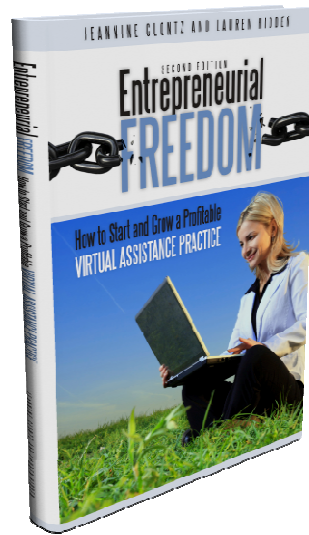


SECOND EDITION
Entrepreneurial Freedom

*How to Start and Grow
A Profitable Virtual Assistance Practice*



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CHAPTER 1: DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES?

Arguably, a virtual assistant practice is easier to start up than many other businesses. It doesn't cost tens of thousands of dollars, and it shouldn't take you too many years to break even. But this doesn't mean you should underestimate the effort involved—starting up a VA business requires an investment of time, blood, sweat, and tears to get your practice off the ground and then to keep it profitable (and enjoyable) for the long haul.

The Internet is filled with people looking for work from home opportunities. It's also a playground for scam artists. Some people are so desperate to work from home that they get suckered into unscrupulous business "opportunities." Others, with the best of intentions, decide that being a virtual assistant is an easy way to make a living and jump into it without spending the time to investigate whether or not it's a good fit for them. But starting your VA business isn't a "get rich quick" opportunity, and to be successful, it's going to require the same dedication a "regular" business start-up would require.

The recent turn of the economy has provided our industry with a blessing and a curse of sorts. The blessing comes in the form of increased interest in what a virtual professional brings to the mix as it relates to providing organizations with 'as-needed' professional support without the exposure to taxes and expenses required of in-house staff. After being forced to cut back on staff through lay-offs, many new prospects are now looking at VAs as a viable option to fill-in the areas where cutbacks have forced middle to upper management to take on additional workload that many times gets left on the back burner, or never again sees the light of day.

The curse comes in the form of the massive numbers of people who were laid off or downsized during this time who don't realize the needs of establishing a viable business model, but simply put their hats in the ring to do project work. This has in some cases 'muddied the waters' of our industry, in that these providers, while they have the expertise/skills to perform the work, don't have the entrepreneur's mindset necessary to maintain and grow the business. This then leaves less than stellar customer service and potential clients who discontinue the use of VAs due to the dissatisfaction and lack of business knowledge portrayed by these pseudo-VAs, hurting our industry.

For those who are willing to get the business knowledge and expertise necessary to develop a Virtual Assistance practice, they find a much easier road to climb, and help to solidify the overall perception of the industry. Since you are reading this book, we must believe you are willing to look at establishing a solid foundation for your VA practice.

On the upside, a virtual assistant practice is very flexible. You have the ability to work from home, set your own hours and set your own rates. Unlike opening a franchise or a brick and mortar business, you won't need to work 16-hour days and need to be physically present for your customers at all times. However, opening a VA practice will require your time, money and energy and will affect the rest of your family, too. Being a VA can be a dream come true for some, and a living nightmare for others. Read on to take an objective look at whether you have what it takes to be a happy and successful virtual assistant.

What You Need For Your VA Business

To start up your virtual assistance practice, you need to possess some tangible items and some intangible traits. The following is a list of some items to consider before starting your VA business.

Capital

Starting your business will take some cold, hard, cash, (or at least a credit card or loan). How much money you need depends on many factors—what specialties you want to work in, how top-of-the-line you want or need your equipment to be, and what initial level of monetary exposure you are comfortable with. Carefully evaluate your wants versus needs for a practice and make a list of your bare minimum expenses and your money-is-no-object ones.

If you are going to be home-based, minimally you can start a practice for about three thousand dollars. That will be enough for a computer, basic software and supplies to get things rolling. But, in reality, you will need to be able to fund your current lifestyle and pay your expenses for approximately two years. That will give you the ability to keep your household running smoothly while you establish and market your business. It could take anywhere from three to five years for your business to support itself in the manner that would allow you to draw a regular salary.

You may even find VAs who have been able to establish and grow their businesses much more quickly, so it is certainly possible, however, if you go into this endeavor with the understanding that in most cases it will take several years for you to draw a regular salary, you will alleviate some of the natural pressures owning a business creates.

Want to start your business before you could save up that much money? It's still possible. There are many other ways to fund the start-up costs of your business. Here are some possibilities:

- Refinance your home
- Use your home's equity
- Borrow from friends or family
- Secure a personal loan based on collateral, stocks and bonds, mutual funds, etc.
- Use credit cards
- Sell personal or collectable properties
- Look to the Small Business Administration (SBA) for a loan
- Find an investor
- Apply for a business loan

Any of these options still give you the end result—capital to start your business.

Will You Need Retail Space?

If you're looking to plunge into retail space for your business, your capital needs will be higher and most likely require more structured funding. This will require you to get a business plan, financial statements and other paperwork in order before you can really walk into a bank and get your funding. Unless you really need retail space for your specific type of VA business, you may want to consider starting as a home-based business, and later moving it to rented office if

you need to. The lower you can keep your overhead in the beginning, the sooner your business will be profitable.

What's Your Experience?

Very few jobs prepare you for running your own business and the leap from employee to entrepreneur is huge. You need two skill sets:

- entrepreneurial “know how”
- the specific skills required of your business services

Your past experience may not be as important as your talent and business software skills, but your corporate experience can be helpful in providing you with a basic understanding of what it takes to run a business. Initially, you're going to be responsible for paying the bills, setting up vendors, marketing, sales and promotion, getting systems in place, creating promotional materials, setting up bookkeeping practices and a pricing schedule. We'll go into this in much more detail in future chapters. If you feel totally unqualified in one or two of these areas, you can also outsource some of these tasks as you start to secure business.

Obviously, you should possess excellent skills in the services you are providing. You need to communicate and be confident in delivering what you say you can. Clients will instantly know whether you know what you're talking about as you try to sell them on the advantages and benefits of outsourcing work to you. The more experienced you are, the easier it will be to close the sale. You will also need to understand and build good communication skills in order to work with the different personalities and backgrounds that your client base will include.

Having good customer service skills and business ethics will round out the necessary level of experience that will be the solid foundation for your new business.

Can You Persevere?

Operating a successful business requires time, sacrifice, and lots of hard work. There are no short-cuts or quick fixes. You are the only person that will be responsible and accountable for your success and/or failure. That's a scary realization for many people. Having your own business will require some creative thinking, and some long nights. But the rewards and benefits of persevering far outweigh the sacrifices you need to make to be successful.

Like any business, you will have gains and losses. You will not get every client you pitch to. You may lose a client to a competitor, you might have clients that are delinquent in paying you, or clients that try to micromanage you and drive you nuts. You can't take any of these negatives personally—you'll learn to develop a thicker skin. Most importantly, you must be able to persevere and have faith that the positives of running your VA business far outweigh the negatives. Stick with it.

Building a strong network of peers and business associates will help you stay on track and persevere, long after your subconscious has made you question your decision to dive into this new adventure.

Are You Self Confident?

How you perceive yourself plays a huge role in your business success. If you don't feel good about yourself and your ability to provide top-notch services, you'll have a hard time closing the deal.

There will also be some times throughout the year when business will be slow or soft. Without a healthy dose of confidence in yourself and your business, you will struggle to succeed. Self-confidence comes from within and takes work to maintain. Just like we need to exercise and eat right to maintain good health, we need to keep a positive attitude and confidence in ourselves and our ability to run an ethical and profitable business.

As you read farther into this book, you will find many ways to help maintain and improve your self-confidence. Your experience and perseverance are also keys to improving your attitude and the way you perceive yourself. As you continue to organize and grow your business, your pride and accomplishments will go far to bolster and improve your self-confidence.

If self-confidence is a struggle for you, look to your friends, family and colleagues to give you a boost. Give yourself a pep talk in front of the mirror or standing in the shower. Consider taking a class at a local community college or continuing education center. Spend some time at the library or local book store and read up on the subject. Start a journal and write down your accomplishments, no matter how small. Do whatever it takes. You need to be your biggest cheerleader. This is especially true when approaching possible clients and implementing marketing strategies. If you don't believe in yourself, potential clients won't believe in you either, no matter how skilled you are at the services you offer.

Are You Outgoing?

Not everyone is born with an outgoing personality, but you will need to develop one to create a stable business. It's all too easy to "hide" behind your computer and only deal with people on the phone and via email, but to develop a successful business you need to get out there in the world, hang out where your clients do, and make valuable contacts. Networking is an important part of your business. If you don't have an outgoing personality, this will be more of a challenge.

You'll have to step out of your comfort zone to develop this ability, but the more you do, the easier it becomes. Participate in a variety of activities that allow you to try out different ways of delivering your message or be among other business owners who will be delivering theirs. Learn from them so you can develop your own strong message. None of this happens if you don't get out there.

On a local level, you will be forced to do this face-to-face. Working virtually allows you some additional protection from feeling uncomfortable in your surroundings. Later in this book you will learn about the advantages and benefits of volunteering and donating your services. Involvement in general business and industry organizations will help you in developing a strong, outgoing personality and help improve your self-esteem. Practice, practice, practice.

The Executive Summary

Remember that every business professional you meet had to start at the beginning—just like you. Don't be afraid to ask questions and develop relationships with other VAs to help you to decide if you 'have what it takes,' or can develop the necessary skills to get what it takes, to start and build your VA business.

Be creative and innovative, find something that sets you apart from the rest, and be certain that owning your own business is a good fit for you. Starting your own business takes a lot of courage, requires flexibility and is a big risk. Running a thriving business is not easy, but can be extremely rewarding if you take the time to do it right.

Chapter Links and Resources

Small Business Administration

www.sba.gov

Financing

Businessfinance.com

Lendingtree.com

Cba.ca (Canadian Bankers)

Business information

businessknowhow.com

Additional reading

amazon.com