

Virtual Assistants On the Move — Work Anywhere, Anytime, for Anyone
By Kathie Hightower and Holly Scherer
Wordcount (with sidebar): 1429

“I knew I wanted to work from home, yet be available for my kids.”

Air Force spouse Charlotte Lingard-Young’s thought is echoed by many military spouses and is one of the key reasons many start a Virtual Assistant (VA) business.

Lingard-Young’s business, C.Y. Virtual Solutions (www.cyvirtualsolutions.com), puts her background in healthcare and masters degree in Applied Psychology to work for her clients doing internet research and general and psychiatric transcription among other services.

Army spouse Jeri Winkler combines a Computer Science degree with real estate experience in her virtual business called The Secret Assistant, www.secretassistant.com. She provides realtors with everything from database management to prospecting to website maintenance. Her familiarity with popular real estate software programs allows her to handle time-consuming office tasks from a distance.

Air Force spouse Janelle Davis combines a law degree and experience in commercial litigation and appeals to provide motion and brief preparations for her clients.

Virtual Assistant businesses obviously cover a wide range of specialties.

As Chris Durst, who is credited with founding the Virtual Assistance industry in 1995 points out, VAs are home-based entrepreneurs who run their own shows offering business support services to other businesses via email, phone and fax. Durst and Michael Haaren, co-founders of Staffcentrix, have trained, taught or mentored over 3,800 VAs internationally. In their book *The Two-Second Commute: Join the Exploding Ranks of Freelance Virtual Assistants*, they identify over 80 varieties of expertise, ranging from basic word processing to high-end corporate consulting.

Many specialties listed in their book seem tailor made for the background and experience of military spouses: Event Planning, Expertise in Foreign Markets, Interpreting, Import/Export Support, Nonprofit Support Services, Government Procurement Expertise, Resume Writing, Fundraising.

In March 2002 Staffcentrix’s program The Portable Career & Virtual Assistance Training Program™ geared specifically to military spouses kicked off with a pilot at Cannon AFB through support of the Air Force Aid Society. Since then Staffcentrix has provided programs to many other military sites. Their Train the Trainer program certifies spouse employment professionals from all services. Over 2,300 military spouses are now part of the Military Spouse Virtual Assistant community.

Staffcentrix tracks the outcome of the training through quarterly reports from all military spouses who attend training. In the 2004 report, 89% of spouses who launched a VA business report improved quality of life. As one spouse said, “Our quality of life on the relationship front has always been solid, but when it came to career and finances I was

on a downhill slide while he was working his way up through the ranks. Now I am the 'general' of my own business and the self-confidence I have gained through this experience has only helped me feel more supportive of his career. (Yes, I was a wee bit envious of him before.)"

Of course, a VA business isn't for everyone.

As Durst says, "The failure rate of small businesses is quite high, and unfortunately, a failed business can have a negative impact on a family's finances, time, and quality of life. For the business owner, the failure can cause damage to self-esteem that can take a long time to overcome." The first step of the Staffcentrix program is a thorough assessment of potential candidates to see if they have what it takes to succeed.

"The ideal candidate," says Durst, "possesses a strong entrepreneurial aptitude, solid skills that can be performed virtually, a good knowledge of the Internet and how to use it for sending and receiving work, the ability to communicate effectively in writing, and 'fire in the belly' — that drive to make things happen in spite of hurdles that may stand in one's path."

You also need self-discipline, strong time management and organization, networking ability, marketing ability (being able to sell yourself is key) and being good at detail and follow through.

Another key requirement is spousal and family support. As Lingard-Young points out, "You have to have your family on board with the idea. You will need time and space to work and they will have to understand that."

Advantages to Military Spouses and to Their Clients

"The advantage is you can work anywhere, anytime, for anyone," says Lingard-Young. "The business can be wherever you are and can move when you move."

Evy Packard-Williams is an Army spouse with a Masters degree in Administration who focuses her VA business, BrochuresByDesign.com, on marketing, desktop publishing and professional writing services. After years in the corporate world, she appreciates the flexibility this business provides. "I love being able to take the time my family needs and work when I can. I can work early in the morning or late at night if I have to."

The advantage to your clients is that they have no overhead expenses such as rent, hardware/software expense or benefits to pay. They only pay for hours worked. Some clients like the fact that work can be going on in another time zone while they are sleeping, and others like having a "satellite office" in another state or country.

And Disadvantages?

If you aren't careful, the business can take over your life. As Davis says, "The key advantage to a virtual business is staying home with my daughter and setting my own hours...and the main challenge of this business is working at home with my daughter." Other VAs echo this. As Lingard-Young says, "My biggest challenge is being able to balance my time so that my work does not take over all of my time with my kids...the main reason I decided to stay home."

As Durst points out, “Contrary to popular belief, self-employment doesn’t mean you’ll have more free time. On the contrary, you’ll usually have less, especially in the startup phase.”

And there is the boss issue. You now have a boss who never leaves you alone. As Durst says, “This new boss will follow you everywhere — the house, the car, the store — even the shower!” And depending on your personality, you may now have the most critical boss you’ve ever had. Not only that, every client you have is in effect another boss.

Packard-Williams adds that finding clients is challenging as is getting clients to pay on time, which points out another challenge to any virtual business. Some of the work you do cannot be billed to a client. From accounting to learning new software to marketing, you do a lot of unpaid work.

Although this business is movable, it can be challenging to continue effectively during the actual move itself. Winkler has moved her business three times since 2001.

“The first move was a nightmare and cost me a client,” she says, “I thought I could handle the daily workload and the move at the same time, but faced internet connection problems as we traveled cross country.” She’s since learned to hire other VAs to continue her work during the move so she can get her house established before starting back to work.

As the VA industry grows, services are developing to help with marketing. Staffcentrix and other associations like REVA network provide Requests for Proposals (RFPs) from clients looking for VAs for specific kinds of work.

Winkler’s best source of clients is referrals from a national real estate organization. Lingard-Young’s is RFP’s from Staffcentrix and Guru.com. A broadcast fax to fellow Chamber of Commerce members produced one long-term client for Packard-Williams with other clients coming via referral. Davis got her first client by dropping off her resume at a law office. Clients since have come by word of mouth. Winkler believes it’s important to have a great website and to “talk about your business to everyone.”

Many VA’s find their businesses immediately profitable if they already have the computer equipment, fax, phone lines, high speed Internet access and software needed. Others put their profits back into the business, get a loan or put personal money into the business to keep it going until they build a clientele. VAs charge between \$19-34 per hour for general administrative support with fees for higher level services up to \$50 per hour.

With the challenges of this kind of business, is it worth it? “It is for me,” says Packard-Williams. “I love the freedom, flexibility and creativity of working on my own. I get to help provide an income, do work that I truly enjoy and take the time necessary for my family!”

Sidebar:

Resources for Virtual Assistants:

International Virtual Assistants Association; www.ivaa.org
Military Spouse Virtual Assistants; www.msvas.com

REVA Network (Real Estate Virtual Assistants), www.revanetwork.com
Staffcentrix, www.staffcentrix.com
Work-the-Web.com, www.work-the-web.com

The Two-Second Commute: Joint the Exploding Ranks of Freelance Virtual Assistants
by Christine Durst and Michael Haaren

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Kathie and Holly are coauthors of Help! I'm a Military Spouse — I Want a Life Too: How to Craft a Life for YOU as You Move With the Military. In future issues, they plan to explore careers in financial services, legal services, federal government, DoD contractors, network marketing and more. If you have questions or a story to share about these career fields, contact them at kathie@militaryspousehelp.com