


What Every Business Owner Should Know About Virtual Assistance



A Practical Guide for the Small Business Industry

By: Girl Friday Services of Maine

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What is a Virtual Assistant?




There are so many different versions of what a Virtual Assistant is, lets start with what a Virtual Assistant is not. A Virtual Assistant a/k/a a VA is not an employee, they don't get your coffee for you nor are they a temporary worker. Okay, lets get back to the topic at hand, what is a Virtual Assistant? A Virtual Assistant is many things:

- An independent contractor
- An entrepreneur
- A highly skilled administrative guru
- A service provider
- A time and money saver for their clients
- A business owner
- A powerful business resource
- A contractor ready to work on your projects when you need them

A Virtual Assistant typically has 5 or more years of administrative assistance experience. Many have even more advanced skills and experience with things such as desktop publishing, sales and marketing, advertising, web designing, event planning, travel planning, customer service etc.

Why do you need to know this stuff?

Every business owner needs to know what a Virtual Assistant is because if they don't, they are missing out on the latest, most strategic business resource that is currently being utilized by highly successful business people in the world. If multi millionaires are utilizing the value of a Virtual Assistant, when they could easily afford a full staff of in-house personnel, shouldn't you check it out for your own business?



Who benefits from working with a VA?

Anyone! Yes that's right, anyone can benefit from working with a Virtual Assistant.

Who are some of the typical clients?

Business owners, business executives, lawyers, real estate brokers, doctors, counselors, coaches, speakers, teachers, authors, sales managers, consultants, artists, technical writers, students, bloggers, online entrepreneurs, therapists, general contractors, real estate developers...

If you have too much to do and not enough time to do it all in, a Virtual Assistant can help you balance your life. You will have more time so you can concentrate on serving your clients, spending time with your family, selling your products, meeting prospective customers, networking within your industry, visiting with friends - whatever it is that seems to take a seat on the back burner during busy times in your business.

Can a VA be helpful when you have in-house staff?

Yes, a Virtual Assistant is there to help you on an as-needed basis. You may have a project that your assistant either does not have the skills to do or does not have the time to do along with their other 10,201 tasks that week. Call a VA to take on that one time project (your dedicated assistant will love you for it). Maybe one of your administrative staff members is going on vacation and no one is available to pick up the slack from their absence. You can contract a VA to work with you for a week. You simply email them projects and directions as needed. A VA does not replace your in-house staff, but they are the strategic outsourcing solution for small businesses, who don't have the funds for a full time assistant or the space for one or who need professional temporary help.



How does a Virtual Assistant work?

A Virtual Assistant typically works remotely from either a satellite office or from their own home office. According to the 2008 Survey by the Virtual Assistance Chamber of Commerce 96.25% of VAs polled conduct their business from their home office. Many VAs never meet their clients as their client base can span the globe.

Through today's technology, Virtual Assistants can receive assignments from their clients through email, internet document sharing, or more conventional ways such as fax, phone, or in person if the client is local. The VA conducts the work on their own computer or telephone and delivers it to their clients through email, internet sharing, fax, mail or in person.

Here are four ways to contract with a Virtual Assistant:

- *pay as you go, paying their hourly fees;
- *flat rate fees for certain projects;
- *monthly or weekly retainers for a set number of hours;
- *commission basis i.e. representing artists and their work..

As an independent contractor you can claim VA services as a tax deduction much like your accountant's fees and you do not need to worry about payroll taxes, retirement funds, sick pay, vacation days, or insurance. Virtual Assistants pay their own taxes, vacations and insurance as they are business owners themselves.

A VA may work their business full time or part time in conjunction with a regular day job. When discussing a working contract with a VA be sure to ask when they are available to do work for you.



Typical services offered by VAs

Here is an extensive list of services that Virtual Assistants may offer. Please check with your VA on what they offer. Every VA has a specific set of skills just as every client has a specific set of needs; but you never know what may come up. Also please note, some VAs like Girl Friday Services of Maine also offer a referral service. So if they can't do what you need done, they'll find someone who can! Check out this list of what you can outsource, you may find something you didn't even know you needed.

- **Desktop Publishing** (newsletters, business cards, brochures, flyers...)
- **Word Processing** (letters, resumes, manuscripts, proposals, manuals)
- **Transcription** (audio, handwritten notes, medical, legal)
- **Editing/Proofreading** (you can only make a 1st impression once, make your written materials error free)
- **Competitive Research** (market analysis, industry research)
- **Transaction Coordinator** (realtor listing management, marketing/mailings, contract to close processing, logistics coordination)
- **File Conversion** (from word to PDF, photos to JPEGs)
- **Meeting Planning** (locate meeting space, arrange catering, contract negotiations, security, invitations, programs)
- **Presentations** (PowerPoint slideshows, booklets, business presentations, event slideshows such as weddings, graduations, reports, charts)
- **General Bookkeeping** (invoicing, AP/AR, collections, bookkeeping)
- **Web Design** (site design, hosting, domain name registration, updates)
- **Office Organization** (for local clients -organize clutter, filing, redo filing system, order supplies, inventory; for virtual clients -order supplies, organize documents on computer...)
- **Sales** (listings on Ebay, Craigslist, Uncle Henry's, Backpage, others)



Typical services offered by VAs

- **Event Planning** (logistics, invitations, announcements, venue reservations, catering, budget, rental of equipment, entertainment, hand outs, gifts...)
- **Office Administration** (word processing, appointment scheduling, email management, filing, photocopying, spreadsheets)
- **Office Management** (HR matters, database creation, payroll, vendors)
- **Realtor Support** (bulk mailings, database management, thank you cards, phone calls, listings, coordinate with closing agent, arrange inspections)
- **Internet Research** (locate friends, vendors and suppliers, competitor research, info for term papers, reports, articles, directions)
- **Marketing & Publicity** (desktop publishing, articles, press releases, advertising, media relations, promotion, branding, logos)
- **Writing** (technical, academic, business plans, reports, business)
- **Association Management** (meeting minutes, agendas, meeting and other planning, database management, mailings, bookkeeping)
- **Reminder Service** (email or phone reminders of meetings, appointments, deadlines, birthdays, anniversaries)
- **Contact Management** (client database creation and maintenance, convert business card info to database, auto responders for client lists)
- **1Shopping Cart** (online shopping cart service, auto responder service)
- **Concierge Services** (travel planning, dinner reservations and recommendations, directions, gift buying, rentals, itineraries...)
- **Personal Assistance** *not typical (personal check book maintenance, filing, errand running, misc tasks as needed)
- **Social Networking Assistance** (creation of profiles on sites such as Myspace, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, industry associations, updates and notices, linking/connections)
- **Executive Personal Assistant** (assist with decision making, purchase authority, email management)



Specialty services and prices of VAs

Some Virtual Assistants offer specialty services such as:

Referrals

Coaching

Resumes and job searches

Working with authors

Paralegal services

Working with specific industries: medical, legal, insurance, real estate.

Bookkeeping services

Investigations and Research

Prices

As an independent contractor a Virtual Assistant's prices can vary depending on the value of the work requested, level of knowledge and skill needed, longevity and quality of experience, location and credentials.

Rates can range from \$15 an hour up to \$100 or more an hour; again depending on the type of service and the VA's experience. The more premium the service, the more you can expect to pay your Virtual Assistant. Retainer clients are often offered a lower rate in exchange for a guaranteed number of hours per month. Remember you are getting top quality work from your VA and they deserve to be paid what they are worth. That is most likely the reason why they went into business for themselves in the first place.

When specific skills and experience that you don't have are needed, you realize the value in paying a fee for a professional attorney, plumber or mechanic to help you. A VA is the same, a highly skilled and experienced professional available to help you with your business needs and decisions.



How to find the perfect VA for you

Finding the perfect Virtual Assistant

First, you should list the services you are looking to have fulfilled and then figure out your budget and other basics such as: are you looking for a regular service such as 3 hours a week? or do you need just a one time project completed? Decide on a geographic location. Will it be necessary to have a local VA who can take things to the printer for you or be on-hand during event planning or will someone who works strictly virtual fit your needs? Personally, I hope you will look to hire Virtual Assistants residing in your own country and more importantly those living right here in your home state/town and help support your own economy. There are thousands of Virtual Assistants worldwide.

There are online membership directories that list Virtual Assistants including: International Virtual Assistants Association, International Association of Virtual Office Assistants, VA4U, VA Networking, Elite Office Support, The VA Connection, Virtual Assistant USA Top Listed and others.

Virtual Assistants tend to be very involved in their local small business networking groups, chambers of commerce and other entrepreneurial groups including online membership sites.

Another way to find a Virtual Assistant is through freelance work sites like elance.com, odesk.com, and ki-work.com etc. These sites offer a venue for buyers/clients to place details of a project frequently referred to as a Request For Proposal (RFP) and have VAs from around the world bid on their project to work for them. The buyer then gets to pick and choose.



How to find the perfect VA for you



However, the best way to find a Virtual Assistant is to ask other business owners for referrals, and check out social networking sites such as LinkedIn, there are several Virtual Assistants on there. Also if you find a VA that you like but their skills do not match a particular project's needs, ask them for a referral to another VA. A professional VA will not try to take on a project they are not qualified to do, but do want to see you succeed in your business and in return will find someone qualified to do the specific work for you.

Look for a Virtual Assistant that guarantees their work. A good VA is confident enough in their skills to offer a money back guarantee for your satisfaction. Also, check out their website, blogs and social networking profiles to find out more about them.

And finally, please try to take your work style into consideration when searching and ask your VA about theirs. If you are a strong Type A personality, you may need someone equally as energetic as you to keep up with you; or you may find someone a little more laid back to be a great compliment to your style.

The great thing about Virtual Assistants is that they are not full time employees. If you are not happy with their work, or their personality just clashes with yours, you are not stuck in an unhappy working relationship and you do not have to hire them again.

You may find you have to go through a bit of trial and error to find the VA that is the right fit for you. After all, your VA is going to be an integral part of your business success, and it should be mutually beneficial and profitable for you both.



Tips for writing a great RFP




Writing a great Request For Proposal (RFP)

Many sites such as VA Networking, Elance.com and others (look for this coming soon to the Maine Association of Virtual Assistants) allow you the buyer/client to post an RFP for review and submission of a bid/quote by Virtual Assistants.

An RFP should include a brief description of who you are, what you do and what your goals are for your business and your project, and your budget for this project. Add links to your personal website and/or blog so that a Virtual Assistant can get to know you a little and see if you will be a good match for them. Be sure to include contact information so that VAs can contact you to ask additional questions that will help them in preparing a quote for your review.

A great RFP should also include details about how long you believe this project will take, when your final deadline for completion is, any long term project milestones and what method you will use to conduct progress checks with the VA. And finally, a Request for Proposal should include information on what resources the Virtual Assistant will need to have experience with and access to. Buying an additional license for specific software for your VA may actually be cost effective if they can take on the work that you struggle with.

When reviewing bids from VAs do not hesitate to ask for referrals or written testimonials. As stated previously you may need to try out a few VAs to find one that is the right fit for you and your business. You both have the same goals in mind, to be effective and successful.



How a VA saves you time and money a sampling...

Card and gift buying and shipping - give your VA a list of people and their birthdays, anniversaries with gift guidelines.

Sales leads - a VA can follow up on leads gathered from your last networking event to qualify those that deserve a follow up call or note and those that are dead ends; so you don't waste your time trying to connect with them.

Fact checking - before you go before a group of people and pitch your proposal, have your VA double check your facts for validity, update your industry information and proofread your materials.

Search for products and services - ask your VA to do some comparison shopping and market research for big ticket items and unusual services that require a little digging for info, they can give you a list of 2 or 3 to contact and make your decision on.

Selling items - outsource your listing of items or services on Ebay or Craigslist to a VA, they will monitor the listings and give you reports on its progress and results.

Registrations - a VA can register your website or profile to online sources that you want to link to or do business with.



How a VA saves you time and money

Article and Press Release submissions - give your VA your written article or Press Release and have them submit them to the appropriate sites and periodicals for you, saving you countless hours of time. Or better yet, contract them to prepare the article or press release for you.

Administrative work - a VA can do most administrative work in much less time than it takes you to do it. They have years of experience doing this, many exclusively. With your time, previously devoted to paperwork, freed up you are able to meet new prospective clients and develop relationships with them and your industry peers thereby increasing your exposure and revenue. This also allows you to spend more time with your family.

Wedding planning - most couples and their parents see wedding planning as a daunting task, outsource this project to a VA and give them your budget, guest list and preferences for food and location. They'll come up with a proposal for your review and tend to the details to be sure it is executed without a hassle to you.

Blog posting, linking, commenting - your VA can respond to comments to your blog, using guidelines set by you, alert you to ones that need your personal response, draft the blog for you to review and mold it to your personal style, and research news.



How a VA saves you time and money



Come on, you know this subject was worthy of a few pages :)

Email management - not one of us can avoid the unwelcome delivery of spam email every day. Give your VA access to your email one day and ask them to unsubscribe you to the numerous email lists we unwittingly become part of. Or maybe you want your VA to check your inbox daily, respond to the not so important ones using your guidelines and alert you to the ones that need immediate or personal attention from you.

Thank you cards and follow ups - a VA can take care of filling out and sending out thank you cards and following up with customers post purchase to ensure their satisfaction and give their buying experience a personal touch.

VA vs. full time employee - a VA only charges for actual time worked, as opposed to a full time employee who gets paid for 8 hours which will often include phone calls, personal emails, breaks, lunch, idle time surfing the internet. By outsourcing to a VA you don't pay employment insurance, vacation or sick days, you don't contribute to retirement plans and workers comp. Plus if your regular employee is out sick, your business doesn't have to stop. Call a VA for a one day project, they work on an as-needed basis.

Equipment and training - a VA uses their own equipment and is already trained to assist you with your business needs. You save time & money by not having to buy equipment, send an employee to a training course, or spending hours training them.



Top 10 ways a VA can revolutionize your business

By VAnetworking member [Diana Ennen](#)

1. A VA brings invaluable work experience and training to the table. You may even find that they will teach you a trick or two. Be it software, hardware or grammar, you can be sure that your VA knows his/her stuff!
2. Because VAs run a business themselves, they have a unique understanding of what your needs as a small business owner are. They will be able to assist and advise you on matters pertaining to Marketing, Branding, Web Design and e-Commerce. What avenues of advancement have you not yet explored
3. Get organized. If you attend conferences and AGMs I'll bet you have a ton of business cards cluttering up your desk. Let your VA scan and enter them into a database for you. Future mail campaigns will be a breeze with a ready-made contact list all neatly stored on a CD.
4. Is there a special project boiling over on the back-burner that you've been wanting to do? Your VA can help with research, planning and coordination, leaving you free to continue your focus on your core-business function.
5. If you're too busy to remember important dates, anniversaries and meetings, your VA, with a tailored reminder service, can assist. From ordering flowers for your mother, to sending a thank you note to a client and even arranging gift baskets for an investor, they aim to please.
6. Conceptualizing marketing items can be agonizing if you don't have the know-how, equipment or creative flair. Most VAs have a wide range of software packages at their finger-tips, as well as experience in creating flyers, brochures and business cards for their own company's. Put your ideas to your VA, they will dazzle you with the results.
7. Planning a much-needed break with your family? Let your VA take care of the details; flights, car hire, accommodation, even a list of "must-see" places of interest. Your VA can handle it all, down to the very last detail.
8. If you're on the road a lot, chances are your cell-phone is often out of signal range and there is no one in your office to take a message should that all-important client call. With the call answering service provided by many VAs, you can divert your calls and rest assured that your client will receive the personal touch rather than dealing with an annoying automated answering device. Your messages will be passed on to you
9. Conferences and networking functions can take a lot out of a small business owner. It is imperative that you attend and make a dazzling show of it, but in order to do so, you have to neglect existing clients. This will no longer be a problem with a VA. They can handle all your conferencing arrangements; table-hire, banner design and creation, even gift bags for client samples. It's that easy!
10. If you have a lot of correspondence, and you're a bit of a "keyboard klutz", your VA can help. Many VAs offer a fully digitized transcription service. Simply record your memos/letters onto your computer and email them to your VA, s/he will have it neatly typed and ready for mailing in no time! Other VAs may provide dictated typing as a service, so that urgent e-mail is just a phone-call away.



Top 10 things a VA can do for your business

By VAnetworking member [Diana Ennen](#)

1. A VA can assist you with marketing support, increasing your clientele and freeing up valuable time to service your customers. They also can handle all your marketing and publicity helping you to spread the word about your product or services.
2. Many Virtual Assistants specialize in web design and search engine optimization. Once you work with a VA, they know your business inside and out, who better to help you prepare your website.
3. A Virtual Assistant can make your next presentation shine by giving it that polished professional presentation which is sure to capture your audience and promote all your products and services.
4. A Virtual Assistant can be instrumental in proofing, editing, and typing all your correspondence, pleadings, manuscripts, etc., thus allowing a more professional edge to all your business communications.
5. A Virtual Assistant can take over all your bookkeeping, bills and accounts payable. Let them worry about payroll so you can worry about the important tasks of running your business.
6. A Virtual Assistant can plan your next company event or outing providing for an enjoyable and memorable time for all. Think how much more enjoyable it can be when the burden of planning is removed.
7. Because VAs work on an "as needed basis" and only when you have work, hiring a VA can save you money. Clients only pay for the work done, and don't have to pay for benefits, equipment, or supplies. What a cost savings that can be.
8. A VA can save you space because s/he work from his/her office as an independent contractor.
9. Hiring a VA can save you time because you will not have to spend time hiring an employee or temporary help, as well as training the new staff.
10. A Virtual Assistant can schedule your appointments, manage your calendar, organize your desk, and make running a business that much smoother.



Top 10 ways a VA can keep you organized

By VAnetworking member [Kara Wierzbowski](#)

1. Email management throughout the day– There are several ways that a VA can manage your email accounts. She can set it up to come directly to her, she can log on to your computer or you can forward emails so she can handle them. No matter how you set it up, this service can save you hours a day...
2. Mail management when you are away – While a VA can easily manage your email every day there are still all those pesky envelopes that make their way to your mail box. If you are out of town, simply forward your mail to her business address, she can toss the junk and scan the important items...
3. Manage passwords – With nearly every website these days requiring you to register an account you can easily lose track of all those passwords. Simply email your VA the new user name and password for a site and she'll keep it in a database & can easily pull it up...
4. Keep track of your clients and customers – A VA can easily create a database that logs all the information about your client or customer. She can easily update it to add or remove entries so you have the most up-to-date information ready for a mail out.
5. Maintain a birthday list for your clients or customers – Customer service goes a long ways these days...
6. Create holiday timelines – If part of your online marketing practices involve submitting articles, press releases or keeping up with a blog it can be very beneficial to write seasonally appropriate or holiday appropriate material... and help you get your material in on time.
7. Appointment setting & reminder services ...
8. Scan documents and put them on disks – If your office is overflowing with paper and you want to get control or go a little "green" then a VA can help...
9. Manage your merchant account –A VA can easily log into your merchant account and see when someone needs to have a friendly reminder sent to them regarding a payment...
10. Set up color-coordinated filing system – Even though a VA could be miles away, she can set up a filing system for you. You send her your documents, papers, etc and she can create a color-coded system that works for you...never lose another must have paper again.



About Girl Friday Services of Maine



Girl Friday Services of Maine is owned and operated by Marie Tucker. Marie resides in Bowdoinham, Maine with her fiancé Gabe and their 4 children, Brittany, Matthew, Brianna and Jeremy. Marie started her virtual assistance business in July of 2008 and has been growing and developing it from day one. Her passion for learning and helping others has led her to create the Maine Association of Virtual Assistants. MAVA will be the first place that business leaders in Maine will go to find a qualified Virtual Assistant and for people entering the VA industry to go to for guidance and business set up advice.

Marie is currently working a full time day job as a Paralegal and is serving her second year as Secretary to NALS of Maine (National Association for Legal Professionals).

Recent activities include a seminar presentation for Half Moon Seminars in October “Efficient Law Office Operation and Administration”, a feature article in MaineBiz Magazine, and a radio talk show interview with Deb Neuman on “Back to Business” for WVOM in Bangor.

Marie is fortunate to have the assistance of two part time VAs that help her to serve her clients that are located from Augusta, Maine to Monterey, California and several places in between with services such as transcription, marketing, website design and hosting, typing, artist promotion and press releases.

Visit www.girlfridayservicesofmaine.com for more information.



Resources

Top 10 lists courtesy of [Virtual Assistant Networking Association](#) “The ever popular, friendly, informative, educational & resourceful network for successful and aspiring "IN THE KNOW" Virtual Assistants and Achievers globally that everyone online is talking about.”

Virtual Assistant the Series by Diana Ennen and Kelly Poelker

The Virtual Assistance Chamber of Commerce - 2008 Virtual Assistant Industry Survey Highlights Report.

Marie Tucker, Virtual Assistant– owner and operator of Girl Friday Services of Maine and founder of the Maine Association of Virtual Assistants.

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