

Kathie Thomas Interview

Sharon Williams

OIVAC, The 24 Hour Secretary

Sharon Williams: Hi, everyone and welcome to the Chat with the VA Industry Leader. Today's interview was sponsored by the Online International Virtual Assistants Convention at OIVAC.com, and the 24-Hour Secretary. We'll discuss ways to increase a VA's knowledge, skills, abilities and expertise in running a successful business, and other important topics about inspiring VA's.

Today's interview is entitled Inspiring VA Tips, Tricks and Secrets. Kathie Thomas reveals how virtual assistants can increase their knowledge and skills and their expertise in running a successful virtual assistant business. My name is Sharon Williams and, today I'm talking with the Aspiring VA Kathie Thomas about her tips, tricks and secrets that every virtual assistant needs to shortcut their way to success and get great results faster. So, without further ado welcome, Kathie.

Kathie Thomas: Thank you so much, Sharon. I'm delighted to be here.

Sharon Williams: Okay, now I know that I've known for I'm not even going to count how many years, and I have a ton of questions to ask. So, let's just start off with you providing a little bit of information about your background, your experience so that the VA's in our audience can understand who you are, where you're coming from, where you're located and how they can relate to what you have to say.

Kathie Thomas: Absolutely. Well, I live in Melbourne, Australia and back in 1993 I was working in a corporate job in the City of Melbourne, and my husband and I had five young daughters at school and at home. And, trying to manage the kids when they were sick or on school holidays and all sorts of things was getting really challenging. My husband and I are originally from Adelaide, South Australia and we shifted to Melbourne, Victoria for two years and it meant that we were away from family. We were away from friends. So, we didn't have any readymade babysitters or anything like that. So, living as a satellite family with five young daughters, and when I say young, the oldest one was probably only about 12. Yeah, about 12 I'd say. The youngest one was about 5 or 6. So, yeah, they were quite young and in primary school, and it was really quite challenging. And, in 1993 I actually won her in Melbourne, Australia I won Secretary of the Year for the state and was runner up for the national title. And, Microsoft sponsored it and I won, amongst a number of things, the full Microsoft Office Suite. So, this was Office Suite 2.0. That's quite a long time ago.

Sharon Williams: Wait, a minute. Back up. What number was that? Did you say 2.0?

Kathie Thomas: Absolutely.

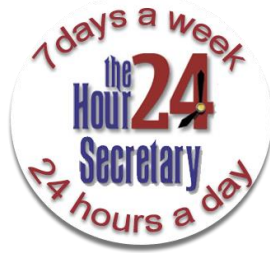
Sharon Williams: Oh, my god.

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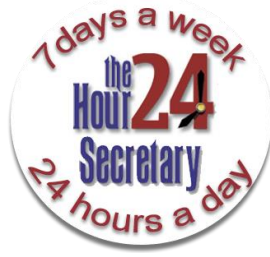
Kathie Thomas: Yeah, a long time ago. Anyway, so I said to my husband gee, if I had a computer at home, I could work at home. Now, this is in the days before the Internet, okay? I had heard about a homebased secretary, a lady called Robin Smith in Melbourne who was working from home and she had a small group of homebased secretaries. I'd seen her book, I think, in a secondhand bookshop or something. I'd been along to a couple of business networking events with speakers, and all these ideas were starting to form in my head about how I could probably work from home if I could get some clients. So, I bought my first computer, which cost over \$4,000 back in those days, and only had 40 megabytes of space. Can you believe that? And, I think it had 2 megabytes of RAM.

Sharon Williams: Oh, my god.

Kathie Thomas: Unbelievable, yeah. A couple of people at my church had said to me, oh, I know you can do typing. I need some typing done. So, I started doing typing for them and I thought I could really make this work. And, I took leave without pay for 12 months. Now, I could do that because my husband was working and he was earning a good income, and I had a bit of money behind me. I wouldn't always recommend to new VA's to do that, but that's what I did and it worked for me. So, I took leave without pay for 12 months. I was given a go. So, I started doing work for a couple of people from my church and then they referred me to other people that they knew, and it just sort of went from there. People started referring me. I started doing letter box drops with leaflets. I found out about local community business networking and groups and I would go along and network. I got myself some really cheap, little black and white business cards and I would give them out to people. And, in the first 12 months it was very, very challenging, extremely challenging, because I didn't have a regular income. At the end of every week I was going oh, how much have I earned this week. I'd be charging up the dollars and thinking I've really got to do more. And, I was making sure I was going out and connecting with people. It was very, very important to be connecting and networking with people.

About six months after I started I had a lady contact me and ask me if I was still doing what I'd been doing. I said yes. She said would you like to come along and talk to our people and let them know what you're doing. So, I got invited to go along and speak at a pharmaceutical company, of all places. They were doing a presentation to all their admin staff. So, I was sharing with them about how I was working from home. And, then one of the speakers that I met there a few weeks later contacted me, and she engaged me to start working with her on a regular basis. I'd be doing digital transcription for her, doing spreadsheets, word processing and formatting, just a whole, wide range of things. And, she was probably one of my very first long-term clients. She was with me for about 2 or 3 years before she shifted back to the UK.

At the end of my first 12 months I actually matched my gross income. I matched the same income I'd received in my government job from the year before. So, I knew I was on track. I knew I was doing the right thing. So, I gave my notice from my government job and I made my business a fulltime thing.



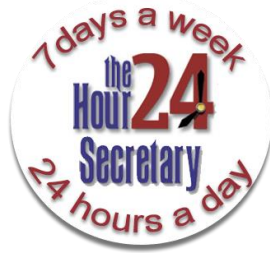
Now, when I say fulltime, in that first 12 months I did manage to pick up a couple of other clients where I was actually going onsite to them. Remember, there was no Internet at that time. So, one of them was the Church Presbytery Office that overlooked all the other churches in our area for a denomination. So, I was in their office for two days a week doing stuff for the head minister there. Then another place was run by the Brotherhood of St. Lawrence. It's a charity group and they were looking after homeless people, and they were getting me to type up resumes from these homeless people. I'd have to be doing questions and asking them well, do you play sports, are you a captain, are you a leader. I was drawing all sorts of things out to try and get together resumes for them. I did that work, I did both of those roles for about 18 months to two years until I got to the point where my phone was getting lots of hang ups and a lot of messages. And, I'm thinking I'm out of my office too much. I need to be back in my own office fulltime.

Eighteen months after I started my business I first heard about the Internet. I was getting a modem connected into my house so that I could start having faxes coming to my computer, because I had limited desk space. So, I didn't want more equipment on my desk or on a cupboard. So, having a fax modem was ideal. Then, it was the actual telecom person who connected the line who said to me have you heard about the Internet. I'm going now, what's that. She was saying to me oh, you can run a national business. I looked at her and thought are you mad. I'm already running all over the countryside picking up work, doing it, dropping it back off again and making sure I'm home by the time the kids are home and all of that. How could I run a national business? She said, well, you don't know, but you've got to explore. It was getting late 1995 when this happened.

So, I said to my husband maybe we should look into this. One Sunday afternoon we went into the local news agents looking at computer magazines and other magazines. Then I saw a computer magazine that had a little floppy disk on the front of it with 8 hours of free Internet connection. So, I bought that and took it home and put the floppy disk into my computer and installed the software. I then spent three weeks trying to work out how to get into the Internet. And, in the end I rang a friend of mine who had a boyfriend I knew who had been using this new Internet. And so, I got his number off of her and rang him up and chatted to him. He said to me, I'll just give you my log in, my username and password and you can log in with that and then you can find out how to use it. So, that's how I started off on the Internet really using someone else's long in.

Sharon Williams: Well, let's back up, because I think I heard early in the conversation an important step that you took was to do local networking. And, I'd like to emphasize and have you emphasize how important that was as part of your launching your business.

Kathie Thomas: Oh, absolutely, and this is something I teach new VA's even today, Sharon. That networking is utmost and paramount. You cannot stop networking. Networking means connecting with other people. It means learning about other people and what they're doing. It's not just about swapping business cards and moving on to the next person. It's is very, very much about learning about people and



their needs, what they do, what their interests are. And, I would make sure that I went out to regular networking events. In fact, every single week I did that for close to 20 years. I've been running my business now for 23 years.

So, I've been doing face-to-face networking for well on 20 years, just meeting up with people, getting to know them, letting them get to know me, because networking is also about building relationships. Letting people get to know you. When people have seen you 2 or 3 times face-to-face. They really start to feel like they know you. They're getting to know you as a person, because they're getting to see your mannerisms, the way you operate yourself, the way you respond to things. They can read your body language and they feel that they trust you. When you're building relationships online and networking online, it takes a lot longer for that to happen, because people can't see those things. You know, we all hear and read about how communication is 80% body language and 20% what you use.

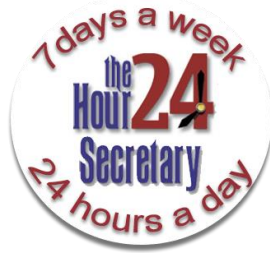
So, if you're networking online all people are getting are 20% of the words you use, and sometimes even those can be miscommunicated. So, networking I just cannot emphasize it enough. It is so, so important to building a business.

Kathie Thomas: Okay, well, we've had a 10, 12-minute conversation, and throughout this I forgot to ask you what is the name of your business.

Kathie Thomas: Okay. My business name is A Clayton's Secretary. Now, for those who don't live in Australia or who weren't in Australia back in the 1980's there was a drink, a non-alcoholic drink called Clayton's, and it was advertised as the drink you had when you weren't having a drink. And, it was actor Jack Thompson that was in bars in Egbert having a Clayton's. So, it was a drink you had when you weren't having a drink.

When I first started creating my business and working at my business name, I wasn't sure what I was going to call it. My last name's Thomas and at one stage I thought I might call it Thomas Office Works and I'd give the business a try with Thomas Office Works. First, what I was originally thinking was going to call my business. But, then when I'm writing my brochure to do the letter box drops that I mentioned before, the very last line I wrote on it, "Let me be the secretary you have when you haven't got a secretary." And, as soon as I wrote that, I thought, oh, that's my business name, A Clayton's Secretary. So, I raced out on the 24th of March 1994 to the small business registration place in Melbourne, Australia and registered A Clayton's Secretary. And, that was my official day for registering my business. So, that name has stuck with me ever since, and I, actually, do explain on my website. My website address is: www.vadirectory.net. I do explain on the about page how the name A Clayton's Secretary came about.

Now, some of your listeners may well know me as Kathie who runs VA Directory. And, yes, I was using the domain www.asecretary.com.au for a long, long time, but as the term virtual assistant came on board and took over from home-based secretaries with the Internet, I felt using VA Directory much better to



describe what it is that we were doing, and it was a much more global name. So, A Clayton's Secretary is still my registered business name, but I trade very much as VA Directory these days.

Sharon Williams: Well, you mentioned the word we. So, do you have a team or a collaboration with other virtual assistants?

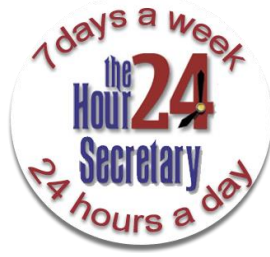
Kathie Thomas: Thanks for asking, Sharon. Yes, I definitely do. When I started, for probably the first two years it was just me or just over the first two years it was just me. Within 18 months of starting my business I was so busy, so, so busy, that I was starting to look for other people that I could refer work to. So, I was asking around at the business networking groups and asking amongst friends and different people I knew, mothers of children who went to school with my kids. Trying to find people who had typewriters or computers at home, because we were still using a lot of typewriters back in those days. I was thinking oh, I might have to open up a shopfront office and employee people. And, I'm thinking no, that's killing the purpose of why I want to work from home. I want to be home for my kids. I don't want to be employing people and all sorts of things.

I had a chat to my accountant and he said to me, why don't you set up a membership based group. Now, remember this is long before membership based groups became popular and were known online. But, he said to me set up the membership based group with a membership fee and that way they pay you to join your membership group. You can connect them with clients. He said, but, because they're membership members you're not responsible for their taxation. They're not your employees. You're not responsible for supplying them with insurances and all of that. And, I'm thinking well, that sounds very sensible, and that sounds like a good idea. So, I'll do that.

Then, I got on the Internet, as I mentioned before, late in 1995, or early 1996. I'm sorry, April 1996. So, I started to have a good idea of what was going on and I created my very first webpage. Now, I say page because the website was literally just one page. It had Microsoft clipart on it. It had my name and list of what I did and my contact details, and that was it. So, my very first website, or webpage.

Once that went live I actually started to have women contacting me. I thought I might have clients contacting me, but I actually had women contacting me asking how they could do what I was doing, and they promised not to be my competition. I thought oh, okay. Well, the accountant was saying about setting up some kind of membership network. Maybe I can work around this. So, that's what I did. I actually established The Internet Homebased Secretaries Network, which was a real mouthful, but that was the name that I did register back in those days to operate with A Clayton's Secretary.

So, for a couple of years that's what we were called: The Internet Homebased Secretaries Network. And then, I became aware of the fact the term virtual assistant was starting to be used, probably late '96 or early '97. And, at first I kind of balked at that idea, that name, because I thought well, it came on the heels of virtual reality and virtual reality was something that wasn't real. I wanted people to know we're



real. You know, virtual assistants are real. But, I could see that name was taking hold, particularly over in the U.S. I thought well, I'm going to adopt that here too. So, in Australia we began to be known as virtual assistants, as well as homebased secretaries.

Sharon Williams: Okay. So, your membership organization has existed all those years?

Kathie Thomas: Yes, absolutely, and I've got virtual assistant members from all over the world in many different countries, as well as all over Australia. Some of my members have been with me a good 18 or 19 years now, which I'm really grateful for. I love that they've stayed on the network for as long, and it means that they're also – they're getting the work. They're enjoying the camaraderie with their peers. I have a lot of respect for them, because they're some really great people on the team.

Kathie Thomas: So, what is that URL again?

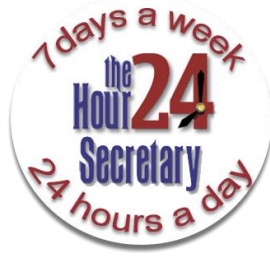
Kathie Thomas: It's www.vadirectory.net.

Sharon Williams: Okay, let just move forward a little bit. Tell me, because you told me all these great accomplishments. What are some of the obstacles that you had to overcome?

Kathie Thomas: Well, especially in the earlier days, but even so sometimes today people thinking because I work from home my rates should be really low, because I don't have any overhead. Yeah, right. I have undergone a lot of training that I've paid for online for different things. I have software that I've got to keep upgrading and paying for and computers. I pay for a phone line, or a couple of phone lines, mobile phone, Internet connection, web hosting. These days I also provide web design and web hosting for clients. So, that's an ongoing expense, because I'm always paying for servers and all sorts of bits and pieces. You know, equipment, upgrading of equipment, just so many things. Membership to professional associations and organizations. You know, all of those things cost. And so, when you're starting out as a VA, you've got to look at things in a very real way. You've got to look at what your expenses are going to be in running your business, as well as household expenses, if you're paying or contributing to those as well. Then work out rates that are right for you.

So, you know, in the early days in particular when I did that letter box drop, I mentioned, I had one lady contact me. She asked me what my rates were, and at that stage I think I was only charging about \$20 or \$22 Australian per hour. She said to me, oh, that's much too expensive. I can get the 15-year-old high school girl down the road to do my typing for me. I said to her, that's fine, get her to do it. When you need a professional job, come back to me. I never did hear from her again. But, it's important to keep a stance and keep your professionalism too. It's very, very important.

Today, there are so many organizations with VA's worldwide. Some of those are actually agencies where they employ very low rate VA's in a number of offshore countries. Then they promote their VA's in



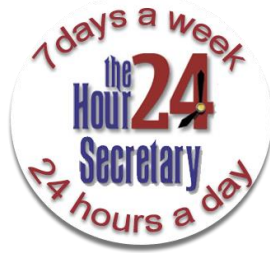
Australia and in the U.S. and Canada and U.K. and elsewhere. And, often they're charging \$4 or \$5 U.S. dollars an hour, and there's just no way that a lot of us can compete with that. So, when clients are starting out with new business, often that's a very attractive thing for them, and it's something that the rest of us VA's have to compete with and cope with. But, what we have to remember is that there are a number of things at play. You know, I hear when people are engaging a VA, I'm hoping that they're looking at not only how much a VA charges, but perhaps where they're located, what hours they're working, what their abilities or their experiences are, and their background. What the client actually needs.

Here in Australia some of the things we encourage clients to think about when they're looking to engage a VA is how important is their intellectual property, their IP. How important is that? Their bookkeeping. You know, if they're giving their bookkeeping offshore, and it doesn't matter what country, it can be any country. But, if they're getting their bookkeeping done offshore, are they giving the VA access to their clients, their credit cards and payment details and other things? Will they be covered by Australian laws if something goes wrong? It would be the same for VA's in the U.S. or Canada or U.K., anywhere. You've got clients and we need to encourage the clients to think very carefully about what they're giving up or what they're sharing with their VA, particularly if their chose VA is in another country. Is that VA covered by their laws? Is there intellectual property safe? Are there other considerations they need to think about before they hand the work over to another VA?

A lot of times sending work to a VA that may be offshore and cheaper will work okay, but there are a lot of other times when it won't. And, of course, you always hear about clients who do engage a VA somewhere else who may not have good English writing skills and then they've got to pay someone else who does to fix it all up. It would probably would have been cheaper for them to have gotten a VA in their own location or country in the first place anyway. So, there are those things that we need to look at and think about, and encourage our prospective clients to think about as well.

Sharon Williams: I think that's an excellent point, especially if you specialize in working locally or in country versus international for you to really consider before you make that decision to go international. To understand what those financial laws are, and if you can recoup your information and money if a situation arises.

Kathie Thomas: Absolutely, it's just so, so important. I mean we hear here, and I know you probably hear about it in your country too, about even large corporations that offshore their work and then find they have all sorts of problems a few years later and then they're trying to recoup or fix up whatever the problem is. But, you know, this is just one of the challenges that VA's face, I guess, in this industry. It's increased a great deal over the years. I mean that wasn't a challenge that I faced in my early days. It is a challenge a lot of us VA's face today.



Sharon Williams: Okay. Well, share with us a tip that you wish someone had shared with you when you first started out.

Kathie Thomas: Ah, yes. I've been thinking about this, and I think it would have to be taking time out for me. Just making sure that I still take time to smell the roses. For the first ten years of my business I was just working all hours of the day and night, whenever the work would come in, and I'd be sitting up until 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning sometimes to finish a job off for a client. And, keep I mind, I was bringing up five daughters as well. And, by this stage they were starting in high school and all sorts of things. So, it was quite a challenge, and I did literally burn myself out after being in business for about ten years. I got to a point where I just couldn't do anymore and I was really struggling to get out of bed. As much as I enjoyed my business, I was just really struggling. And then, I got a business coach. That was probably one of the best things I ever did. For a long time, I didn't think I needed a business coach, because one of my core clients was in the business coaching industry. So, there were a number of business coaches that I supported.

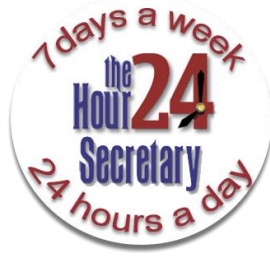
So, I thought in all the work I was doing for them and everything I was reading, I was learning so much. But, that's not the same as having a business coach who's actually focused on you. So, I had this coach for three or four years. His name is Stewart, and we still keep in touch. And, Stewart taught me how to bring my seven days a week into five days a week, and then finally cut it down to four days a week of client contact time. So, I now, actually, mainly do client work Mondays through Thursdays between 8 and 6. Friday is my day for doing my admin, my bookkeeping, my marketing, and all sorts of things. So, I have an interesting photography these days. So, I've been spending Friday's also for marketing and developing websites and stuff like that related to my photography. And then, weekends I get to spend with my family again. I'm pursuing my passions of gardening and photography and bush walking and stuff, but that doesn't mean on the Monday through Thursdays that I don't do some of those things.

You may not be aware Sharon, but seven and a half years ago sold up our house in the suburbs and shifted out to the hills of Melbourne and bought a two-acre property. And, this has been our healing place. It's been a lovely place to stay here. It's got some Australian bush on three quarters of an acre. The rest of it has got some beautiful deciduous trees and we're just entering into autumn. So, those trees are just starting to change color now. We've got beautiful big lawns and our own private park and raised garden beds. We've built a veggie garden, a three- tiered veggie garden.

Sharon Williams: That's enough. That's enough.

Kathie Thomas: You get the picture.

Sharon Williams: Yes.



Kathie Thomas: And, he works at home too. So, every day we make sure we go out for a walk every afternoon. We take time out from the office and we go out, and we literally smell the roses. And so, if that's something that's so important, VA's need to take time out for themselves. And, when you do that, that's when your mind really starts repaying you with fantastic ideas and it's being replenished and being refreshed. So, taking time out for self is so important.

Sharon Williams: Well, I thoroughly agree and while that was fantastic tip about taking time out, the other tip I heard in that conversation was about getting a coach, especially, I think when you're starting out so that you learn while you're beginning things that you don't have to make as a mistake, because someone is there to help you talk through the process or whatever your deficiency is. They may have insights into it and can help lead you through so that you don't have to overcome those obstacles.

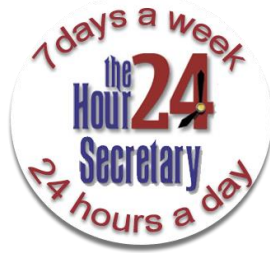
Kathie Thomas: Absolutely, yeah. I should mention, you know, there's about three different types of coaches out there. The coach that I had was a business coach, but he was also a bit like a life coach too. So, he would help me brainstorm things for my business on a white board and I'd go away with homework to do, you know, every time I saw him, but he also did a bit of life coaching as well, focusing on me as a person. Looking outside of my business and making sure I was getting a balance in life.

The third type of coach I want to mention is a virtual assistant coach. Now, there are virtual assistant coaches out there who will help VA's get their businesses off the ground and that is one of the things I do in my business these days. I first wrote my coaching course back in 2006 and I update it on a regular basis, and that's delivered online for new VA's.

So, when VA's are looking at getting coaching, if they're brand new, they need to be able to learn and understand about being a VA. So, perhaps a VA coach or a VA trainer is what they're looking for. But, once they are getting going in their business, then looking beyond that and getting a business coach would be a great idea. I must add I did have to teach my business coach what a virtual assistant was and what they did for him to have an understanding so he could help me. And he did. He helped me in a lot of ways.

Sharon Williams: Well, you did mention that you are a VA coach. Is that service provided through www.vadirectory.net, or is there a different URL for that?

Kathie Thomas: Well, there is a different URL. It is linked on my VA Directory website, but the URL for that is www.vatrainner.com. And, it's about a 13-week course and it takes you through everything like developing the right mindset, creating rates that are right for you, setting up your office, marketing and networking and getting your clients, working out what kind of services you're going to provide, making sure you've got a Web presence so people can find you online. It covers a whole, wide range of things. So, if people went to www.vatrainner.com, they could actually click on the menu item called program, and it actually outlines the full program of what the course covers.



Sharon Williams: Okay, and you train VA's on an international basis, or just those in Australia?

Kathie Thomas: International. Definitely, on an international basis.

Sharon Williams: Okay, that's great. Now, would you share with us a cool tip that you figured out or discovered that would really help the VA's in our audience?

Kathie Thomas: Absolutely. For me, it's never stop promoting. Never stop marketing. Never stop networking. It's amazing how many people get really, really busy, so they stop networking. They stop promoting. They stop marketing. Then when it goes quiet again and there's no more clients, they've got to start networking and marketing and promoting again. And so, there's all these natural ebbs and flows in business anyway, but why make it harder on yourself by stopping promoting and marketing. So, even when you're really busy, it is **so** important to keep that networking and marketing and promoting up. And, that is why I networked on a weekly basis constantly for all those years. It's why I spend time of Friday's doing marketing and promoting. I mean I do networking and stuff during the week as well, but I've got to make sure I get my client work done. So, Fridays I can make sure I spend dedicated time just coming up with new ideas or starting new conversations on line or going out and meeting people, having a cuppa with someone. It's to never stop promoting, marketing and networking.

Sharon Williams: When you say having a cuppa, what is that?

Kathie Thomas: Oh, sorry. That means having a cup of coffee or tea at a café.

Sharon Williams: Okay.

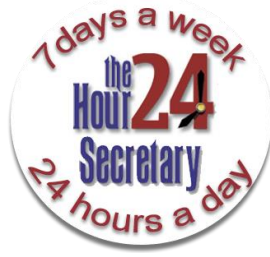
Kathie Thomas: Going out to a café and meeting with people and chatting over a cup of coffee. So, here in Australia we call it a cuppa.

Sharon Williams: Well, I knew what it was, but I didn't think our audience would know what it was.

Kathie Thomas: Oh, thank you.

Sharon Williams: Okay. So, now, share with us a secret that every VA needs to know when it comes to developing their business.

Kathie Thomas: Okay. I touched on this lightly before, but now I really want to emphasize it. Not all of your clients are going to be found online, and not everyone is on Facebook. It's funny, one of the VA firms I was chatting on yesterday, a new person came onboard saying that they're starting up a VA



business and what do they need to get started. And, someone else was saying oh, you don't need to get a website straightaway. Just start up with a Facebook page and you'll be fine.

Sharon Williams: Wow.

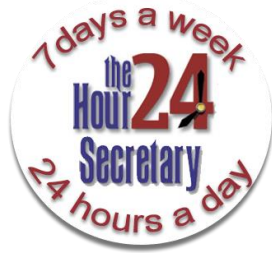
Kathie Thomas: I'm thinking well, you know, only the Facebook audience will find your Facebook page. People who aren't on Facebook won't. And, the reality is, not everybody is on Facebook. And, that's another reason why networking face-to-face is so, so important, because not everybody is going to find you online. I mean those who are already VA's or those starting out, how many of your neighbors actually, know what you do? How many people down the road know what you do, or around the corner from where are know what you do? What about in the local super market, and the doctor's surgery, at the local school, even your local church, your sporting clubs, wherever you go? How many of those people know what you do? They're not going to be looking for *you* specifically online, unless you're really placed well on Google or something. Often people will be searching for the term virtual assistant or they might be searching for a secretary or something like that. They're not going to be looking for Kathie Thomas or Jane Smith or Sharon Williams, unless they know who you are and what you do.

So, it's very important for virtual assistants to remember that Facebook and the Internet aren't their only ways of getting clients. Step outside your four doors and go and meet people. It's good for you health wise, being out in the fresh air, getting some vitamin D, getting a bit of exercise. And, it's good for you when you're communicating with people face-to-face. So, just remember that not all of it has to be done online. You can go out and meet people too.

Sharon Williams: So, how do people who say they are introverts handle taking that first step in going out and networking?

Kathie Thomas: Okay. Well, ask people they already know what business groups may exist. Ask if they can go along with them to a business networking event, or check with your local, regional counsel or whatever online to see what business networking groups are around. Make sure you do take some business cards with you. When you go in if you don't know anybody and you're going in the door and you're a bit shy, a good tip would be to look for someone else who's standing alone. Not big groups of people, but look for someone else who's standing alone, because chances are they're feeling exactly the same way you are. And, just go up and say, hello. You don't have to talk about yourself. Ask them about them. You know, people will answer questions when they're asked. So, when you say hello, you could say hello, my name is Jane. What's your name? Something along those lines.

If you still feel you're too shy to do that, well, then go and stand with a group, where there's a group of people standing and just stand on the outer edge and listen to the conversation. Someone may turn around and notice you and say, hey, what about you, or at you're going to be able to learn from listening to the conversations. Some networking groups are stand up groups. You know, where people are standing up



and talking. Other groups are where people are sitting down and they talk amongst the people they're sitting next to or they're listening to a speaker. But, don't let your shyness of being an introvert stop you from going out and being amongst other people. And, you'll find when you're focusing on other people and asking questions about them, then the focus isn't on you. It's more about them. And, it's good – here's a tip for you. It's good if you're getting their business card, once you finish talking with that person or listening to them, on the back of the card, get your pen out and write down a few little things about that person. It might have been their husband's name. It might have been something about their children. It might be something about their business. But, just so you've got some personal tips. So, when you follow them up later, you can touch back on those points. People really notice it when you listen to someone, when you take things in. And, often, even if you've just been listening and not talking much, often people will come back and say gee, this person is a great communicator or they really listened to me. I think that's really important when you're networking with others.

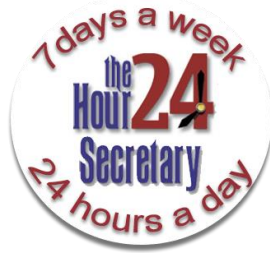
Sharon Williams: That's fantastic. Let me ask a different kind of question. Most of the conversation has been geared towards newbies or people who have been in business only a few years. Let's talk a little bit about VA's who have been in the industry, say, ten years or so, and they are just barely making it. What kind of advice would you give them to get up out of that seat and go and just change their attitude and get out there and start promoting their business?

Kathie Thomas: Yeah, that's a little bit hard, because I do come across VA's like that and often I will ask some questions. I will ask them what have they been to date. Where are they networking? Have they joined any virtual assistant networks? There are times when you find that they haven't joined any VA networks or they've been trying to do it completely on their own.

There are professional VA networks out there where you can register to be a member and get client requests coming direct to you. And, you know, those VA networks have been online for some time. So, they get a lot of, I guess, Google and Alexa rankings and are found easily online. Clients find them and all of that. If you can get your website listed on those sites, because their directories are for VA's. Getting your website listed on their sites helps get you a bit of extra Google juice, as they put it. But, it is very much about mixing and mingling with other VA's and picking up tips, and getting your site listed or getting your name registered and listed in as many places as possible where clients may, potentially, find you.

Sharon Williams: Okay. You talked a little bit earlier about some of the challenges facing VA's. You specifically talked about offshoring and VA's charging very low rates. Let's turn that around. What are some of the big opportunities that you feel VA's might be missing?

Kathie Thomas: Umm. I guess forgetting to look outside their own door, I guess. Their own back door and looking locally. I have seen Australian VA's who live in regional areas, for example, who talk about building their business entirely online, because they didn't feel that there was anything local to them.



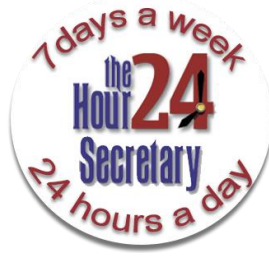
But, I really do strongly believe that there's still businesses operating local to where they live or where any VA lives. And, it's just about tapping in and connecting into the networks that are around locally.

Yeah, as you can tell, I'm very strong on networking. It's been an important part of building my business all these years and I really firmly believe that it's a very important one for all VA's, no matter where they're local – where they are located.

I guess other opportunities might be looking to see if there are not-for-profit organizations that they can support. For example, I'm currently the secretary of our local Rotary Club. I've only been – I'm only a fairly new member and I go to their meetings every, single week. So, I'm still going out networking weekly. Before that, I used to belong to BNI, which is Business Network International. I was a member of BNI for over 15 years. Prior to that, there were other clubs that I had joined and been part of. But, when you're looking at not for profit organizations, a lot of VA's have fantastic administrative skills and a lot of not-for-profits and charities are in need of people with fantastic administrative skills. A few can be prepared to give an hour or two a week in helping in some way or other. It puts you in the frontline. It helps other locals to know that you exist and see what you can do. Then, when you can showcase what you can do, often that will bring in other business people who want to use your services.

With our local Rotary Club, I've created our website, because they did not have a decent website before I came along. I'm now doing their minutes of their meetings. I'm pretty sure now that they won't let me stop being secretary of their club. I've got everything organized. But, what they didn't have was some kind of system in place to teach people how to be the secretary of their Rotary Club. I had to glean information from here, there and everywhere, because the previous secretary who handed it over to me hardly knew anything, and the one before her hardly knew anything about their online system, and what was supposed to be happening. So, I'm now going to document that process for the time when I do step down from that role. And, I've just put my hand up for another 12 months. So, it's not going to be for a little while yet. But, at least, you know, when I do hand it over to the next person, they'll be able to know what's going on. And, most of the members in that club are business people. So, already I've connected with the insurance person there, and he's created an insurance package for the VA's here in Australia, which now the Australian VA Association is promoting on their website. So, it is about cross networking and doing business.

It's not always about what you receive, but about what you're out as well. And, I guess that's another tip that's another tip that I can give to VA's. Don't always let it focus back on you and what you can get. Think about what you can give to others and what you can do for others too. And, for a long time, for most of my business life, Sharon, all my clients, I've always been the center point that they can come to. Who do you know who does this? Who do you know who does that? So, I've connected a lot of people with other people, and, I guess, in a lot of ways it's helped me, or it's helped them maintain their loyalty with me and with my service, because I can always point them in the right direction.



Sharon Williams: Okay, let me ask you a question. You mentioned using administrative skills, but there are a lot of VA's, trainers, coaches, etcetera, who actually suggest that you narrow down and create a niche, be it social media or LinkedIn or whatever. That you develop a niche and become a specialist in that, versus using those administrative skills that you may have started in the industry with. So, what is your opinion about that?

Kathie Thomas: Okay, I believe there are two kinds of niches. One is the niche service type that you were talking about, specializing in a particular skill. The other can be a niche industry. You might support a particular industry, for example, the legal industry, the medical industry. My niche is not-for-profit organizations. So, I use my full range of administrative, secretarial skills to support not-for-profit organizations. I currently run the secretariat for the Victorian Training Industry Organization, and I've been looking after them for about 5 or 6 years now. I also run the secretariat for the Arthrex Association of Australia. They're people who make specialist shoes for people who don't have normal feet, or have walking problems. And, I've been looking after them for nearly two years now. I used to look after the Meetings Industry Association for several years. The Institute of Professional Secretaries Australia for a few years. The Australia Malaysia Business Council. I have looked after a lot of not-for-profit associations since 1997.

Now, how that came about was a lady that lives not too far away from me was looking for a secretary [unclear audio at 48:13.3] days. She rang me up and asked me [unclear audio at 48:20.2-48:27.8] in the secretariat for the Meeting Industry Association. I met the director and had that on my website letting people know what I do...

Sharon Williams: Kathie, let me interrupt you, because you're breaking up. You're breaking up.

Kathie Thomas: I'm sorry. Is that better now?

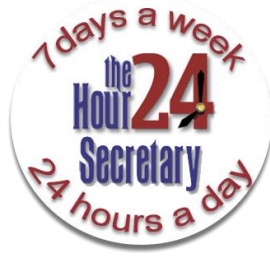
Sharon Williams: Yes.

Kathie Thomas: Is that better now?

Sharon Williams: Yes, that's better.

Kathie Thomas: Oh, good. So, I get to use my full range of skills, secretarial, minutes of meetings, social media, website support, event management. Anything that those not-for-profits need I'm managing for them. So, it's not so much for me about specialists or a niche skill. It's about a niche industry that I'm looking after.

Sharon Williams: Okay. So, can you share some general tools and resources that you think VA's can use?



Kathie Thomas: Well, I guess it probably depends on their skillset, as to ones that they might want to use. But, some of the general ones: Dropbox definitely. I have been using Dropbox for years. I've shared folders with my clients. They're private sharing so no client can see the other client's folders. It's a great way for sharing files and all sorts of things. If a client doesn't understand how it works, I teach that to them. So, Dropbox is one of those tools that I think everybody should be using, or something very similar to that. Again, it probably depends on what else your service offerings are. I use all of the Microsoft Office programs. I use Dreamweaver, because I edit WordPress tools. WordPress is another one, because the sites that I create these days it's WordPress. I use that so that I can teach clients how to update their websites without them having problems, and without them feeling that they have to depend on me all the time. There's nothing worse than a client waiting on a webmaster for two or three weeks just for a simple update on a website. So, you know, I teach and educate the clients as to how they can do that. It doesn't put me out of work. It just helps them, and then they can come back to me when they want other things done.

I guess teaching them social media tools, you know, Facebook and stuff, if they're wanting to use those. But, there are other apps out there that VA's use, but I don't use them. I haven't had a need to use them through the years with the type of services that I provide.

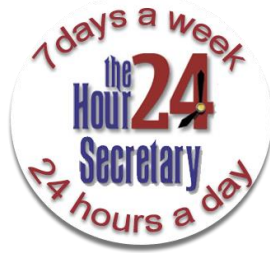
Sharon Williams: Okay. Do you have any that you feel that are useless and obsolete? I mean I know about a fax machine and a floppy disc. But, any others?

Kathie Thomas: Yeah, I did have a 1-800 number for my business for a long time and I only just dropped it last year and swapped over to mobile phone and finally caught up with the times with that. Because, these days everybody locally, and I'm talking about Australia wide when they call me, it makes more sense for them to be able to use a mobile phone, rather than ringing a 1-800 number. And so, I'm finding clients want to text a lot more. And, that's probably happening globally everywhere. So, I'm starting to use a few more apps and things with my mobile phone and using my mobile phone more for my business and contacting, and receiving contacts from clients in that way.

I guess, yes, faxes are getting pretty much obsolete these day, although, you can have eFax. I still receive the occasional one, but not very many at all these days. I'm sure there are probably others that have gotten quite obsolete. But, again, because I don't use them, I'm not really aware of them.

Sharon Williams: So, since you've been a VA for 23 years, you probably can relate to this question. Is it easier for a VA starting out now, versus back when you started and why?

Kathie Thomas: Now, you know I have been thinking about this question, and I don't know that there's an easy answer to that one, because while there is a multitude of information out there today, there's also a lot of scammers today. I didn't have that problem. When I started my business, I went around to



networking groups. I spoke to other business people and asked for advice. There wasn't much information online once you went online. So, I had to feel my way and talk to other business people, and then tried to apply it to my private business with what I was doing.

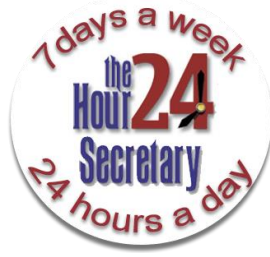
In a lot of ways while it is easier for VA's starting out today, because there's a lot of courses and books, eBooks and all sorts of things on how to get your business started, and different things that you can do. Unfortunately, there are a lot of people online who can also take advantage of you and there are a lot of scammers out there. And, I've seen VA's that have started up their businesses and thought that they were doing the right thing with a client that they'd taken on, only to find that they had gotten involved in a laundering business or not getting paid for work that they'd been doing and all sorts of things. It's very important for VA's to work out some things that they need to be doing when they're taking on new clients. You know, investigating the client. Check them out. See if they're on LinkedIn. Google them and see if they come up and if their business comes up, so you can check out who they are really who they say they are. Generally, if I get contacted by someone by email that doesn't have a proper domain address like that or if they're using Hotmail or Yahoo or something, or they don't include a phone number and they're offering all these promises and how much money I could make, I tend to ignore those, because they're just scams, or they're phishing or something along those lines.

I do write a lot of tips on my website, on blogs on different things that new VA's can be looking out for when they're getting started. But, I would say for new VA's today align yourself with a VA network. Start with one that's in your own country so you can be mixing and mingling online with peers from your own country and learning from there. Then, you can look at VA networks in other countries and join those as well. I always encourage VA's to join than one, because they're not going to get all their work and all their clients from one network. It's going to happen through a number of different networks. And, align yourself with a VA, a single VA. Get a mentor or VA coach or something and learn from them. They'll be able to give you lots of hints and tips and things to look out for and to be careful about.

I think when you think about it, when you look at all the different things, it probably is harder today. Simply because of the things you've got to be aware of. There's great information out there, but you've got to work out what's not real and what is.

Sharon Williams: Okay. Well, that's great. Now, I've heard several times when you have mentioned things that you have contributed to the VA industry, be it coaching, or be it your membership organization, or you're being on VANA, etc. One thing I didn't hear you mention, however, is that you also cosponsor a conference, an Australia based conference. So, why not just share a little bit of information about that and when the next one is going to be hosted, etcetera?

Kathie Thomas: Okay, thanks, Sharon. Yes, I cofounded the Australian VA Conference, AVAC, A-V-A-C, eight years ago with Anita Kilkenny. Anita's been my upside for many years. She's been a member of my network for probably about 20 years, or close to it. We've known each other for a long time, long



before she became a member of my network. So, we cofounded the VA Conference here in Australia. And, the eighth annual conference is actually next month, towards the end of April and it's being held in Melbourne. It is an onsite conference. It's not an online conference. We feel it's important for VA's to be able to meet and see each other face-to-face for just a couple of days a year. So, we take it through the different eastern states of Australia. So, it's been in Sydney and it's been in Brisbane and all of that. But, it's in Melbourne this year. We've got about 13 or 14 speakers coming from around the country to it, and it's in a great venue. There's accommodation available for those coming from overseas or interstate and they can stay overnight. There's always a great number of takeaways. It's just a great conference. I really enjoy it every year myself.

For the first time I'm not, actually, on the organizing committee for this one. Last year I stepped down from the organizing committee, and also, I stepped down from being President of the Australian VA Association, which I also cofounded with Anita a few years ago. I felt after being president for four years it was important to step down and let other people step up. Anita is now president of the association. I'm still there in the background and available for support and advice when they need it.

The VA industry is going really well here in Australia and it's good to be able to be a part of a professional association that, you know, has been formed to help manage all those things. And, part of the reason why I organized the Australia VA Association too was so that it could be the parent organization for the Australian VA Conference rather than myself. That way they could drum up funding and sponsorships and all those sorts of things, and it wasn't all coming out of my pocket. And, they've been quite successful with those conferences each year. It's been good.

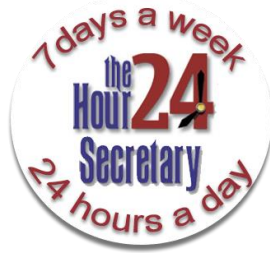
Sharon Williams: Would you please share the URL for the conference?

Kathie Thomas: Yes, absolutely. I'm sorry, I have so many URL's rolling around in my head that I have to stop and think for a moment.

Sharon Williams: Well, just let me say that we're going to, on your page for the chat, we will include all of the URL's that you've mentioned today. So, if you can't think of it off the top of your head now, we'll make sure it's included.

Kathie Thomas: Oh, absolutely, yes. I'm pretty sure it's <http://australianvaconference.com/>, www.australianvaconference.com. With the Australian VA Association, it's www.avaaassn.au. And yes, the other one is www.australianvaconference.com. In fact, when they go and look at that, they'll see a photo of all of our delegates from one of our conferences, and I'm in the bottom left corner.

Sharon Williams: Okay. Everybody, please go check it out. So, we're kind of winding up now. Do you have one story or case study or something you'd like to share, just to sum up everything?



Kathie Thomas: Oh, no. I have lots and lots of stories, Sharon. There isn't any one particular story, I guess. But, one of the things I haven't mentioned is how much my family have benefitted from me being home fulltime. I mentioned before about our girls and how young they were. They're all now grown up and they're married and have children. So, we've got seven grandchildren. Working from home means that I can go and be with a daughter if they have a need. Our youngest daughter has got a two-year-old and she's got six-month-old twins. So, I go down once a week and spend some time with her and just help out and do a few things for her. All of our girls have grown up knowing that they can run a business from home. So, the girls are doing just that, running businesses from home now, because they've seen the mom did it while we were growing up. We can do it. Not one of them is a VA. They're all doing different things, but, you know, they're all running their own businesses. But, most of all, as well, my husband has needed me to be home. Over the 23 years there's been a couple of times when he's been hospitalized and different things have happened, and then he's been home recuperating. And, I've been here for him the whole time. I haven't had to take time off from a job. I haven't had to worry about being sacked from a job.

There have been a couple of occasions where I've, literally, had to step back from my own business for a few weeks. My whole VA team have just stepped in and looked after my clients and done things for me. You know, when you join the VA community, it is a community. It's just that. And, if you're networking with your peers, via different VA networks, when the comes you need to have a holiday or you're having a baby or something else is happening in your life and you need to step back, hopefully, you would have developed some friendships with those peers, and some of those can step up and help look after things for you when you have that need.

Sharon Williams: Well, I think that's one of the best things that has come out of this conversation today, just the sharing of, of course, your personal history and story and how the industry has supported you financially, as well as supported you when you had need for support within your family.

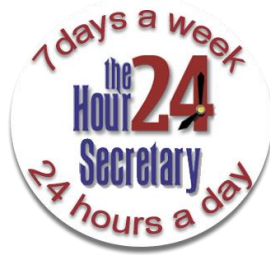
Kathie Thomas: Absolutely.

Sharon Williams: And, also, that your daughters are now running their own business, which is something I strongly advocate. I think, overall, that's fantastic.

Kathie Thomas: It is, absolutely. Yeah, it's been really great. Thanks, Sharon.

Sharon Williams: Okay. Now, I'm supposed to ask you is there anything else you'd like to share?

Kathie Thomas: Oh, look, I think I've probably pretty much covered it all. I'm sure as soon as we stop, I'll think of something else, but at this stage, I think I've pretty much covered it all.



Sharon Williams: Okay. Then, I want to thank Kathie Thomas for a great interview. And, I'm sure all the virtual assistants that are in our audience have just gotten a ton of value from the tips, tricks and secrets that you've shared. So, again, thanks Kathie for sharing with us. And, thank all the VA's in the audience for joining us for this amazing presentation. I'm Sharon Williams. Thanks for joining us on the chat with the VA Industry Leader.

Kathie Thomas: Thank you, Sharon,

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