the **most recent** perception ... not the most common.)

It has reached 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 rests 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; perhaps managed 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.

"Professional Virtual Assistance for the 21st Century Professional"

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Here's a definition that will hopefully clear up what a virtual assistant **truly** is:

"A virtual assistant (VA) is a highly-skilled, independent professional entrepreneur who provides remote administrative, technical and/or creative business support services to clients locally, nationally or globally."

It annoys 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. And that's okay - but it's about understanding **why** you are outsourcing. If it's bottom line - say so.

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 (his words). Remember, philanthropy is not the same as charity. If you, as a client, believe you are being philanthropic by sending your work to India or the Philippines, then I would argue you would pay them \$30 or \$40 an hour - not \$2 or \$5 - regardless of their cost of living. Alternatively, you could send a percentage of the profit you make off the back of this cheaper labour back to the country of origin. Now **that's** philanthropy.

Cheaper providers definitely have a place in the market - and frankly they serve 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. As one business person put it "It's never about the money ... except when the value hasn't been established". 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 achieve an industry certification 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! Before you sign on the dotted line though, ask yourself one question: if you were going to see a plastic surgeon, would you use one who's inexperienced and likely to carve you up? Or do you spend a few extra dollars for skill, experience and a guarantee they'll do a good job?

If you decide to go for it, it's worth doing your homework and remembering that some of those off-shore providers you are considering outsourcing to have abysmal workplace standards, their workers may have limited or no rights, and some have been found guilty of using under-age workers. I found one online that actually motivates its staff with free beer!

Are you really using a virtual assistant as you understand it (see definition above), or are you actually using a company with a head office in Canada or the US who itself is making money from the cheaper labour countries by having their operations based in the Philippines?

If this doesn't concern you, think about the fact that often utilising these cheaper providers requires a level of micromanagement on your part that is not required if you utilise the services of a professional, experienced virtual assistant at the outset. If you charge your services out at say \$250/hour and you spend 2 hours a week micromanaging your VA, you can see immediately that the upfront cost savings of using a Filipino service provider for example is offset by the \$500 it costs you to micromanage their time. A professional VA won't require this level of micromanagement – another thing that sets them apart from the cheaper operators.

Also remember, people can say anything on a website whether it's true or not. Perhaps the "virtual assistants" are said to hold degrees – but is a degree obtained in India say the same as a degree obtained in the US or the UK or Australia? How do you know it's true? Can you check? If you use a VA in-country you at least have the opportunity to check their credentials against your own understanding of the home country's education standards.

I would also argue that you consider paying people what they are worth – not what you consider 'fair' based on a potentially misguided understanding of their living standards.

Other things to consider: cultural misinterpretations, language barrier, ethics. There are plenty of examples of offshore freelancers plagiarising content – even stealing whole websites – and passing them off as their own or using them as "templates" for client's sites. Do you want your intellectual property and/or confidential information in the hands of people who may not have the same ethics as you? If something goes awry, how difficult might it be to seek legal redress? Actions across borders can be so difficult and so expensive that it's often not worth pursuing.

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?

I'm not a doctor just because I can put a Bandaid on a skinned knee – similarly you can't call yourself a professional virtual assistant just because you can type. 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), 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. She is Queensland representative on the Board of International Contractors Australia, and host of Australia's first-ever internet radio show for the virtual business industry: The Virtual Business Show (www.virtualbizshow.com.au).