



BUSINESS

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Cottage industry Virtually employed

During the industrial revolution, women used to find flexible part-time work doing sewing piecework and small-scale product assembly at their kitchen tables. The internet has triggered a rebirth of this phenomenon, but this time, women and men alike are whipping up marketing plans, organising parties and conducting business research for executives and entrepreneurs who are pushed for time but don't want an assistant on staff.

Virtual assistants – available for anything from \$5 an hour from an India-based outfit to as much as \$100 an hour for a US-based VA with specialist technical skills – represent a booming sector, profiting from the large pool of unemployed post-recession skilled workers and businesses' reluctance to hire full-time staff.

The VA service sector evolved from work-from-home typists in the pre-internet days, and while many still provide basic office services, others do far more. Want a daily call to nudge you to the gym? Holidays researched and booked? Even basic product design and brainstorming, finding a lost dog, teaching algebra; there's a VA for that.

Berlin-based Strandschicht offers small German marketing and media firms service VAs from Eastern Europe. GetFriday, based in Bangalore, has about 200 people with various skills, many of them graduates, working in shifts to match clients' waking hours. Individuals and small businesses each make up about half of their clientele, dotted through 50 countries. CEO Sunder Prakasham says doctors, lawyers, artists and academics are signed up. Local rivals – inevitably riffing off the *Robinson Crusoe*-inspired name – include AskSunday and Tasks EveryDay.

Justine Curtis launched My Virtual Assistant in the UK in 2003. Her core team of five now runs a six-figure business that has sold four franchises in the UK and has attracted interest from would-be franchisees in France and Dubai. Recently, she's launched the UK Association of Virtual Assistants, which has a code of practice and 150 members.

Maryland-based Sharon Williams, owner of The 24 Hour Secretary, is founder of an annual convention for VAs, who she figures number more than 28,000 worldwide, about 60% of whom are in the US. She draws a line, however, between teams of self-employed VAs and the bigger outsourcing businesses that use overseas staff and doesn't include them in her tally.

Where Williams and Prakasham are in agreement is over the increasing complexity of clients' requests. "The trend now is to be much more tech savvy," Williams says. "There's a surge in clients wanting social media campaigns, they want to get into online video and want advice on that, they want to know about cloud computing and mobile too. Lots of entrepreneurs haven't embraced all that yet and they need someone to do it for them."