



## Office Work Moves Out of the Office

By **KELLY SPORS**

Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal.

From *The Wall Street Journal Online*

**Question:** I'm starting up a virtual-office administrative-assistance business. What is the climate like for this? Good? Developing? Oversaturated?

--Gretchen Koehler-Swaney, Pleasant Prairie, Wis.

**Answer:** The good news is that as small businesses outsource more of their administrative tasks and employers seek ways to slash overhead, there's a tremendous opening right now for independent contractors to find work.

You weren't the first to discover this, of course. Yet it appears that there are still plenty of job opportunities for virtual assistants -- enough that some virtual assistants hand off job offers to others. And some new VAs, as they call themselves, manage to build a full workload within a year of starting up.

Email your questions about starting a business. Please include your name, city and state. If you don't want your name used in our column, please indicate that. Due to volume of mail received, we regret that we cannot answer every question.

Virtual assistants are typically self-employed workers who handle administrative work for other businesses from a home computer. Some are generalists, who carry out whatever chores a business may need done. Others specialize in an area such as Web design or legal transcription. Most set their own rates, charging an hourly fee between \$25 and \$70, depending on their experience and the complexity of the task. Clients who put them on retainer often get a better rate.

The number of people calling themselves virtual assistants has blossomed from a few hundred in the mid-1990s, when the industry first defined itself, to more than 5,000 world-wide today, according to

the Alliance of Virtual Businesses, one of the many trade groups representing the industry. Most live in the U.S., though the profession is quickly growing in other countries.

Most VAs today are hired by other small-business owners who don't want to be bogged down in administrative work, says Sharon Williams, president of the alliance. But the industry is trying to sell itself to larger companies looking to cut costs. One nagging problem: "In a lot of industries, people aren't comfortable releasing confidential information" to an outsider, Ms. Williams says. Moreover, many companies still don't know exactly what a virtual assistant is.

While there are plenty of opportunities, you need to network with others in your industry and other industries looking to hire VAs. Make sure you are adequately trained in the types of computer programs businesses use.

Developing a niche that not every VA is familiar with might help you avoid the pains of an oversaturated market in the future. Often the biggest hurdle for new VAs is getting those first few clients. Once you have a small client base, business tends to proliferate through referrals from clients and other VAs.

Kirsten Womack, 43 years old, in Turtle Creek, Pa., started a virtual-assistance business from her home in early March after losing her job last summer as an administrative assistant during a downsizing at a telecommunications company. Ms. Womack took a 20-week course through Virtual Assistance U, an online for-profit school, which cost her \$500 after a scholarship. The course prepared her for launching her business, including teaching her software programs she needed, designing a Web site for her business and setting her rates. (She charges \$25 an hour, less for clients who put her on retainer.)

Once her business was up and running, Ms. Womack posted ads on Craigslist and other online message boards and attended business-conferences to meet potential clients. She joined several VA and business-networking groups, including Business Network International, and mailed postcards to prospective businesses in her area. Now, two months later, she's lined up retainer agreements with three clients and has four who pay her hourly. She works about 35 hours a week, though she'd eventually like to work about 50.

Stacy Brice, founder of AssistU, an online resource for VAs, warns that it can take quite a while to get those first clients. Thankfully, she says, most VAs only need about six clients to make a decent living.

If you're struggling to get those first clients, you might try bidding on jobs on Web sites such as Elance.com and Guru.com. You might have to settle for less than your standard hourly rate, but at least you'll have work and it might lead to other job opportunities.

**[OTHER ARTICLES BY THIS AUTHOR](#)**