



Virtual Office Services ... pay-as-you-go admin support

With close to 100% internet coverage across the UK and the proliferation of increasingly powerful personal computers, perhaps it's not surprising that people in secretarial jobs have come to realise that much of their work could easily be done from home.



Some have taken the idea further and started working for themselves.

Witness the birth of both the VA (Virtual Assistant) and the term Virtual Office Services. It is still predominately the domain of women, with many mums preferring this to working in an office. By equipping themselves at home with a fast internet connection, telephone, PC and printer they can easily provide a basic secretarial service, and they have flexibility in how and when they work.

But who are these people who ask you to trust them with your business admin?

The Virtual Assistant

VAs are a special breed. It's difficult enough setting up on your own without putting yourself in the firing line with demanding clients. So it's not surprising that many give up. But those that stick with it are usually professional, resilient, resourceful and capable people who know their job inside out.

However, being a VA brings with it an array of challenges:

- The Boss is now a "client" ... who can be just as demanding
- Their IT equipment is now their responsibility to manage and maintain
- They have to cope working alone and with flexibility comes the need for self-discipline

Most VAs are good communicators and have experience of handling demanding clients, but the conflicting priorities can be a headache and managing client expectations has to be a core skill.

Technology is another matter. VAs need IT support to keep going. This is often provided ad hoc by a partner or a friend, which can leave them vulnerable. It's worth checking out their situation first, so you don't find yourself stranded. If you need your VA to use **your** technology – ranging from Microsoft Exchange and Groove to iCAL and other online calendar or file sharing tools – then they'll need to be IT-savvy enough to cope or have access to more professional support.

Working alone has its own set of issues. VAs will usually take steps to break their isolation and have moral support close at hand, but being the only person in the business can again leave them vulnerable to workload peaks and illness ... not forgetting, everyone needs a holiday some time too.

My advice to someone looking for a VA is to ask about these issues and satisfy yourself that the trade-off in risks Vs benefits is acceptable to your business.



Virtual Office Services

This tends to describe the wider array of services provided by a business that's more than just a individual VA, perhaps a business that's grown with a few VAs or an organisation that has secretarial and admin staff providing chargeable VA services to clients. Typically, they will have better office facilities – this can be a physical office or a virtual office setup – and you can expect their IT systems to be superior to that of a VA. This enables them to deliver more sophisticated services just as if they were “within your organisation” but with all of the flexibility and cost benefits of a VA.

The types of IT you might expect to find them using includes:

- A website through which they take instructions, track work and manage clients
- A web office for document management, calendar sharing and time recording
- Collaboration tools such as instant messaging and tele/video/web conferencing
- VOIP telephony system for call handling and virtual internal extensions for VAs

Not many people like being forced to use someone else's IT systems if they can help it. Most website applications will force a new way of working on clients that's alien and burdensome, so look for someone who can also accommodate some of your more important working practices.

If you create large documents or use digital voice dictation, emailing large files will be impossible and you'll need to use a file transfer service, a WebOffice or another collaboration tool. This is common so understanding the options for file transfer is important from the start.

The range of services that the Virtual Office Services provider can offer will be far greater than a VA largely because of their technology. You should also find that their IT knowledge and even their IT support people can be extremely useful in helping you to learn how to get the best from your own IT systems and may even help you to solve IT problems too.

Apart from making refreshments and welcoming guests, virtual services cover pretty well most of your office admin and secretarial activity. These can include:

- Virtual PA
- Virtual Receptionist
- Mail Handling & Scanning
- Digital Typing Services
- Transcription Services
- Database Management
- Marketing Admin Support
- Sourcing and Purchasing
- Book Keeping Services
- General Office Admin.

In fact, providing they have the right technology, the range of services is only limited by the skills of individual VAs. Surprisingly, virtual office services can extend into the most unexpected areas, such as tele-marketing, language translation and even property management as you will see from the following client examples.



Virtual Clients

The following real client examples provide a flavour of the varied work of a VA working for a Virtual Office Service provider, and the range of clients that rely on these services as part of their business.

Property Development

This property services business manages new build shopping centres and housing developments. The owner is frequently travelling and running site meetings, so he uses his VA mainly for typing services. He has a Digital Pocket Memo for dictating letters, minutes and reports, and also uses it to record live meetings. The voice files are downloaded to his laptop and then sent via email to his VA who emails the finished Microsoft Word documents the next working day.

Medico-Legal Professionals

A clinical psychiatrist specialising in childcare cases has a heavy case load which means she is constantly interviewing clients and preparing reports for solicitors and local authorities. She uses her own digital recorder to dictate multiple reports simultaneously and her VA uses templates to compile individual reports. Her VA also handles client calls and uses her preferred methods of working to track enquiries via a spreadsheet and book appointments online via iCAL.

Management Consultancy

This niche consultancy is an established virtual organisation, with everyone being home based to keep overheads low. It was therefore natural for the MD and other Director to look for a virtual PA to handle their calls and prepare reports. Reports are often large files with complex graphics and they rely on their VA to compile these and resolve technical issues in Word, Excel and Adobe. Initially, they used their VA's WebOffice for file transfer before realising that it was ideal solution for their virtual organisation – now their VA uses the company's own WebOffice.

Property Management

A successful property developer whose busy life was limiting the number of deals he could manage turned to a VA for help. The VA deals with a lot of personal and routine office admin, as well as handling telephone calls, which releases time enough to double his deal rate. He soon realised that his VA was capable of more. She now manages a small property portfolio of 10 flats for less than the cost of a property management company, which involves managing lettings, deposits, rents, VAT reporting and making decisions on day-to-day management issues with tenants and tradesmen.

If you would like to find out more about [Office Lifeline](http://www.office-lifeline.co.uk) and how to take advantage of virtual office services, you can contact me on 01926 659 120 or via email at anna@office-lifeline.co.uk.

About the author

Anna Isaacs is the founder of Office Lifeline, a Warwickshire based virtual office services business, providing virtual PA and office services to small businesses. Anna had a successful career as an Executive PA in several blue chip companies before setting up Office Lifeline in early 2007.

