

Start your own virtual assistant business!

FabJob Guide to
**Become a
Virtual
Assistant**



JENNIFER FISHBERG

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1. Introduction

1.1 A Career as a Virtual Assistant

Congratulations on taking the first step toward a rewarding new career as a virtual assistant! Behind many of today's economic challenges, such as corporate downsizing and the trend toward outsourcing, lies enormous opportunity for those with the creativity, technology savvy, and desire to tap into it. It takes vision to imagine yourself in the roles of entrepreneur and partner in business instead of employee, and courage to act on that dream.

One key to a successful transition is to arm yourself with the facts, skills, and advice of those who have already traveled the path you are beginning. The *FabJob Guide to Become a Virtual Assistant* is designed to be your guide along this path to a successful career in this fast-growing field, and to help you avoid the potential pitfalls along the way.

In this guide, you will learn what virtual assistants do, how much they earn, who they work for, and how they find clients. You will also gain an understanding of how to leverage your skills and experience to tap into a niche market, how to develop new skills to make you more marketable, and where to find the resources you need to help you grow your business. So let's get started!

1.1.1 What Is a Virtual Assistant?

Ask any successful CEO or business owner how they got where they are and, if they're honest, they'll probably tell you that they could never have done it without a fantastic administrative assistant and support staff. A great assistant is typically highly organized, skilled in utilizing the latest technology, and has an ability to anticipate what is needed and make the boss look good to his or her colleagues and clients. It's clear why someone with these traits would be in high demand.

Unfortunately, there are also many administrative assistants who work tirelessly for years in support of others for little financial reward or appreciation, spend countless hours commuting to an office in addition to working long hours, and are never valued for their contributions. They may be thought of as "just a secretary" or "typist", which is usually far from reality, and may not be given the opportunity to grow in their career or to focus on those aspects of the job that they truly enjoy. If any of these scenarios sound familiar, or even if you're happy in your current administrative position and are just seeking new challenges, more flexibility in your schedule, or are concerned about your company downsizing, becoming a virtual assistant could be right for you.

Virtual assistants have the satisfaction of doing what they love and contributing to the success of their clients while experiencing the financial rewards and freedom of entrepreneurship. According to the International Virtual Assistants Association, a professional organization dedicated to educating and promoting the interests of individuals in the virtual assistance profession:

"A Virtual Assistant (VA) is an independent entrepreneur providing administrative, creative and/or technical services. Utilizing advanced technological modes of communication and data delivery, a professional VA assists clients in his/her area of expertise from his/her own office on a contractual basis."

Virtual Assistant, Telecommuter, Freelancer: Is There a Difference?

The short answer is yes! Because virtual assisting is still a relatively new field, you'll likely get a few quizzical looks from people who are unfamiliar with the term when you try to explain what you do. Some may associate the term with the animated paper clip character that pops up in older versions of Microsoft Word (to provide document writing assistance or annoyance, depending on your perspective). Others may assume that this is just another term for anyone who does freelance work or works from home. While a virtual assistant does generally work from a home office, running a virtual assisting business should not be confused with "telecommuting," a practice which began more than 20 years ago and has grown in popularity in the corporate world in recent years.

Telecommuters typically work for one company, either full- or part-time, but do so from their home or another remote location. According to an Office of Personnel Management survey, the number of telecommuters has more than doubled over the past 15 years, with about 15% of employees working remotely at least once per week. Some telecommuters, especially those whose work requires regular communication and interaction with colleagues or the public, work a regular 9 to 5 schedule. Others may work a flexible schedule within pre-determined company guidelines. Telecommuters may be administrative assistants, IT professionals, marketing professionals, or hold any number of titles within the company. The common thread is that they have a single job function (e.g. computer programmer) and are regular employees of an organization, not contract workers.

Freelancers may also be telecommuters, or they may work on-site for one or more companies on a contractual basis. They are not officially employees of the companies for which they provide services and are often hired on a per project basis or for a predetermined length of time. They may be writers, editors, web designers, researchers, or work in any number of other professions. Freelancers typically focus on one type of service or a group of related services (writing, editing, and proofreading, for example) rather than offering a diverse array of services. Many freelancers work part-time to supplement their income from another job, though there is an increasing trend in the current economy toward full-time freelance work.

So what makes virtual assistance unique? One thing that distinguishes a virtual assistant from a telecommuter or freelancer is that while they may have a specialty on which they focus, they also provide a variety of administrative support services in addition to that specialty. These services may vary based on the individual client's needs, as well as the VA's experience. The required range of support services may also evolve over time as the client's company grows and changes, making the virtual assistant a collaborator, and sometimes advisor, in addition to someone who just carries out assigned tasks. A virtual assistant is not an employee, but rather an active partner with a stake in the success and growth of their clients' businesses – this requires a completely different approach and mindset than administrative work in the non-virtual world.

Virtual assistants can also be distinguished from telecommuters and freelancers in that they more commonly establish long-term business relationships with clients to provide ongoing services. They may be paid per hour, per project, or may work on a monthly retainer basis.

1.1.2 Services Provided by a Virtual Assistant

Specific services and specializations will vary based on the virtual assistant's personal experience and business model. For example, some virtual assistants choose to subcontract work to other virtual assistants in areas where they have less experience or less interest, or they may accept subcontract work from another virtual assistant who may not have expertise in a particular area.

Typical VA services might include any or all of the following:

- Accounting and bookkeeping
- Appointment setting
- Billing
- Collections
- Concierge service
- Contact management
- Customer service

- Data entry
- Database design and management
- Desktop publishing
- Document translation
- Editing & proofreading
- Event & meeting planning
- Executive assistance
- Graphic design
- Human resources services
- Internet marketing & social media
- Legal secretarial services
- Medical billing and transcription
- Newsletters
- Programming
- Project management
- Public relations
- Real estate virtual assistance
- Research
- Transcription
- Travel arrangements
- Technical writing
- Website design & maintenance
- Word processing

Pretty impressive list! And this is by no means an exhaustive one. If you have skills in other areas, knowledge of particular software packages,

computer programming languages, or services you have experience in providing for a past employer that could be offered virtually, this could help you to stand out from the crowd. It may even become a profitable niche for you (more on choosing a niche in Chapter 2).

1.1.3 Who Utilizes Virtual Assistants?

In addition to offering a diverse array of services, virtual assistants work with clients across many different industries and with businesses of varying sizes and needs. Some are small businesses without the office space, budget, or workload to maintain an on-site staff. Others may be larger organizations seeking to cut back on expenses by limiting spending on employee benefits, tax contributions, and equipment purchases.

Several examples of the types of clients for which virtual assistants typically work are listed below.

Self-employed Individuals and Small Business Owners

- Authors and journalists
- Coaches, counselors, and therapists
- Real estate professionals
- Medical and law practices
- Financial planners and advisors

Larger Organizations

- Corporations that are downsizing
- Companies with short-term projects
- Companies seeking a specialized skill set
- Hospitals
- Universities
- Professional associations
- Nonprofits

1.2 The History and Growth of Virtual Assistance

While there is some disagreement over exactly who established the field of virtual assistance, and you will likely read accounts on the Internet of several individuals claiming the title of “founder”, most sources agree that individuals began providing administrative services virtually in the early 1990s. According to the Virtual Assistance Chamber of Commerce, the actual term “virtual assistant” was coined in 1996.

Time is Money: Benefits of Outsourcing

Today, with books such as Timothy Ferriss’ bestselling *The 4-Hour Workweek* gaining in popularity, individuals and corporate hiring managers everywhere are recognizing the value of outsourcing the tasks that are outside their areas of expertise or interest, and focusing on those things that are profitable and that they do well. Good news for aspiring virtual assistants!

Recent figures from the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) suggest that the average small business operator spends 40% of their time on administrative tasks. So for small business owners and individuals who are self-employed, virtual assistants can help eliminate some of the long hours spent on routine daily tasks and allow them to focus on the revenue-generating aspects of their business. They may also provide needed expertise and flexibility to work on special projects as they arise.

There are other cost savings that are appealing to companies as well. According to a December 2009 report from the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, employers pay an average of an additional 30-35% above wages for employee benefits including health insurance, paid leave (vacation, holiday, sick, and personal time), and retirement contributions.

The Virtual Assistant Networking Association Cost Comparison indicates that employers can save as much as \$60,000 per year by hiring a virtual assistant instead of a full-time employee. These are some impressive figures to keep handy when explaining the cost benefits of your service to potential clients! For companies facing financial crisis

in the current economy, utilizing the services of a virtual assistant instead of hiring full-time staff can mean the difference between staying in business and becoming yet another statistic.

The Future of the Virtual Workforce

Clearly the way companies do business is changing, and workers are learning to adapt to the changing marketplace. A recent Money Magazine article on CNNMoney.com entitled "The Rise of Freelance Nation" states that, "about 30% of the U.S. job market - roughly 42 million workers - is made up of independent contractors, part-time or temporary staffers, and the self-employed." Experts predict this number will grow to 40% by 2019.

So how many of these 42 million workers are virtual assistants? There are currently no formal numbers due to varying definitions of the term "virtual assistant" among other things, but estimates range from 2,000 to 8,000 worldwide.

According to the results of the Virtual Assistance Chamber of Commerce's 2008 Virtual Assistant Industry Survey, these numbers continue to grow. Results indicated a dramatic increase in new VA businesses operating in 2007 and 2008 compared with previous years.

Because virtual assistance is a relatively new field, and because it can encompass such a variety of job functions and tasks, the U.S. Department of Labor does not list statistics on its predicted growth. However, the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Outlook Handbook 2010-11 does specifically mention virtual assistants under the category of Secretaries and Administrative Assistants. The Bureau of Labor Statistics states that "Secretaries and administrative assistants held about 4.3 million jobs in 2008, ranking it among the largest occupations in the U.S. economy."

Growing industries for administrative assistants include:

- Healthcare and social assistance
- Legal
- Construction

- Educational Services
- Professional, scientific, and technical services

Based on the predicted need for administrative assistants and related fields, it is clear that virtual assisting represents an area with enormous growth potential.

1.3 Benefits of Being a Virtual Assistant

There are many reasons why virtual assistance continues to grow in popularity as a career option. Some of the benefits include:

Helping Others

Many virtual assistants are drawn to the field because they have a sincere desire to use their organizational skills and expertise to help people run more efficient and profitable businesses. Virtual assisting can be extremely satisfying in this regard since you can see the immediate and measurable results of your work with clients. It is a tangible way of making a difference not only in your clients' bottom line, but in the quality of their day-to-day lives.

“Great VAs are true experts in the target markets they service and the skills they provide. They also act as consultants. By that I mean, they provide recommendations on how best to achieve their clients' goals, and they offer suggestions on additional ways to increase their clients' income and happiness with their lives and businesses.”

— *Kathy Goughenour, President, Head Trainer and Coach,
Expert VA Training*

Flexibility and Independence

This freedom to choose the types of work and clients accepted, and the flexibility of creating a schedule that fits one's lifestyle is what attracts many people to the virtual assistance field. The Virtual Assistant Networking Association's 2007 Virtual Assistant Survey indicated that among more than 750 respondents, over 79% started their VA business because of a desire for flexible hours – this was ranked well above money as a motivating factor. VAs can work full- or part-time during any

hours they choose. Over 60% of respondents to the survey indicated that they do not keep traditional 9 to 5, Monday to Friday work hours.

Virtual assistants may also choose to work independently or subcontract for other VAs. The flexibility of working from a home office also eliminates the tiresome and costly daily commute from their routine, enabling more time to be spent with family and doing the things they love.

As a VA, you also have the freedom to choose a niche that you have a particular interest in. The options are unlimited. Tya Bolton, virtual assistant and founder of Maryland-based Exceptional Business Solutions, manages a team of 10 VAs.

“You have control of your destiny! I always ask our VAs what they enjoy most and what they truly dislike. That helps me to match them up with clients and assign worthwhile work. You should be able to look forward to the work you do when you’re in business for yourself. Gone are the days of being a miserable employee; take control!”

– Tya Bolton, *Exceptional Business Solutions*

Challenge and Variety

Because they work with many different types of clients in different industries, and because they never know what projects may arise, virtual assistants have the unique challenge of keeping up-to-date on emerging trends in many different areas. This includes keeping up with new technologies that can be utilized to assist their clients.

In terms of running your own business, there is the added task of keeping up with new marketing techniques and getting the word about your services out to potential clients. For those who are easily bored with the same old day-to-day routine, being a virtual assistant offers a continued opportunity for learning. Many virtual assistants say that there is no such thing as a “typical day” for a VA!

“A great virtual assistant has a thirst for knowledge, is constantly learning new things, and shares that knowledge with his or her clients by making recommendations to enhance the client’s business. There are so many rewards, including the flexibility to create my own schedule, and the knowledge that I don’t have to do the same old work day

after day. But perhaps most rewarding is being able to constantly learn and apply new technical and creative skills.”

— *Janet Barclay, Founder of Organized Assistant and Golden Horseshoe Virtual Assistants Group*

Income Potential

Virtual assistance is a field with a great deal of income potential – and according to the Virtual Assistant Networking Association survey, over 30% had their first client within only a month. Including those VAs who had prearranged clients before starting their business and those who had their first client within 3 months, that number jumps to nearly 80% -- encouraging numbers for a new business owner seeking to turn a profit as quickly as possible.

Virtual assistants typically earn a higher per hour wage than an administrative assistant performing similar tasks in a traditional office setting. Because businesses don't have to pay many of the costs associated with hiring on-site staff, this savings is reflected in the hourly rate that a VA can charge. Your fees as a VA will vary based on your specialization, level of experience, and unique skills, as well as the industry and types of clients you are targeting.

Some VAs earn over \$100 per hour – but more typically the range falls somewhere between \$25 and \$60 per hour. Virtual assistants who offer general office support services only are more likely to earn toward the lower end of the scale, while those who have experience in specialized areas such as internet marketing, web design, medical, legal, or real estate fields typically charge higher fees.

“When determining what rate you should expect to make, it is always advisable to understand that your time is more valuable than you may think! Something that may only take you 30 minutes to complete may take them 4 hours – you should remember to charge accordingly. Your knowledge and skill is extremely valuable!”

– *Suzanne Roy, Real Estate Virtual Assistant, V.A. Work*

Many VAs generate additional income by earning a percentage from client work they subcontract out to a team of other virtual assistants.

“I have no trouble finding new VA clients, but do have a big problem overbooking myself to the point where I was working 7 days a week, 12 to 14 hours a day for about a year. Ridiculous! I finally figured out that by outsourcing to other VAs I could still earn money without having to do the majority of the work.”

– Kathy Goughenour, *Expert VA Training*

Low Start-up Costs

Office space, staff, inventory, supplies, expensive marketing campaigns... these are just a few of the costly headaches that many new business owners have to deal with. A major benefit of starting a virtual assistance business is that many of these typical expenses can be greatly minimized by using the many free resources that are available (you will find many of them listed throughout this guide).

As the title “virtual” assistant indicates, much of the VAs work can be done on a computer either utilizing software or online resources. Files can be stored electronically. Paperwork is minimized. This helps to eliminate the need for storage space and excessive supplies. Many virtual assistants make an effort to keep their businesses as green as possible, benefiting both their bottom line and the environment.

1.4 Inside This Guide

The *FabJob Guide to Become a Virtual Assistant* will take you step-by-step through the process of transitioning from employee to business owner, from learning what virtual assistants do, to finding resources to meet your educational and practical needs, and learning techniques for building and running a successful virtual assistance business. You’ll also find sample forms and contracts you can adapt for use with your clients. The guide is arranged as follows:

Chapter 2 (“*What a Virtual Assistant Does*”) explains the importance of choosing a niche and how to choose the right one for you. Once you’ve decided who you want to work with and what services you enjoy providing, this chapter also details how to do a client consultation, and how to establish and maintain a positive VA/client relationship. You’ll also learn helpful techniques for structuring your business policies

and procedures, and how to organize your day to maximize your “you time” as well as your billable hours.

Once you understand the basics of what a virtual assistant does, Chapter 3 (“*Getting Ready*”) will help you discover the many opportunities, both formal and informal, that exist for learning and practicing the skills you’ll need to be a great virtual assistant. This chapter covers suggested areas of study for those interested in pursuing a college or university degree or certificate program, the value of VA certification programs, and how to find a mentor. Chapter 3 also suggests ways you can hone your skills in your current profession and through volunteer activities.

If you want to try virtual assistance on for size before starting your own business, or if you’re just looking to supplement your new business or provide an added income stream, subcontracting could be for you. Chapter 4 (“*Getting Hired for Subcontract Work*”) will provide you with information on how subcontracting works and where to find these opportunities.

Starting a new business venture can be exciting, but it can also be overwhelming if you aren’t informed about the process. Chapter 5 (“*Starting Your Own Business*”) will provide you with guidelines and all the resources you need to start your virtual assistance business, from the legal formalities to how to choose a business name and create your fee structure. This chapter also provides a sample contract you can use with clients.

You don’t need a degree in marketing or a big publicity budget to attract business. Chapter 6 (“*Getting Clients*”) offers lots of ideas on how to reach out to the target market you identified in Chapter 2. There are many free and low cost options for designing and hosting your website, and writing and distributing press releases – this chapter will show you where to find them. Chapter 6 will also offer some tips to help take the anxiety out of networking and make the most of this extremely effective marketing tool.

Each chapter also contains relevant practical advice from the many virtual administrative professionals and trainers with experience in many different specializations, such as real estate virtual assistance and legal

virtual assistance, who generously shared their time and insights with us. You will learn what these now successful virtual support providers wish they'd known when they were where you are right now, what challenges and rewards you can expect to face as you grow your business, and what steps you can start taking today to be an outstanding VA with the thriving business of your dreams.