

# MORE TIME MORE MONEY

BY EASING 'OVERWHELM' AS A SOLOPRENEUR  
OR SMALL BUSINESS OWNER



**ROB O'BYRNE**

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# Acknowledgements

OK, this is the point where I have to say nice things about a whole bunch of people!

But it gives me enormous pleasure to do so.

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# Introduction

Like so many things in life and business, my journey into offshore outsourcing, and later even starting my own outsourcing business, all came about due to a number of totally unrelated coincidences.

In late 2010, I was attending a “pitch fest” business seminar for the very first time. Yes, I was a slow starter. It was an amazing experience, and I was totally taken-in with all the promises of an easy, step-by-step pathway to riches and freedom!

I think I spent \$56,000 that weekend on a whole range of products and services, from a 12-month “Business School”, which was actually really good (I stayed a member for 3 years) to a coaching program, a book writing program, and finally, access to a Virtual Assistant (VA).

The interview process with potential VAs was an interesting experience on Skype Video. I interviewed three,

and hired all three! I had my ~~CFO and my wife~~ sitting off camera, and we all liked different ones, so we found roles for all three.

The whole experience was tremendously rewarding, in terms of getting our VAs onboarded and productive. It soon became apparent that we had been missing out big time through not hiring VAs earlier.

Suddenly, my ~~GM Chau~~ and I had more time each week for higher-priority tasks, and we were beginning to implement marketing and support activities that we just couldn't resource in the past.

Then at 6 months, the cracks started to appear...

Our three VAs were great, and we all really enjoyed working together, but things were not all that great, in terms of the BPO we were hiring them through.

I won't go into the fine details, but little things started to become apparent. For one thing, the bonuses we were paying via PayPal were being held up for 3 months. We were assured that any extra days off that we gave our team were still paid. ~~But~~ they weren't. In effect, by giving our team a day off, we were punishing them by cutting their income! My PA even had to support two clients during our first 3 months together, and wasn't allowed to tell me about it. And there were far worse issues, as well. That's only scratching the surface.

~~So what happened after 6 months is that our three VAs told me that they would not be renewing their contracts at the end of 12 months,~~ as they needed to find a better place to work.

I was really disappointed. Everything had been going so well, and now I was going to lose three valuable team members.

So, I told them one thing: “Finish your 12-month contract, and I’ll come over to the Philippines to meet with you.” And we left it at that.

So, at the end of their contract, they left. We organized 6 weeks’ paid holiday for them, and I met with them in the Philippines. There, WE decided, on the spot, that we would continue to work together, and set up our own virtual back-office.

By this time, a fourth member had also joined the team, being a great web developer and friend of one of the team members.

And so, **Virtual Done Well** was born. My PA, aged only 19, at the time, became ~~President, and~~ organized finding an office and fit-out, registering the business, and getting things ready to go.

We got accountants and lawyers involved, in order to make sure that we were doing everything the right way and meeting all the appropriate “rules”.

When it came to employment contracts, we sat around the table in our hired meeting room with our lawyer and brainstormed things like salaries, leave allowances, and the like. When it came to public holidays, we listed on the whiteboard all the Philippines and Australian public holidays, and agreed which ones would apply. And yes, they got Australia Day as a public holiday.

Things were much happier already. We had our own office, small, but a nice working environment. And most importantly, our team now had a degree of control over their own destiny, and how things would operate.

Over those first few years the team grew as we added more staff to help us manage our growing businesses here in Australia. At 12, we ran out of space and decided to move.

That move to a bigger office also allowed us to take on additional staff for “external” clients. We’d had lots of inquiries from industry colleagues who’d wanted to hire VAs in our company, and now we could help them. We also added a small night shift, to look after our US, Canadian and European clients.

And guess what? We need to move office again!

People often ask me how big Virtual Done Well will become? My only answer ~~to that~~ is that it won’t be that big. It will remain small enough that we can easily maintain our family culture and values, and provide

good services to our clients, whilst also looking after our staff well.

We also considered the team's viewpoint on the matter. On a recent trip to Davao City, where the company is based, I asked them all what they thought. The "sweet spot" seems to be about 150 staff. 75 on the day shift, and 75 on the night shift.

The other question people often ask me is, "Do you make much money from VDW?" And that answer is simple: No. I personally make nothing from it. That's not the point. And it never was.

The #1 goal, from the start, was to provide a nice place to work, decent income, and long-term career prospects to our own support team.

Then we added the #2 goal: to be able to provide high-quality VA support to a small number of carefully selected clients.

And now, our #3 goal is to help the less fortunate by sharing some of our time and income. This includes a program for feeding the homeless in Davao City, as well as supporting a range of worthy causes in the Philippines and elsewhere.

I'm very lucky. I have a good life, and I own and run five different businesses. But let me tell you a very badly-kept secret: Virtual Done Well is my favorite. By far. All of the staff at VDW are like an extended

family to me, and rather like a proud father, I get a great sense of joy from seeing what they are able to achieve, and how they are all able to grow, both personally and professionally.

If, for some reason, I could only keep one of the businesses I own... it would be this one.

## Chapter 1

# Why Being a Business Owner Sucks

Being an entrepreneur is, for many people, a kind of status symbol. It is a goal toward which one can aspire as a sign of personal success and independence. And that can be very true. Seeking to build a successful enterprise is, without a doubt, an exciting adventure to embark upon.

There are a lot of reasons why people choose to start their own businesses, rather than climbing the traditional ladder in big, corporate business. For some, they may feel passionate about a particular product or service, and truly believe that they can produce that product, or deliver that service, better than anyone else in their respective industry. Perhaps it comes from a sense of total confidence in grandmother's perfect apple pie recipe.



It is a desire to share something special with the world. And that's an extremely exciting and positive quest to undertake! That is, in a way, someone seeking to make the world just a little bit better. Sadly, upon embarking on such a quest, a new entrepreneur often won't know, or otherwise won't take into account, that running a business is about much more than simply producing a superior product or a service, and that it is in these ancillary functions that they're likely to run into trouble. But we'll talk more about that later.

Another reason a person might take the entrepreneurial route is that they are on a quest for personal freedom. This stems from a basic understanding of the nature of business. The business owner (or in the case of corporations, the board of directors) always makes all the decisions. Sure, the good ones will accept input and suggestions, but in the end, they get to decide on everything. And all the employees around them, even the managers, only exist to carry out the owner's wishes.

Staff and employees are, and always will be, servants. And while there's nothing wrong with trading one's hours for a stable paycheck, for many, serving someone else simply isn't as rewarding as being the boss yourself. The desire to be the king or queen of your own domain is a wonderful thing. But once again, many new entrepreneurs have difficulty envisioning just how complicated the process of running a business can be. And sadly, this can very easily result in problems.

There is another whole class of entrepreneurs who enter the business fray with a desire to build and leave a legacy. These are often family men or women, who can read the writing on the wall. They know that slaving away at the traditional, daily grind isn't going to be enough to provide the kind of lives they want for their children, or the quality education that they will need. ~~And they~~ may not even see how working the traditional 9-6 will help them to reach their own lifestyle goals. They dream of building something bigger and better, by taking an alternate route and doing it themselves. ~~And~~ yet again, this is an admirable goal. ~~And the decision~~ to start a business was probably a good one. ~~But the~~ unknown and unexpected can sneak up on them.

As for me, I was working in a business that I felt was underperforming in its field. I thought that I could provide a better service on my own, and I also didn't think I was being adequately rewarded for the work that I was doing. So it was sort of a combination of a passion for the work, and a desire to build a legacy.

I hate to refer to the same, tired statistic that has been quoted and talked about in every business magazine, book and blog ever written, but the fact is undeniable, and it is terrifying for new business owners: more than 60% of small businesses will cease operations within the first three years of operations, with even more failing within their first ten years. And neither you, nor I, want your business to be one of them.

A lot of articles will name poor management as a leading cause of business failure, and that answer isn't wrong. All the positive attitude, good intentions, passion and charisma in the world won't make up for a lack of properly applied knowledge and experience. All businesses are about much more than the products or services they offer. Businesses are about building, maintaining and growing relationships with the entire supply chain, all the way from the top to the bottom. Whatever it is you sell, getting it from raw material to satisfied customer is a complicated route. ~~And~~ it is very labor-intensive. But it is a rare occurrence, when one person is enough to adequately accomplish all of the work that needs to be done to make a business successful. So yes, good management is an absolute necessity.

But I also believe that blaming business failure on "poor management" isn't really a fair or complete assessment. It is something that the field of medicine defines as an "exclusionary diagnosis". While the statement may be true, it fails to adequately explain the problem in any useful detail. It means that a doctor can identify a sickness by ruling out all the stuff that it isn't, even if he has no evidence of what it is. But why would entrepreneurs manage their businesses poorly? Why would they neglect the very thing into which they have poured so many tangible and intangible resources? I think the real culprit here is something we call "burnout".

Burnout, as defined by Cambridge Dictionary, is: "the state of having no energy or enthusiasm because of

working too hard, or someone who shows the effects of this state.”

Entrepreneurs manage every aspect of their business, because a small business has not yet built the kind of revenue stream to support a managerial staff. That means the business owner has to wear all of the hats, do all of the work, and stay on the job for extremely long hours. Let’s look again at what I said earlier:

**“It is a rare occurrence, when one person is enough to adequately accomplish all of the work that needs to be done to make a business successful.”**

Owning a business is often a lonely lifestyle. You don’t have the old network of friends and colleagues you could rely on for emotional support or technical assistance if you worked as an employee in a big corporation. Instead, you must rely on your own personal ~~fortitude. But~~ inner strength can only get you so far. Everybody has their breaking point.

Just think, for a minute, about the number of hours that you work every week. I’d bet that it’s a lot. At one point, in my early days as an entrepreneur, I was working something between 70-100 hours in a week. That was probably about 8 years ago. All during the day, I was servicing clients and doing sales. In the evenings, I was doing the accounting. On the weekends I was trying to do the marketing. And, to be

honest, I don't know how I kept it up for so long. I had been doing that for about 10 years. It's surprising that I didn't burn out.

A lot of business owners aren't so lucky. I've known business owners who become unhinged because of the stresses of running their own businesses. I'm talking about people who forget to take showers and feed themselves. Work-related stress is proven to increase your chances of a heart attack and can often result in increased consumption of tobacco and alcohol. You can run yourself into an early grave if you're not careful! And if it doesn't destroy your health, burnout can very well destroy your family. With working such long hours on the job, how can you hold a healthy relationship together? It's not just the hours in a day, but the days in a week. Do you even take a day off? Many entrepreneurs end up divorced or separated, in large part due to the hours they put into their businesses.

Finally, burnout can also destroy your business, too. That's because, if you lose the will to do the job, it's going to wither and die. Running a business is much too complicated an undertaking to approach half-heartedly.

So, it seems pretty grim, doesn't it? It looks as if the long and the short of it are that, once you've started a business, you're glued to it until something comes unraveled – whether it be you, your family, or the business itself – and everything crashes into the ground.

But, as much as it sucks to be a business owner, there is hope. There is help out there. There is a way to get through the very difficult challenge of entrepreneurship that is burnout. And no, contrary to some other articles you might read out there, a vacation isn't a long-term solution to battling burnout. It's nearly impossible to do anyway, because your business won't stand still while you go somewhere to unwind.

In the chapters and pages that follow, I'm going to share with you about how I got the help I needed to make my business more profitable and successful. I'll tell you all about how I dramatically reduced my working hours. Where I used to work 70-100 hours in a week, I'm now down to 50 hours. But those 50 hours I spend are so much more productive – so much so, that I'm now running 6 businesses. I absolutely love what I do. On top of the reduced business hours, I can now take three months a year of real leave. That means I'm totally unplugged and relaxing, and travelling overseas with my wife. So, keep reading to see how you can turn things around for your business, too!



# Time Management

I started off this book with a chapter title that heralded nothing but doom and gloom: “Why Being a Business Owner Sucks” carries a pall of darkness along with it. And if that discouraged you, I am very slightly sorry. But only slightly, because there is a perfectly good reason for it. Being a business owner isn’t supposed to suck; but all too often, it truly does. I want to see you succeed at your entrepreneurship dreams, though, as I have. So, the good news is that the tone will get lighter as you continue reading!

In the previous chapter, I talked a lot about not having enough time in the day to get things done. I shared a bit about the detrimental effects that overwork can have on your health and relationships. And, of course, running a business is not supposed to do that, but, for so many entrepreneurs, they suffer under impossible work hours. The sad reason for this is one very specific



failure, a failure to properly value and carefully manage your most precious asset: Time.

I first started as a business owner 22 years ago. And, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, by about 8 or 9 years ago, I was working 80-100 hours in a week. I was doing everything myself, and I had no time off at all. Even my weekends were full. The consequences to my health and to my family life were very unpleasant. But as they say, you live and learn. I am happy to say that I have done just that.

But the common problem of unmanageable hours for entrepreneurs raises one very important question, doesn't it? What should you, as a fellow business owner, do about it? I'm sure that you're facing the same challenges in your business venture as I did. I mean, maybe you are a time-management genius, and you don't need my help. But, just in case I'm wrong, please read on!

Managing your time in a business environment, as in any other environment, is all about establishing priorities. Ask yourself, "What is the most important thing that I can be doing?" Once you know the answer to that, you should dedicate as much time as possible to it. Next, you should continue by budgeting smaller and smaller amounts of time, as you go down the priority list. It sounds easy, but it is harder than it sounds. That's because, no matter what is most important to you, you still have to get all of it done. Even the less important jobs are still important. So, even if you do

get the most important part done, you still have more work to do.

In the beginning, the highest priority for your time allocation is delivering services (or perhaps products) to your clients. Most likely, that work is going to fall on your shoulders. If you're lucky, you may have a senior staff, or business partners, to help you with it. But either way, you can certainly bet that if your business is even remotely successful, your hands are full. That's to be expected.

At this stage, the best business you're going to get is from existing and repeat clients. So you're dedicating everything to them. You're treating them like the cash cows that they truly are. But that creates a problem, and not a small problem, at that. The problem is that, if you are 100% focused on existing and repeat customers, then when you're dedicated to servicing your old clients, you're not looking for new ones. And that, my friend, is a very dangerous place to be in. Even in the best-case scenario, your business has stagnated. It cannot grow, because you don't have time to chase new clients. In the worst-case, you could lose a client. Even if it's due to no fault of your own, the loss of an existing, repeating client can destroy a business. In any case, the best you can hope for is a sort of "peak and trough" effect, where your business does well with new orders from your clients, and then it stagnates between orders. No, true business growth can only come through new clients, and the sales that come along with them.

In order to see any growth in your company – in order to get more customers – you have no choice but to spend more time on sales and marketing. In fact, you need to spend a lot more time on it.

My recommendation to any business owner who wants to see strong growth is to spend about forty percent of their working hours on sales and marketing. That's right: that's almost half of your time that should be dedicated to finding new clients.

You have to put effort into a broad range of marketing resources, including social media platforms, paid adverts, and much more. Of course, the kind of marketing you do will largely depend upon the kind of business that you are in. You should be focusing your marketing efforts wherever you expect to find potential customers.

As for me, for example, I never had much success in using Facebook for marketing. Most of my clients are large corporations. To reach them, I go to LinkedIn and YouTube. But that's my business, and it's not the same for everybody. Your marketing efforts have to fit your target market. This is one of the reasons marketing takes so much time.

Of course, you have to have a great website, too. But you also have to figure out how to make the most of it. Getting thousands of people to visit your website is useless, if you don't turn those visits into actionable leads. You have to provide some sort of mechanism to

get your visitors to leave their contact information. So, managing your website takes some more time.

Another way I manage my time is by being careful with whom I spend my time. The nature of my primary business, as a consultancy, means that I spend a lot of time in face-to-face meetings with business owners and senior executives of major corporations. But that means a lot of time lost in driving to meetings, so I'm very careful to "prequalify" a lead, before dedicating my time to visiting them. If a given lead looks promising, I'll go and meet with them. If it doesn't look like it will pan out, I'll give them a pass.

Another big chunk of time is taken up in networking. And that's an important part of what you do. Networking is a cost of doing business. It's important to attend industry events and to meet new people, because it's the people you meet who become customers, or who will refer you to others.

You should also spend a significant amount of time on training for yourself. I spend about ten days per year in training myself. I learn new techniques for service delivery, as well as new ways to market my services. That's an important part of keeping my business moving forward. I also make an effort to keep myself up-to-date with new technology, otherwise I'll get left behind by the competition.

So, once you've spent about 40% of your time in marketing, and another approximately 10% on networking

and self-training, that leaves you with about 50% left for actually delivering your service directly to your clients. That seems small, and maybe it is, but I'm convinced that it's the only way to get it done and be successful. That's how you budget your time.

But budgeting your time really isn't enough, anyway. That's because, the more your business grows, the more work there will always be. You're working in percentages, but the total number of required hours is increasing. It's really a bit of a glass ceiling, and it's very hard to break through. There comes a point when you just can't do it all anymore.

So, as I always tell my friends, the biggest and most important thing that you can do is to take on support. I meant what I said in Chapter 1 – you truly don't have enough time to do it all, once your business starts to grow. But very often we, as entrepreneurs, can't afford local support, either. This is the conundrum of most business owners. You can't live without a staff, but you can't afford to hire them either.

This is why I've written this book. The intent is to help you solve this puzzle. The solution to this problem is something called a VA (Virtual Assistant). I promise to give you all of the important details in the chapters to come about how you can take advantage of a VA to get your time back, and to get the ball rolling on growth for your business. I have been using VAs for about 8 years now, and my results have been astounding. For the first 7 of those 8 years, I kept my secret

under wraps. My VAs were my competitive advantage. They were what enabled me to ramp up my marketing, to serve more customers, and to make more sales, albeit at a significant lower cost. That's what helped my business grow and succeed.

But today, I am breaking my silence. I have seen my life transformed because of the time I have saved with the help of my VAs, and I want to make sure that everyone can get the same benefit. I don't want anyone else to live through the same nightmare. Being an entrepreneur is supposed to be a fun and rewarding challenge, and using VAs to manage your time can have that effect.

The purpose of this book is not to promote my own business – although one of my companies does offer the services of VAs to struggling entrepreneurs. This book will share information with you, the reader, about what VAs are, where to find them, how to use them, and so on. If you should choose to take advantage of Virtual Done Well, the company that I founded, then we will be happy to provide you with what we feel is the best service in the industry. But, if you should choose to go out on your own, or even to work with a different company, then I wish you the best of luck. My sincerest hope is that you will succeed in your business, get your time back, and live to enjoy the business that you created. And may you do so without the fear of it overwhelming you and failing. In short, it's about you, not about me.



# Typical Challenges to Growing your Business

There are many things that can get in the way of real growth for your business. Sometimes, it can almost seem like the fates are aligned against you. But let me assure you, there are solutions to getting past the startup phase of your enterprise.

The first step to overcoming challenges is to identify what they are. This chapter will talk about some of the different challenges most businesses face, when it comes to getting bigger.

## **I. Change is the Only Constant**

If you're reading this book, then your business is most likely already established. If you're having any success at all, you probably started out with a fantastic business



plan, jam-packed with lots of market research. Well, good for you! You laid a good foundation, and that's why your business is still standing today. But now that you're planning on moving forward and growing your business, it's time to think about that age-old adage: "Change is the only constant." And if you've been living in the real world for more than five minutes, you know that quote is true. Everything is always changing. So, why should your market be any different? The answer is, it's not.

Now, while dropping your whole marketing plan into the big Microsoft Recycle Bin in the Sky might be a little excessive, it is still extremely important that you continually, or at least periodically, evaluate your market for important changes, which can cause clients and potential clients to leave you behind for your competitors. New trends are always starting. Old ones get left behind. And that's the way of the world. So be sure and stay on top of those changes!

Here are some important things to look out for, when re-evaluating your market. But, of course, there are also many other things to take into account – especially considering the differences between specific businesses and their product and service offerings.

- Has there been any change to the kind or category of person that is seeking your products or services?
- Is your target market still relevant?
- Are there new business entrants to the market?
- Have any competitors left the market?

- How big is the population of your market? Has it increased or decreased?
- How big is your share of the market?

## II. Cash Flow and Financial Management

Research shows that one of the biggest reasons for businesses to fail is cash flow problems. Quite simply, to make money, you have to spend money. But it's easy to go too far with this. Good opportunities come all the time. But if investing in an amazing opportunity creates a significant risk of overtrading, it may be a good idea to let that opportunity slide. If you spend for growth, but you don't have the resources to operate, your business will fail. It's as simple as that. So spend carefully.

In this growth stage of your business, the mantra of "cash is king" is paramount. And cash constraints will limit your ability to respond to opportunities in the future, so it is vital that you do everything you can to maximize your cash. You have to manage your working capital well. Remember, your working capital includes cash, inventory, accounts receivable, accounts payable, the portion of debt due within one year, and other short-term accounts. If you leverage all of these properly, you can learn to minimize your cash usage, and that will open up opportunities for growth, down the road.

Another important aspect of your cash flow is debt management. Be careful with this one. Debt is a useful

tool, but it comes with a cost. It is quite common for new business owners to take out their credit card every time there is a crisis – but interest rates swallow cash the way my dog attacks a freshly-opened can of food, and it's very easy to get lost down that rabbit hole. Many a business has gone bankrupt because of debt. Don't be one of them.

Managing your stock is another great way to free up cash for growth. A lot of money is often buried in inefficient inventory. Unsold merchandise, unused materials and obsolete stock are all things that cost money. And storing them isn't free, either. Find ways to more efficiently track and manage your products and supplies, to help save in the expenses of holding on to them.

Supplier Relationship Management, also known as SRM, is another important way of keeping control of costs – and therefore freeing up cash. You need disciplined strategies for handling supplies of both goods and services that your business needs and uses. Remember, you may need those supplies, but they need you as a customer, too. Do your best to negotiate favorable rates and payment schedules. But don't burn bridges with them either.

While it isn't for everybody, some businesses certainly do consider bringing in outside investors to inject cash into their businesses. This can be effective, but it does mean bringing in partners who will ultimately want a say in how your business is run. However, this might

actually be a good solution, especially if they also bring in a new skillset.

Lastly, one of the most valuable pieces of cash flow advice I can possibly give is to outsource as much of your ancillary business work as possible to an overseas Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) company. This basically means letting a foreign company handle your office work while you focus on your core competencies. This topic will be covered in great detail later in this book. But, for me, BPOs have proven to be an invaluable resource for freeing up much-needed cash and time.

### **III. Problem Resolution and Managing Personal Expectations**

As a relatively new business owner, you've probably already come to terms with the fact that things will often – or perhaps even usually –not go according to plan. You expect that things will go wrong, probably several times a day. And you are probably a firm adherent to Murphy's Law, which states: "Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong – and at the worst possible time."

I once met an entrepreneur who approached "problems" by refusing to call them as such. Instead, she simply insisted that all "problems" were just "challenges" that needed solving. It's a good philosophy. But whatever you call them in your business, they do need to be resolved.

It's easy for newer entrepreneurs, who have built a business based on a high-quality product or service, to turn into accidental firefighters. But running around putting out fires in your business isn't productive, in the long run. You have to find logical strategies and ways to identify and prioritize the most important tasks, to avoid getting run over and crushed by your own business. You have to get ahead of these problems with good planning. And when it is necessary to be reactive, you have to do so in a way that also lays the groundwork for avoiding repeated issues in the same area.

Have you had repeated angry customer calls regarding a certain aspect of your sales and delivery procedure? Then, rather than calling angry customers all day to apologize, instead, you should consider hiring a salesperson who can do a better job at smoothing customers' feathers before they get ruffled. Congratulations, your problem is solved! That's taking a proactive approach.

This is a bitter pill for a lot of entrepreneurs to swallow: you're not Superman. You don't have all of the skills necessary to do every job in your business by yourself – at least not to the level of quality that is needed for maximum efficiency. Your skillset is most likely centered around creativity, or around your business's core product or service. Coupled with your passion for that product or service, it was enough to get started, but running a business is bigger than you. You absolutely must learn to delegate tasks, to trust

your management, and to focus on what you do best. Otherwise, you'll always be nothing more than a fire-fighter. And, in the charred and sooty end, you might find that you, yourself, are the one that's been starting all the fires – even if indirectly.

You may have observed that your small business doesn't have management or a staff to rely on. And a big part of that is because you simply can't afford to hire anyone. Well, later on, I will go into great detail about one of my favorite solutions – and a central inspiration for writing this – the use of BPOs. A Business Process Outsourcing company can be a great resource to help you manage all the essential, repetitive functions that your business must do to survive. And you'll also find that it is incredibly affordable.

#### **IV. Having the Right Technology**

These days, virtually all businesses are deeply dependent on information. Everything is digital, from sales and finances to customer relations and supply lines. It's all digital. This means that you will need industry-appropriate software systems, competent staff that can use them, and proper support in order to keep them running. The good news is that there are a lot of free services out there now, especially for newer businesses. But keep in mind that, as you grow, your ability to rely on free software may disappear. And the truly professional ones are not cheap. Your systems will represent a major investment in the operations of your

company. But it will be very important for you to balance the functionality of your systems with their cost.

It would be impossible for me to advise you on the specific systems you will need for your business, because your needs will, of course, be industry-specific. My best advice is to talk with colleagues in your field and see what they are using.

Once again, you'll hear this advice from me: get help from a competent BPO. Many Business Process Outsourcing companies have their own industry-specific software and equipment, and their well-trained and affordable staff will already know how to use them, because they use them for other clients, too. Contact them to find out what resources they have available, as it can vary greatly, from BPO to BPO. Keep reading to learn more.

Whatever problems and challenges stand in the way of your business's future growth, there is always a solution to overcome them. As I mentioned before, the first step is to identify those problems, and I certainly hope that I have helped a little in this area.

Next, I'm going to share with you one of my favorite tools for leveling the playing field against your competitors and helping your business grow. I'm going to tell you all about virtual assistants. You'll discover that they're worth their weight in gold, and yet they're shockingly affordable.

# What is a VA, and Why Do You Need One?

While we have already talked about the many difficult challenges of running a business, one of the most significant of those challenges is the long working hours that you face as an entrepreneur. Another big one is the prohibitively high cost of hiring the kind of help you need to maintain your sanity. It can almost seem hopeless, but it's not. There is affordable help out there. And this is the chapter in which I'm going to tell you about the solution to your biggest problems as a business owner.

What is a virtual assistant? Let's start by breaking down the term into individual words. There are two: "virtual" and "assistant".

Of course, you know what "virtual" means. It's a word that gets stuck onto every computer or internet-based



application of technology known to man! To use a very simplified definition here, “virtual” means that it is something that is done via the internet.

“Assistant” is another common term, which means exactly what you think it means. You’ve heard the word used in many related terms: “personal assistant, administrative assistant, etc.” That’s that thing, or in this case, person, that you so desperately need, but probably can’t afford, because your new business isn’t yet producing enough revenue to support them. An assistant is someone to “assist”, or to help you, make your business work.

In fact, an assistant is exactly what you need – because while you may be able to keep up with the constant torrent of business needs for a while, it is eventually going to catch up with you. And if yours is like the vast majority of small businesses, when it does catch you, it will run over you and crash you off the nearest cliff. That’s just statistics talking. But with help, you can keep it under control.

When you put the two words – “virtual” and “assistant” – together, you create something entirely new. And this new product is something truly magical. Just like the other types of assistants you can find out there, a virtual assistant is a person who “assists” or helps you to make your business work. But there is something unique about a virtual assistant. A virtual assistant, by virtue of the name, doesn’t work in your office. They work in a different office, or sometimes,

even from their own home. Instead of commuting to work every day, your virtual assistant will simply log in via the internet and perform their work, without ever stepping foot through your door.

Having an assistant who works remotely might seem a bit strange to you. It certainly isn't traditional. But then again, since when has ingenuity ever been "traditional"? Making your business successful will always require some degree of "thinking outside the box". There are some definite benefits to a virtual assistant arrangement, though. For one, you'll save on office space. If you're like me, your startup business is operating from your home. It would be difficult on several levels to bring an employee into your house. You'd have to find space for them to work, you'd have to provide a computer terminal and a phone line, and then you would have to think of how to handle your family's privacy. Alternatively, you might have to lease office space for your workers. And we both know office space doesn't come cheap! Of course, that would bring in an entirely new line of overhead expenses, too. These can include utilities, such as water and electricity, office supplies, and more.

Another benefit to hiring a virtual assistant is that they, or their agency, will provide all the necessary equipment, along with an internet connection and a phone line, if necessary. These are all expenses that you would have to shoulder, if you were to hire a traditional in-house worker. So, that's an additional savings to you.

A virtual assistant can do almost anything an in-office employee can do. Using the internet, a virtual assistant can answer your phones, schedule events, assist with digital marketing, and perform a million other tasks. Your virtual assistant's abilities will be limited only by the skillset of the particular assistant (or assistants) that you employ. And if you take advantage of a BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) organization, they can even hire specialists, and train them to suit you. I'll share more about where to find a virtual assistant in a later chapter, but the point to keep in mind is that a VA can do whatever work you need done, at a fraction of the cost of a traditional employee.

But you're probably still a little skeptical about my previous claim. I talked about being able to get help for your small business that you can actually afford. It might seem that a virtual assistant would cost nearly as much as a traditional, in-office worker, but you'll be surprised. Let me explain to you how you can hire a virtual assistant for as little as 20% of the cost of an in-house employee!

The wonderful thing about virtual assistants is that using the internet grants power to both the employer and the employee to do business from any place in the world. This means that you don't have to limit your hiring to someone who lives in your hometown. In fact, you can even source your virtual assistant from the other side of the world! Several developing countries, particularly in Asia, have a very strong talent pool of highly qualified workers who speak good English, and

who are motivated to find and hold a job with a company like yours. And the benefit to you is that, being from a developed country, the exchange rate and relative costs of living are in your favor. A reasonable, living wage in India or the Philippines is a tiny fraction of what an average worker in Australia would need to survive. And paying slightly above average for a good worker overseas can gain a very high level of loyalty from your new virtual assistant, all while saving you enormously.

Of course, this strategy does raise some ethical questions, and I want to address those straight away. Of course, I don't advocate unethical business practices. Once you start down that slippery slope, you're likely to crash off that proverbial cliff in an entirely different way. But I am absolutely convinced that outsourcing virtual assistants from developing countries is not only ethical, but beneficial for everyone. It's good for your business, it's good for your country, it's good for your virtual assistant, and it's good for their country's economy, as well.

Some people feel awkward about paying lower wages to a worker in a developing country. In their minds, they feel like they're contributing to a "sweat shop environment", where employees are overworked and poorly compensated. And that's a noble thing to consider. It is an important, moral responsibility for an employer to fairly compensate their employees. But you should also examine the facts before judging. And the facts don't support these fears. The cost of living

in developing countries is dramatically lower than it is here in Australia, where I live. That means that all sorts of expenses, ranging from rent and transportation to food and medical care, cost much, much less. So, a smaller wage is fair, as long as it meets or exceeds the local cost of living. And that's the key. If you're hiring overseas, you will have to do a little research to determine the local cost of living, and pay accordingly. But you will certainly still find an enormous cost savings for you, even after calculating a fair, living wage.

What's more, you can choose to pay slightly above the local average, while still saving money. This has two positive effects: it can instill loyalty in your virtual assistant, and it can help to drive up the average wage in the community from which you are hiring. If companies like yours are paying a little better, it means that local companies will also have to pay a little higher in turn, in order to compete for quality workers. And that's good for the local community. Furthermore, funds paid to your virtual assistant are spent, almost exclusively, in the community where the virtual assistant lives. They use that money to go shopping, to pay the rent, and to take care of all of their needs. Once that money has entered the local economy, it goes on to support local people and local businesses, too.

But how does outsourcing a VA from abroad help the Australian economy? Isn't it taking jobs away from domestic workers? To be honest, not really. Remember, you couldn't afford to hire somebody at the local minimum wage anyway. So it's a choice of either not

hiring at all, or hiring abroad. In any case, it's going to have zero impact on the Australian economy in the short term. On the other hand, hiring a virtual assistant from a developing country might just be the difference that makes your business succeed and grow. And as it really starts to take off, you'll have the revenue to support the local hiring of managers and higher-level workers. That's creating Australian jobs that never would have existed without contracting with a virtual assistant from a developing country.

Anyway, you shouldn't feel like you're breaking new ground here. How do you think the world's biggest manufacturers stay profitable in a highly competitive environment? All the biggest auto makers in the world, for example, have factories in China, Mexico, India and other countries, where labor is cheaper. This is an internationally-established trend in the world of business, so making use of a virtual assistant from a developing country does nothing more than level the playing field so that you can compete against the big guys. And finding competitive advantages is what business is all about!



# Where to Find a VA?

After reading the previous chapter, I'm sure your reaction is similar to mine was, upon first learning about this amazing resource. You're probably thinking, "Sign me up now!" I'm sure that, by now, you understand how much a virtual assistant can help you with getting your own life back, and how much money they can save you in the process. The next question should be, "Where can I find a virtual assistant?"

There are several ways to go about hiring a virtual assistant. None of them is perfect, but some are better than others. I'm going to cover the two most common ones and help you break them down, looking at the benefits and drawbacks of each, in order to help you decide.

### **1) The Freelance Approach**

The first, and most direct, method of finding and hiring a virtual assistant is by contracting with a freelancer.



You know what a freelancer is. It's an independent contractor who does a job for you, for a price, and based on the specifications that you both agree to. You can find a freelancer in many different ways. Some people post on social media. Others open public ads. But the most common method these days is through a freelance marketplace. There are several of these. In layman's terms, freelance marketplaces are websites and networks where freelance workers go to advertise their services, and where people like you, who need those services, can go and hire them. Freelance marketplaces can range in complexity, from Craigslist (see the services section) to Upwork.

These sites can be a good way to make contact with a new virtual assistant. However, I must stress that this is not my favorite approach. There are too many drawbacks and risks involved. Firstly, posting an ad for a virtual assistant on one of these sites is almost certainly going to result in hundreds, if not thousands, of applications. This puts you in the position of sorting through them and finding the one worker that is right for you.

Another important point is that there is very little accountability with these sites. You're forced to trust that the person applying for the position is, in fact, as qualified as they claim to be – and that they can actually do the job. As with any public job posting, the first step to hiring is weeding out the unqualified candidates – a job usually delegated to an assistant that you don't have yet. So, that means things will get worse before they get better.

On a related point, once you've agreed to a contract, there is also very little accountability in the actual work being done. That's especially true if the worker is working abroad in a developed country. It's not like you can call the authorities or file a lawsuit. It's true that you can find a VA in your own country, but the cost savings will be minimal, so there's little point, in my opinion. The best approach is definitely to seek help from offshore.

As there is no supervision, you can be sure that the VA has more than one client. This is not so critical, perhaps, when you have set targets which you are satisfied with, so long as all the targets are met.

It would be quite different if you wanted the VA to be part of the company, pro-active with suggestions and involved in the growth of your business.

Home internet is normally of a poorer quality, and there is no back-up generator. You will need to understand that this is the risk you take.

## **2) Go with a BPO**

The second method of contracting a virtual assistant for your company is by seeking out an agency to assign one for you. This is, unquestionably, my favorite way to find a virtual assistant.

Do you remember how I told you that outsourcing VA work to a developing country helps that country's economy? Well, as evidence of this, I present to you the

BPO. Business Process Outsourcing organizations are companies, usually based in developing countries, who hire, train and manage workers to support businesses in developed countries like Australia. Their purpose is to do the jobs that you:

- a. don't want to do (email management, for example)
- b. cannot do (technical support, where you lack knowledge)
- c. should not do on your own (following up on small details, like shipping)

They are capable of handling any, or all, of the non-primary functions of your business, allowing you to focus on your core competencies, such as producing the highest quality product or service possible.

BPOs have their own offices, where their employees can work from comfortably. In many cases, some of their employees even work from home. Amongst the workers at these BPOs, virtual assistants are often prominently represented.

But BPOs do a lot of other jobs, too. For example, they often support big businesses with call center operations. You know how, when you call Telstra for technical support, you'll often get somebody with a bit of an accent on the other end of the line? That person probably works for a BPO in India or the Philippines. And they're very well-trained and very professional. You'd probably never guess that they're not direct employees of Telstra.

Well, those same BPOs (and many more like them) are available to support your business, too. In fact, BPO companies are springing up everywhere. It's a rapidly growing sector.

One fair point to question is whether a BPO, which services multiple clients in different industries, is capable of focusing on your business, with so many other irons in the fire already. But if you find the right BPO, and if you are careful with the way you form your contract, you will have one specific virtual assistant that is permanently assigned to you, trained to do the tasks that you need done, and who is managed and accountable to a local supervisor.

There are other benefits, as well. With a BPO, if your virtual assistant calls in sick, or quits suddenly, you can communicate with the BPO for a temp or replacement on short notice. This will avoid the kind of delays to your business that could have disastrous consequences to your relationships with your clients.

Security is another major concern when hiring a virtual employee. If you do it independently through a freelance marketplace, you could find yourself with half-finished projects disappearing with the worker. Many business owners have been ghosted by virtual freelancers, who found a better-paying gig elsewhere. There is no accountability for independent contracts with unknown individuals in developing countries, and there is no legal remedy to resolve that kind of problem. But a BPO has a reputation to uphold. And

since they have their own office, they can take steps to ensure that your data is safely secured and backed-up; and they even have legal leverage in their own country, to provide further protection. So, no such scenario can ever happen.

Another great point about doing business with a BPO is the other business offerings that they may be able to provide. While your VA is a valuable tool to make you more productive and save money, your BPO probably offers a wide range of digital services, including everything from website development to social media marketing. And when your business is ready to look at those options, their efforts can be coordinated with those of your VA – a person who, by then, will be a known constant. That means that, as your business grows, your new team member’s organization can move with you in a way that is both flexible and seamlessly integrated.

Of course, there is one drawback to hiring with a BPO – but that’s to be expected. After all, nothing is ever perfect. So, on the downside, you are probably going to pay a little more for a VA that is contracted through a BPO than you would with a freelancer. But as they always say, “You get what you pay for”. Your BPO has value-added services, which explain the extra cost. You’re paying for accountability, reliability, and security.

Of course, finding a good BPO is easy. You can simply google “BPO” and find dozens of them. And most of

them are going to be great providers. But I'm going to recommend my own BPO, called Virtual Done Well. I may be a little biased, but I am proud of this company. I established VDW as a new business, after my early experiences with VAs in the Philippines. I had a fantastic, reliable worker, who really went the extra mile to provide quality service. But at one point, my VA told me she was going to quit, citing poor compensation and other issues at her workplace.

After doing a little research, I discovered that this was a common problem. So, after the completion of her employment contract, I hired my VA directly. Together, with the help of a few other team members, we created a BPO that is designed around the concept of treating workers with dignity and respect – and on helping the local community where it is based.

Virtual Done Well provides virtual assistants, along with a full range of digital marketing services. And its focus is not primarily on profit – at least not its own, anyway. A significant portion of our proceeds go to community assistance for the homeless in Davao City, where it is based. It is a company designed to help people. So, when you contract with VDW, you're doing business with managers who care about their workers, their community, and their clients. And that should go a long way in making you feel good about doing business with them. You can contact Virtual Done Well's very competent staff through their website: <https://virtualdonewell.com/>

So, in short, the best place to find a virtual assistant is through a BPO, and the best BPO is Virtual Done Well.

The question, then, is which BPO to go with – because, as you may expect, all BPOs are not created equal. There are good ones and there are bad ones. Do your research carefully, because you’re choosing a partner that will be responsible for handling some important parts of your business.

Some BPOs have what I like to call a “VA-friendly environment”. They treat their (and your) workers with dignity and respect, and they pay them fairly. It isn’t hard to see what a good BPO looks like. A good BPO, like my company, VDW, looks after its employees’ welfare.

On the other hand, there are also some BPOs that are VA-unfriendly. These are usually very large companies, who focus on call-center operations, with a few VAs thrown into the mix to make more money. But the environment in these offices is often toxic. They usually focus excessively on performance incentives and in-office competition. High performance is rewarded, but then they require successively higher targets for following periods – often until the goals have become unattainable. This style can be effective for some office types, but I find that it doesn’t work well for VAs. The result is a high rate of employee burnout, and – just like we talked about earlier – burnout means a loss of motivation to work. If your VA gets burned out, you’ve lost a valuable resource.

Here are some useful questions you can ask the management of a BPO, to get a feel for how they treat their workers.

► **What % of your employees does the Company have regularized?**

Although we are in our growth stage, VDW has 60% of employees regularized.

► **How many labor cases have been filed against the Company?**

Since incorporation in 2012, there has only been one complaint made against VDW, and this was withdrawn before the mediation process. VDW works closely with the Department of Labour (DOLE).

► **Do the employees get paid the 200% and 30% compensation, when they work Philippine's public holidays?**

VDW follows the mandated compensation for employees working on local public holidays.

► **Does the Company provide medical (HMO) benefits?**

VDW provides medical, including dental, cover when the employee is regularized.

Does the Company pay government-mandated benefits? (In the Philippines, these benefits include affordable house financing, health insurance, and **social security benefits**.) VDW pays these benefits when the employee starts work.



► **Does the Company provide Company-sponsored activities?**

VDW provides quarterly team building activities and monthly birthday lunch celebrations to promote socializing. We also provide weekly badminton and yoga sessions for health benefits.

Some BPOs organize activities, but they are paid-for by the employees.

► **Does the Company provide loans to employees?**

The Company provides interest-free loans for medical purposes, based on individual assessment.

# How to Hire a VA?

In Chapter 5, we talked at length about the places where you can find virtual assistants, and you discovered that they're not all that hard to find. But finding a virtual assistant is only half the battle. You won't see any results until you pull the trigger and hire one! But how, exactly, does one go about closing on a virtual assistant agreement, with a person who is probably located in a faraway country? Do you have to deal with a complicated hiring process? What about the legalities of international contracts? These are some of the questions I'll get into in this chapter.

I also discussed two primary sources for finding VAs in the previous chapter, and each of them has its own approach for hiring. There is the freelance method, which involves finding a VA on your own, usually through a freelance marketplace like Upwork. This method puts the ball firmly in your court to sort,

weed out and interview applicants. Then there is the BPO method, which lightens the load significantly. You'll work together with the BPO's management, who will follow your parameters to screen applicants for you and help you with the selection process. But let's talk about these things in a little more detail, shall we?

As I mentioned in Chapter 5, the freelance method is certainly not my favorite way to go about hiring a VA. It generally requires you to post an ad publicly, which means that you'll probably get hundreds, if not thousands, of applicants responding to your ad. And since you still don't have the help that you need to run your business, you'll have to take a lot of time out of your own busy schedule to screen through all these applicants. For a bigger company with an HR department, that's just all part of a day's work. But for you, it's a headache – and one I'd sooner avoid. If you do choose to go this route, you'll have to consider accountability issues. You'll need to write a good contract that clearly outlines reasonable expectations for both parties. And, if you're dealing with a freelancer from a foreign country, you'll also just have to hope that they're honest enough to stick to the terms, because if not, it will be very difficult for you to get legal assistance against a foreign freelancer in their own country.

BPOs, on the other hand, are generally bigger companies with HR departments – or they'll at least have somebody there whose primary job is to handle HR.

So, screening applicants for your VA needs will truly be all part of a day's work. And that's your headache avoided. But how does the process work? Well, of course, you can expect the process to vary somewhat from BPO to BPO. They're all going to be managed a little differently, because they're different companies, but most of the process is universal. For the sake of this chapter, though, I'll use my own BPO, Virtual Done Well, as the model. Whether you choose to use VDW or not is up to you – although I will admit to being biased in this regard. We've worked hard to make our company the best. But in any case, this description should help you to understand the general process, from start to finish. Let's take it step-by-step.

## Step 1: Contacting the BPO

Most BPOs will have a website, featuring an easy-to-use contact form on the homepage. If they don't, then you're probably going to want to find a different BPO. Remember, you're looking for a virtual assistant who will work via the internet. If your BPO isn't competent with their own usage of the internet, then you might have reason to doubt the reliability of a virtual assistant from them. At my company's website, <https://virtualdonewell.com/>, you can quickly fill in your contact information, and their professional staff will reach out to you within one business day. They'll give you a comprehensive introduction to the company and its products, and interview you regarding your specific needs. Pricing for services will

vary, based on the complexity of your needs. That's because every business, including yours, is unique – so it's impossible to have a broadly generalized scope of expectations. But you'll generally find the terms to be fair – especially if you're familiar with minimum wage requirements at home in Australia. At this stage, you'll have to provide your BPO with a detailed job description, along with the qualifications you expect your VA to have.

## **Step 2: Recruitment**

This recruitment stage is a standard hiring process, but the main difference is that your BPO will handle all the hard work for you. In fact, they're actually the ones who will do the hiring. That's right: your VA will officially be working for your BPO – to handle your contract exclusively. There are a lot of benefits to this. It means that dealing with administrative requirements, like taxes and conforming to local labor laws, is the responsibility of your BPO. So, that's just one more thing that you won't have to think about.

Your BPO is going to post your VA position publicly. They'll sort and screen the applicants and their resumes. As part of the screening process, they'll also check the quality of each applicant's English. They'll verify their skills and abilities, as well as their qualifications. They'll follow up on references and recommendations. And at Virtual Done Well, one of the most important things they look for is the applicant's character – because they know that your VA has to be

honest and reliable. And they also know that your virtual assistant will be representing VDW when they're working for you. At the end of this stage, your BPO will generally recommend 2-3 applicants to you as their choice of client. You'll then be given a chance to read their resumes, and interview them over a video calling service such as Skype. At VDW, you are given the final say in which applicant you want to handle your account.

### **Step 3: Closing the Deal**

This can be the scariest part of starting your relationship with a new virtual assistant. With many BPOs, you'll have to sign a lengthy contract requiring periodic (usually monthly) payments. And then, if you don't like the service, you're stuck.

But this is one place where Virtual Done Well surpasses all of its competition. At VDW, there is no signed contract to tie you down. You simply pay the initial deposit, and your virtual assistant will begin working the next business day. Any time you want to quit your arrangement, you can back out. Simply stop paying. But I'm confident that you'll gain such an enormous advantage from your first VA that, not only will you stick with the arrangement, you'll probably be taking on additional VAs as your business continues to grow.

Of course, there are some other fine details for you to work out with your BPO and your virtual assistant,

about things like holiday schedules (remember, you're dealing with two different countries), leave, etc. But that's normal for any employer-employee relationship. And if your BPO is as flexible as VDW, then you won't have any problems with it. Just keep an open line of communication with your BPO, and conflicts can generally be avoided.

# How to Manage a VA?

If you've made it this far, then you've most likely already seen the benefits and advantages of hiring a virtual assistant. I'm sure that by now, you know where to find one and how to hire one. You may even have an idea about how you want to approach it. But, once you've hired a virtual assistant, how in the world can you manage an employee who lives half way around the planet, and who never comes into the office?

Well, for starters, you're not going to be able to poke your head out of your office and shout down the corridor. But you may still find that managing a virtual employee is a lot like managing an employee in a large office environment. After all, if you really think about it, most office workers receive instructions and assignments via e-mail memos and online calendars anyway. For the rest of the work that doesn't fit into those two categories, it will usually presented in a staff meeting,



or otherwise land in a big “to-do” box in a centralized location. In this section, I’ll show you how to stay in control and manage all your VA’s assignments, no matter what they are.

In general, I expect that you won’t find managing your VA to be very difficult. Truth be told, having a VA will likely take so much weight off of your shoulders that managing them will be a piece of cake, by comparison.

But first, keep in mind the basics. Your virtual assistant is your out-of-office employee, whom you are contracting to serve your business needs. Here are a few tips to help you manage your virtual assistant.

**I. Maintain a Friendly, Professional Working Environment** – Your VA works remotely. This means that you’ll need to make some special effort for them to feel like an important part of your team. And yes, that’s an important part of the motivational force behind any successful employee. So, take some time to get to know your VA.

But you should also make sure they understand that you’re the boss. This is one of the advantages of a virtual assistant, as opposed to an in-office worker. The geographic distance makes it much easier for you to establish the degree of relationship-distance that you feel is appropriate, and also allows you to avoid the office dramas of making sure nobody feels hurt, when given the hard jobs that nobody else wants.

**II. Have Clear Expectations** – In most ways, your VA is just like any other worker in a traditional office environment. Without a good job description and clearly-established limits, your VA will do their best to guess at what you want. But guessing means occasionally missing. And those resulting failures can lead to conflicts between you and your VA, so it's best to make sure your VA knows what you want from them in advance.

At the very beginning of their contract with you, you should establish daily tasks which must always be completed without your needing to be consulted. These can be the simple jobs, like managing your email.

Next, you'll need to set up a standardized method for your VA to check on more complex jobs, which can be anything from an online project management app (such as Trello) to a regular video chat with you.

But the important takeaway here is structure. If the job has structure, it will always be easy for your virtual assistant to know what's expected of them.

**III. Keep Communications Open** – This is one of the most important pieces of advice I can share with you about managing your virtual assistant. Keep communication lines open at all times!

Use an internet-based service (such as Skype) to maintain communications with your VA. You will need to communicate via video, audio and text, and share

files quickly and efficiently. Your assistant will need to ask a lot of questions – particularly in the early stages of your relationship– but keeping an open line helps to streamline productivity, and helps your VA avoid ever getting stuck. If your virtual assistant can't contact you, then they won't know how to handle the unexpected when it arises.

Skype is also very good for the occasional business meeting. Group video calling allows for a greater feeling of inclusion with your new worker, and it allows them to more actively participate on a creative level.

In terms of file sharing and collaborative work, you should definitely take advantage of a cloud storage service, such as Dropbox or Google Drive. There are also some fantastic project management apps (such as Trello) that allow you to stay on top of who's doing what, and to monitor progress without having to constantly call your VA and interrupt their work.

Of course, email is still the most commonly-accepted medium for formal business communication. It's also a slightly better way to share files as attachments. And most email apps today have unlimited storage and long-term email logs, keeping you from losing important communications. Gmail, in particular, is interconnected with a lot of other, extremely useful business apps, like Google Calendar. It can also be used for collaborative work through the Google Office apps.

**IV. Check Progress Regularly** – Having a worker who is not physically present in the office presents some unique challenges, one of the most significant ones being the fact that your VA isn't on the radar all day. They don't have a cubicle or a desk where you, as the boss, might walk by at any given time. Checking your VA's progress regularly will help to keep them on task. It will also catch procedural errors earlier, preventing bigger problems down the line.

There is no steadfast rule about how often you should make contact with your VA, but there are still some good guidelines to help keep you on the right path. Of course, you should keep in touch regularly. On the other hand, it's also important not to micromanage your virtual assistant. Remember, the whole reason you hired a VA in the first place is to save time and money. If you're spending more time babysitting your virtual assistant than you would in doing the work yourself, then you're doing it all wrong. Try to keep in mind that your virtual assistant is a competent and professional worker, who can follow instructions. So, give them a little space.

If you're doing business with a BPO, your VA has a supervisor on the other end, too. Feel free to contact the supervisor from time to time, in order to fine-tune your expectations and priorities. Doing that will go a long way in eliminating any need to constantly hover over your new worker. And it can boost productivity, as well.

As a rule of thumb, I'd advise a daily reporting arrangement with your VA. It can be at the beginning of the day, the end of the day, or both. You can issue instructions for new assignments and follow up on progress for ongoing projects at these times. But, by sticking to a schedule, you also make sure that your VA has all of the direction and guidance they need, while leaving them to do the work that they are uniquely skilled and qualified to do.

**V. Praise and Criticize as Needed** – These two tools are very beneficial for any working environment. An employee needs to know if they are meeting standards and expectations. They need to know if they're doing a good job. The obvious benefit of this point is that knowing when there's a problem allows your virtual assistant to fix it. If they don't even know there's a problem, they're going to keep doing it the same way.

But use of praise and criticism also works to help the VA feel like a part of your organization. When their work has a positive result for your company, be sure to let them know. If your client is satisfied with the customer service your VA provided, then tell them about it. Conversely, if your virtual assistant has made an error, a tactful correction can go a long way to improving your VA's work quality in the future.

By applying actionable feedback and reinforcing positive accomplishments, your virtual assistant will start to develop a sense of ownership, commitment and loyalty – which are very important steps in growing trust.

## Mistakes to Avoid when Working with a VA

So, you're learning all about how to manage and work with a virtual assistant. And that's an important first step to saving enormous amounts of time and money. Your virtual assistant is a truly valuable resource, and if you make good use of them, you will surely see some huge benefits.

However, just like any new business resource, the only way that you can maximize the benefits of your new VA's potential is to make sure you're using them properly. And since you are like most small business owners who have never worked with VAs before, it's very easy to make some elementary mistakes that can have big negative effects on their productivity.

With that in mind, here's a list of 6 mistakes that small business owners sometimes make after hiring a new

VA. These can be avoided. And if you do slip up, they can be fixed. But you should absolutely keep these on your radar, if you want to get the best return on your investment!

## **1) Not Defining the Role and Scope of the Job**

I touched on this issue in the previous chapter, but I am repeating myself here, because it's an important issue. A virtual assistant is a real employee. They may technically be employed by a BPO, but they work for you. They're only "virtual" because they happen to work online. And, like any good employee, they work best with clearly-defined expectations and instructions.

Ideally, you should have started your VA arrangement out with a detailed job description before hiring. If you did, then great! Be sure to refer back to it from time to time, if any questions arise about what your VA should or should not be doing. Remember, your business environment is always changing, so your VA's job might change, too. So a periodic review of responsibilities is advisable.

But, if you didn't have that job description, then take the time to put it all down on virtual paper – with a particular eye on adaptability. You have to have written guidelines, but be prepared to be flexible. Help your VA to meet and exceed your expectations by letting them know what those expectations are.

## **2) Not Treating Them Like a Valuable Member of Your Team**

This one is closely related to item number 1 on our list, for one reason: just like we mentioned before, your VA is a real employee. You've just been smart enough to figure out how to hire them at a fraction of the cost of a local one.

But as the real HR asset that they are, VAs have the same motivational factors that a typical in-office employee has. They work best when they feel that they are part of the team, when they have a clear grasp of your overall vision, and when they feel appreciated. Quality work comes from a sense of ownership, but if your VA feels like they're part of a separate entity, then you can expect a different level of quality in their output.

Just remember that, while your VA is a cost-saving tool, they are also much more than that. And the degree to which you welcome them into the team and make them feel like a part of the group will correlate directly to the level of loyalty that you can expect from them.

## **3) Not Building Trust**

Trust is important in any business relationship. And that's no different when you're working with a virtual assistant. You have to be able to trust the person who works for you to do their work honestly, and not to cause harm. Your business is your baby, and if you've



been successful this far, it's only because you have poured a lot of hard work and money into it. It would be a shame to be taken advantage of by a bad employee. Unfortunately, that can happen in any environment – whether it is an in-house employee, or a virtual one.

Can you trust your VA? Sure, you can! But you should build trust gradually. Start out with simple, low-risk tasks. And then, as they succeed and show trustworthiness, begin to let them handle more sensitive aspects of your operation.

Some businesses have learned to depend on VAs who hold the company credit card and make online purchases for them. That kind of trustworthy worker is worth their weight in gold! They can be hard to find, but once you've found them, they will be invaluable to you. But that kind of trust doesn't happen overnight. It comes from gradually building a positive relationship with a good employee, who just happens to work online, rather than in your office.

Sadly, it can also happen that a virtual assistant may prove themselves unworthy of trust. And if this happens, you need to take action immediately. There is no practical reason to take a continued risk in doing business with a bad employee. Contact your BPO and insist on a replacement. You can fix a lack of knowledge. You can fix a lack of skills. But you can't fix a bad character.

If you have a good BPO, they should be prompt and helpful in resolving the issue. Many of them will even

go so far as to offer free services as restitution for the inconvenience of a lost worker. So, you can see that there is a tremendously strong benefit in maintaining a good relationship and open communications with your BPO and your VA's on-site supervisor.

#### **4) Not Maintaining a Relationship with the Agency**

Just like with any employee, you should always be prepared for the unexpected. Even the best of employees can sometimes quit unexpectedly – often due to family emergencies. Or, a million other things could cause you to lose the benefit of your trusted VA. That could leave you in a real bind, if it happens in the middle of a time-sensitive project. However, by maintaining open communications with the agency that helped you find your VA, you can avoid a lot of the headaches of dealing with a lost employee. They can have a new person online for you whenever you need, whether to replace a loss, or to expand your current virtual operation.

Aside from that, keeping your VA's agency apprised of major developments in your business can also help them to offer you more cost-saving services. Most of these agencies do much more than just hire out VAs. Many will offer a wide variety of services, from digital marketing to web development and more. And it would definitely be a mistake not to at least have some information about more opportunities to save you money or boost your revenues!

## 5) Not Giving Valuable Feedback

When it comes to managing any employee, one of the bedrock principles of building the employee's confidence and increasing productivity is the proper use of constructive criticism and positive reinforcement. This principle applies to all employer-employee relationships, whether they are in-office or virtual. A worker needs to know whether or not they're doing a good job.

If there are problems with your VA's output, you don't need me to tell you that you should do something about it. But I'm here to tell you that, for the sake of your positive relationship with your VA, and for the quality of their future output – use tact here. Remember, your VA is an asset that, if properly used, will save you a heap of money, and loads of time. So, when correcting a deficiency, always do your best to apply some tact. Remember the importance of human dignity.

That being said, you never have to accept less-than-good service from your paid employee, either. You have the right to demand good output. Work together with your VA, their on-site supervisor, and the BPO's managers to resolve any issues early, so that they don't become ingrained and habitual.

On the other hand, positive feedback can be another powerful tool for building your VA's confidence, and improving the quality of their output even further. If they know they're doing well, they're certain to imitate what they're already doing. And a little praise can

go a long way in challenging them to reach towards greater heights.

## **6) Limiting your VA's Scope and Potential**

From the start, you're hiring a VA to handle the simple stuff. They begin with basic – but important – jobs, such as email management, with the understanding that you can't keep up with it all. It's the mundane, boring work that you don't want to do, or that you shouldn't be doing, because you have more important work to focus on. But you should always remember that your VA is a talented individual, who was screened for their abilities and good attitude.

So, once they've mastered the basics, don't be afraid to push the envelope and see what else they can handle. Your VA is on the job. Don't let their hours – which you are paying for – be wasted. If they have time, and you have a project that you think they can handle, see how far their talent will take you!



# Onboarding Your New VA and How to Get the Most from Them

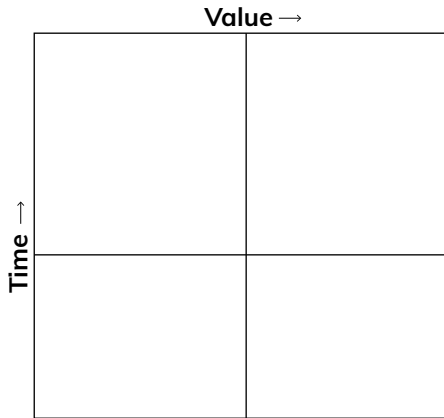
So you've finally pulled the trigger and hired your first VA! Congratulations! That's a huge step toward getting back your time and increasing your productivity.

A friend of mine recently went through the same process, and she asked me a valuable question – and one that I'm sure many of you are asking, as well. She asked me: “What tasks should I be giving my brand new virtual assistant?” And she had a follow-up question: “Is it riskier to give them some tasks, rather than others?”

I had the opportunity to sit down with her and break down my own approach in a systematic, step-by-step

manner. And I want to do the same for you. So sit back, pull out a notebook, and get ready to take some notes!

The way I shared this with my friend was by drawing up a four-box matrix, like this one.



In this matrix, you're going to be writing down tasks that you may be able to assign to your virtual assistant. But don't start writing just yet. We have some organizing to do, first. Remember, even if your VA is a highly-experienced office worker, they're still new to you and your business. So, it's important to approach task-assignments in a systematic way.

Now, as with anything, the first thing you should do before making a plan is revisit your purpose. That's because your purpose should always inform your actions, if you want to be successful. And remember, the reason you hired a virtual assistant was to save you a lot of time. Chances are you were wearing a dozen different hats for your business, clinging onto the brink of burnout because of ridiculously long working

hours. So, as you can imagine, time is going to be the most important variable in your matrix – especially in the beginning. That’s why it’s getting the vertical axis. As you work upwards, you’re going to be looking at tasks that are more and more time-consuming.

At the top of your matrix, you’re going to label the other axis “value”. This is how we will measure how much value a given task has to your business. You’ll most likely note that, in many cases, the higher the value, the higher the risk in letting someone else do the task. But we’ll talk more about that later.

Please keep in mind that the examples I’m going to give you worked for my business, but everybody’s business is different. You’re almost certainly going to find tasks for your VA that I never assigned to mine. And most likely, there are going to be some tasks I have assigned to my VAs that you will never assign to yours. My examples below are only intended as a guideline. You have to analyze your own business and your own needs. But my sincerest hope is that this matrix method will help you to get organized, and get the most out of your own virtual assistant.

## Upper-Left Quadrant

So, now, you have a matrix with four quadrants. And we’re going to start in the upper-left corner. In this quadrant, you’re going to write tasks which you do every day, which take a lot of time, but offer very little value to your business. Can you think of one thing that you spend soul-sucking time on, but with almost no value?



The most obvious item here is managing your email. This is one place where you could certainly start out letting your VA help you. That doesn't necessarily mean that your brand new VA will be replying to customer emails right off the bat. Not at all. But what about just managing them? When I first got started, I was going through hundreds of emails a day, many of which didn't help me at all. So, I assigned the task to my VA, to log into my email and sort messages into three folders. One folder was for customer messages, another was for junk mail or marketing emails, and a third was for items that she wasn't sure about. My VA then put her time, rather than mine, into sorting through them, and I could get to the "customers" folder whenever it was convenient for me. I soon discovered that about half of my email was worthless junk that was a complete waste of time. So having my VA to filter them for me saved me a lot of time.

How about documents? Do you process a lot of paperwork, such as reports and proposals, for your customers? That paperwork is very important to your business, but I find that, when I'm handling important documents, I spend a lot of time formatting the documents in order to make them look good for the client. Wouldn't it be better if you could focus your own efforts on writing the content, and leave the formatting up to your VA? And given that your VA is probably a well-trained and professional office worker, they're probably better qualified to produce the highest quality output, anyway. So, let your VA do it!

What about blog posts and social media posts? Of course, you're the best person to write your own material, but do you have to be the one to post them? Do you have to do all the formatting and make it look good? I do a lot of posting on a whole range of social media platforms. My blogs are especially important to me. I want those to look really professional. But I find that, once I've written the blog, I can then pass it on to my VA and have it formatted and posted, which saves me loads of time. Another big benefit of this one is that it keeps you off of social media, which is perhaps the worst thief of time ever invented! It's so easy to start off posting business content like you're supposed to be, then caught up in watching a friend's cute kitten videos and scrolling through funny memes for half the day. So, write your own blog and social media content, but let your VA handle the posting.

Answering the phone is another job that your VA can do. My virtual team is based in the Philippines, but I'm based in Sydney. A lot of people are surprised to find out that setting up local, Sydney numbers for my VAs overseas was cheap and very affordable. All of my VAs have local numbers. So, they can receive calls from clients, suppliers, and from me when I'm away from the office. They can also do outbound calling to numbers in Sydney at local calling rates. It's literally so easy, I don't have to think about it.

What about social media replies? If you have successful blogs, or a good following on social media, you're probably getting hundreds of comments and messages

a day. And most of them are pretty standard; things like, “I love your blog, it’s so helpful!”

It’s valuable to respond to simple comments like these, because those people are potential customers. But when they’re simple, you can probably assign your VA to use a standardized list of responses to answer posts. That makes sure your customer feels important, and it takes another time-consuming task off your hands. Again, this isn’t a complicated job, it just takes a lot of your time – which is exactly why you hired your VA to begin with.

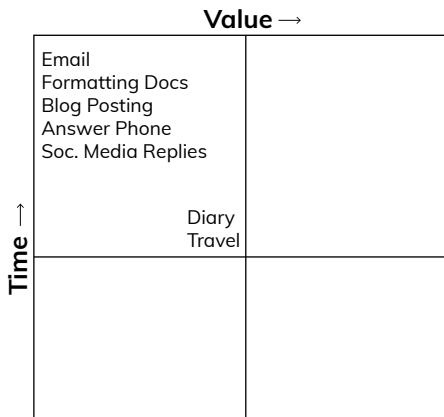
This next one is a really important job: your VA needs to be managing your diary. This is probably one that your VA won’t handle in the first few days, and you’ll notice that in the matrix, I’ve kind of placed it over towards the right a little bit. That’s because this is a higher-value, and somewhat higher-risk, task. But I would definitely get into that within a short space of time. Maybe within a week or two, or whenever your VA has shown you enough of their ability to give you some confidence. But handing over my diary has given me so much freedom.

Eight years ago, I got my first virtual assistant, and I’ll always remember a valuable piece of advice I got from a friend who had been working in the corporate world for a long time. I asked him how it worked, having an assistant, and he said, “Basically, hand over your diary to your executive assistant, and don’t screw it up! You leave the diary to her!”

That’s what I’ve done ever since, and it has worked great for me.

Another item, for me, is travel. I'm traveling all the time. I fly usually once, sometimes twice, a week. Buying plane tickets and making travel arrangements can take a long time, and I don't want to burn my time doing it, so I assign it to my virtual assistant. Once again, this is a slightly more sensitive task, so I've written it in towards the right side.

My VA already understands how my travel works. She knows the places I usually go to for meetings, how long it takes to get to and from the airport, and all the details necessary to make it go smoothly. I just have to inform her of the meeting, then she books it in my diary and makes the travel arrangements. And that's a huge load off my shoulders.



## Upper-Right Quadrant

Once you have the above types of simple tasks going smoothly with your VA, and once they have a bit of an understanding of how the working relationship works, and how you and your business function, you

can then start giving them more valuable tasks to do. By now, your VA has already saved you a lot of time, so think about some other things that they might be able to do.

What about calling customers? Do you call customers, trying to make appointments? I don't. My executive assistant does that. I find it too frustrating getting voicemails, or finding out that they're not available. It's a waste of my time, which I could be using to do something much more valuable. So, give that task to your VA. An appointment is set up in my diary. It's very professional, and your client is also not going to be caught off-guard.

Responding to leads is another area in which your VA can help. And this is a little like replying to social media messages, in that many of them will be fairly routine and simple. You could have a standardized list of answers for your VA to use, with those.

Another one is processing more important documents. Your VA can begin to handle more sensitive proposals, and maybe even start to put together the bones and structure of those documents. That way, by the time you're ready to begin writing the content, half the work is already done.

Your VA can help by replying to customer emails. That might take a little guts on your part, but I do it, no problem. My current executive assistant has been on my team for a little over 2 years, but she's been my EA

for 12 months. And, to be honest, I've had enough confidence in her since the first few months to allow her to answer emails for me. But that may vary from assistant to assistant. You have to have a sense for what your VA can handle. It's been great for me, though. If I'm going to be tied up all day, or away on business, I can always tell my EA to monitor my email and check my voicemails. A lot of times, I've opened up my phone to check my e-mail, just to see that my EA has already responded to a customer request in my absence. So it really frees me up, to let her handle tasks like that.

		<b>Value</b> →
↑ <b>Time</b>	Email Formatting Docs Blog Posting Answer Phone Soc. Media Replies	Call Customers Respond to Leads Higher-Value Docs Reply to Customer Emails
	Diary Travel	

## Bottom-Left Quadrant

Now remember: up until now, your purpose has been to take work off of your shoulders and free up your time. But now, once you've reached the bottom half of your matrix, you've already accomplished that goal. You have passed on as much of your time-consuming, non-primary tasks as you could to your virtual assistant, and now, this has opened up a brand new door for you. This quadrant is where the

real magic happens. It's where you can start to do the things you never had the time to start. Here are just a few examples.

Website upgrades are important to your business. Your website is the public face of your company on the internet, and keeping it up-to-date gives your clients a sense of confidence in your competence and ability to get things done. Generally, upgrading your website isn't that hard to do. Most people out there are using Wordpress websites, which are easy – but they are also time-consuming, which, once again, makes this task prime material for a virtual worker to handle.

Do you produce lots of videos, like I do? I love shooting videos. A long time ago, I used to do my own video editing. But it's so time-consuming, I can't do it anymore. So now I have a video editor in my virtual team who is highly skilled and talented, and who does a great job.

Creating infographics is very useful. People love them, and they're great for social media. But once again, it takes some time to put them together and make them look nice. Now, I just sketch out a basic idea and send it to one of my virtual assistants, they put it together and produce something that looks fantastic, and I have taken almost no time to get it done.

CRM management is an important part of doing business, but if you're like me, you probably hate

keeping the system updated, or you're just not good at it. But, why do it yourself? My amazing executive assistant prompts me almost daily on pending proposals, and asks for updates on leads, contacts and follow-ups.

		<b>Value</b> →	
<b>Time</b> ↑		Email Formatting Docs Blog Posting Answer Phone Soc. Media Replies	Call Customers Respond to Leads Higher-Value Docs Reply to Customer Emails
		Diary Travel	
		Website Upgrades Video Editing Infographics CRM Management	

### Bottom-Right Quadrant

In the bottom-left quadrant, you listed tasks that you'd never even had time to start. In the bottom-right quadrant, this is where you're going to get really serious about having a complete back-office. This is where you outsource technical specialties to experts in your virtual team. I'm talking about vital tasks that you can't live without, but that aren't a direct part of your core competencies.

Bookkeeping is one very good example. You can spend hours of your own time keeping up with the accounting. And one mistake could be disastrous. Why not outsource that to trained experts overseas? It's certainly more affordable than getting help domestically.



I have to confess that our company's CFO has a very easy time of it, because all of our bookkeeping is handled by our virtual team in the Philippines.

Information technology management is another technical area that can be handled almost exclusively from off-site. If there's ever a software issue, our technicians overseas can fix it themselves. If it's hardware, they can walk us through it over the phone. But working with a virtual professional saves a lot of money.

Does your company do a lot of events? I'm talking about things like conferences and seminars. We love doing them. And since we do so many, we have a well-documented procedure for handling the whole process. That makes it very easy to hand the job off to virtual assistants, overseas. These days, I just tell them the topic and the theme, and then give them a few details. They'll arrange the venue, book the audio/visual equipment, and handle all of the details. My virtual back-office even handles all of the marketing! That includes email, social media, paid adverts, and a lot more.

		Value →	
Time ↑	↑	Email Formatting Docs Blog Posting Answer Phone Soc. Media Replies	Call Customers Respond to Leads Higher-Value Docs Reply to Customer Emails
		Diary Travel	
		Website Upgrades Video Editing Infographics CRM Management	Bookkeeping IT Management Event Planning

So, as you can see, I have filled up this sample matrix already. I could probably fill up ten of these, because I know my own business, and I know what jobs need to be done. For you and your business, you're going to have to do the work of sorting it out yourself. But I'm confident that, if you approach it in a logical and systematic manner, you'll easily make good use of your new asset.



# Rewarding and Incentivising Your Virtual Assistant

I'm truly excited for you, a business owner who has discovered the power of using virtual assistants, to boost your business and get back your most valuable resource – your time. And one reason why I'm so excited is that I've been where you are, and I remember what it felt like when the weight started to lift, and I found myself, once again, with a little free time on my hands. I am truly grateful to my virtual team for the valuable work that they do for me and my business. They're saving me time, making me money, and helping me to accomplish my goals!

I learned long ago that, when someone is important to you, it is important to show your appreciation in tangible ways. I know that my VAs are paid employees, and I know that they're paid well and fairly for their contribution. But

it is also important to recognize when an employee is performing above expectations, or when they surprise you with their sharpness and attention to detail. The best VAs are truly intuitive in their work. They know what needs to be done, because they've learned my business, and they understand how it's supposed to work.

When it's time to reward my virtual assistants, there are several approaches that I find effective. I want to share some of those with you, because I'm confident that you'll experience some of the same successes that I have. But what's most important to keep in mind is this: when rewarding an employee, it's best to know your own worker and their needs. That way, you can find creative ways of rewarding them that will make a real difference in their lives. This, in turn, can build a strong foundation of loyalty in that ever-important employer-employee relationship.

Of course, all of these suggestions are just that: suggestions. They are not requirements. But here are just a few ideas to help you reward a deserving VA.

In most cases, if you're working with a Business Process Outsourcing company (BPO), you can work with the company's management to set up formal arrangements, to make sure that your VA gets the rewards that they deserve.

## **Say Thank You**

This one seems obvious, but it's very easy when you're focused on your business to expect that everything will

go right, and not to be surprised when it does. But recognition and appreciation from the boss is very important to the employer-employee relationship. Feedback is also extremely important, for operational reasons. If workers sense your appreciation, they're likely to continue doing whatever it is they're doing right. It's always a great idea to reinforce good and productive behaviors.

## **Wage-Based Rewards**

Of course, like all workers, your VAs work for a paycheck. They expect to be paid fairly for their work. And if they're working hard enough to earn rewards, you're probably paying them fairly already. But, for a worker who consistently performs above standards, it is not unreasonable to give them a small raise. If they're performing well on a daily basis, chances are that they know it. And they also know that they might get paid better for it somewhere else. Of course, you should always continue to keep in mind the local cost of living in the city and country your VA resides in. But also remember how much you're saving by hiring abroad. It's really up to you how much you pay your VA, but remember what they say: "You get what you pay for!"

## **Monetary Bonuses**

Bonuses are common features of the corporate world. They are incredibly useful, both as rewards and as incentives. In the case of the former, they are applied retroactively, when you observe that an employee

has performed above standards. Financial bonuses as rewards are generally unexpected, and are not announced in advance. As such, they usually have a strong effect on building employee loyalty. Who doesn't like to be surprised with extra cash?

Bonuses are also great ways to incentivize your VA to perform even better than they already are. In order to be effective, it is best to first audit your VA's current level of performance, then to establish a standard that is markedly higher than their existing performance level. Next, you can offer a bonus for meeting or exceeding your new standard. It is important for this goal to be challenging, but attainable. If it's too easy, you'll be giving extra money away for very little outcome. If it's too hard, your worker probably won't even try very hard to achieve your goal.

## **Traditional Employee Benefits**

Once again, if you're working with a BPO, your VA probably already has some basic, corporate employee benefits. These might include paid leave, medical insurance, etc. It is always advisable to be familiar with your BPO's benefits policy, regarding your specific VA. In some cases, you may even be able to work with your BPO to offer increased benefits for your valuable worker. You might be able to arrange a gym membership or dental coverage, for example. Nothing is really off the table, when it comes to adding benefits. It may just require a little negotiation with the BPO.

## Travel

One of the greatest benefits I have received from hiring a VA has been the time and freedom to travel and see the world. Since I developed my virtual back-office, I have been able to travel regularly with my wife, and I haven't had to work a single day while on vacation. For me, returning the favor seems an easy choice. Periodically, I arrange travel for my virtual staff to physically visit my office in Sydney. Yes, it's costly, but it goes a long way toward making my virtual staff feel a part of the team. And that boosts employee loyalty, which is a valuable commodity.

Furthermore, travel can be another fantastic incentive for your VA. Incentive travel can actually save you money, when compared to traditional cash bonuses. You can generally get discounts from travel agencies. So your VA gets an exciting vacation, and you pay less than you would otherwise with a cash bonus. Trip rewards can be international or domestic. You can talk to your BPO's management for suggestions on specific, domestic destinations. But from your employee's perspective, it's a free trip, regardless of where you send them.

Be careful, though; travel incentives might not be for everybody. Travel incentives are most effective with young, single college graduates who are unmarried and have no children. That's because arranging travel for the whole family can be challenging and stressful. They have to contend with school schedules, their



spouse's work schedule, and accommodations for a larger group. Local transportation at the destination can also be very costly, if it's not inclusive with the travel package.

## Family Gifts

In many cultures, including the Philippines where my own virtual team is based, family is deeply important to people, so it is expected that family events, such as weddings, births, children's graduations, etc. are important to your VA, too. By maintaining a good relationship with your VA, you can respond to family events. It's okay to send baby clothes if your VA is expecting a little one, or a wedding gift if they're getting married.

Likewise, when your VA's family is undergoing a difficult time, you should also consider their family needs. Coordinate with your BPO to make sure that your VA gets the time off that they need. You can even consider sending flowers. Being a thoughtful and understanding boss when a family member is sick, for example, will go a long way in strengthening relations with your virtual staff.

## Extra Days Off

If your VA works extra hard, and gets more done than you expected, then it is likely you won't have the next task lined up for them right away. So, rather than just giving them busy work, consider giving them the rest

of the day off. In special cases, when they've really performed well, you can consider giving them a long weekend as a reward.

## **Visit your VA**

Your virtual assistant knows that you live halfway around the world, so if you show up at their office to say hello one day, or to tell their BPO management what a good job they're doing, they'll feel that they're important to you. And besides, you'll get to see an interesting new place, meet the management of your BPO in person, and have an adventure yourself!

## **Play on your VA's Preferences**

It's true that you hired a VA, in part, to take away the jobs that you hate, but your VA has their own preferences, too. There are certainly tasks that they love, and others that they dislike. If they've been performing well, consider a temporary break from unpleasant tasks, instead choosing to focus their work on the things that they enjoy. It's just a temporary change, and it has no monetary cost to you.

## **Be Creative**

Simply remember that there is a valuable relationship between you and your VA. Find ways to keep it strong, and make your VA feel like a valued part of your team. Try to put yourself in their shoes. You know what kinds of things make you, as a person, feel important and

appreciated. And if a certain kind of reward would appeal to you, then your VA would probably also like it.

But always try to keep in mind the cultural differences between your country and your VA's. There are festivals, events, activities, foods, etc., in your VA's city that they enjoy, which you might not know about. So, a little light research can go a long way. Feel free to ask questions of your BPO's staff about what's available near your VA's office.

# Understanding your VA's Culture

One of the challenges you will face in working with a VA in another country is the fact that they are part of a culture that is very different from your own. And, in a world where cultural misunderstandings have literally resulted in wars, it most certainly pays to put some effort into understanding your VA's culture. Cultural misunderstandings are an avoidable source of conflict, if you first arm yourself with knowledge. And since your VA will be such a valuable resource to your business, you should certainly try and maintain a positive relationship with them. The good news is that understanding your VA's culture isn't that hard. A little bit of reading will make all the difference.

While VAs can be sourced from many countries, I find that a little planning and logic in your decision-making

can go a long way in easing cultural differences. Some countries are dramatically different from yours, whereas others will share a great many similarities. That is one reason why I chose to base my entire virtual back-office in the Philippines, rather than in India. The Philippines is a predominantly Christian country, in which English is widely spoken by large parts of its population. That makes it easier for Filipinos and Australians to see eye-to-eye. And while many Indian VAs are highly skilled and professional, and have impeccable English, their background is very different from mine. So I chose the easier route, at that point, and set up in the Philippines.

Whatever country you choose as a source for your new VA, the challenges you face will not be insurmountable. You can succeed in having a harmonious relationship with a foreign-based worker, no matter where they live.

As for this book, I will try and give you a general overview of Filipino culture, because that is the country I am most familiar with. If you happen to choose another place, then by all means, do your own research. There is an unending supply of free resources online for learning about a country's culture and background.

Without further ado, here is a very basic outline of what you might expect from Filipino culture.

## **Basic Background**

The Philippines is an archipelago made up of over 7,000 islands, which are spread over a wide area.

Consequently, the different regions of the Philippines maintain some significant differences in their cultural backgrounds, all while also enjoying a certain degree of sameness. The country speaks eight major dialects, on top of the national languages of Filipino and English.

The two most popular religions in the Philippines are Christianity and Islam, with Christianity dominating, at around 90%. 88% of the Christian population is Roman Catholic. About 6% of the population is Muslim, with the rest falling in other minor categories.

## Holidays

The Philippines celebrates traditional Christian holidays, including Holy Week (around Easter) and Christmas. They celebrate All Saints Day and All Souls Day, with families travelling around the country to visit and gather at the graves of their passed loved ones. They celebrate both the Western and Chinese New Years, and of course, they also have their own list of political holidays based upon their own history. Most local communities will have their own festivals and fiestas as well, often dedicated to a patron saint.

You will have to work out details with your VA, or the BPO they're contracted through, regarding which holidays that they will have off, and which ones will be work-days. Whilst the VA will work according to the client's work schedule, bear in mind that the VA might ask for leave during local holidays, especially during the Holy Week. They can be very religious!

## History

The history of the Philippines is complex, but can be summarized thusly:

The Philippines was a territory divided amongst different ethnic and tribal groups.

The Spanish arrived in 1565 and began colonization, along with mass conversion of the population to Catholic Christianity.

Spanish control lasted for more than 300 years, until 1898, when they ceded the territory to the United States. That change was a part of the Treaty of Paris, which ended the Spanish-American War.

The Philippines remained a colony of the United States until 1941, when the Japanese invaded and conquered the country.

By 1946, U.S. forces, along with support from the Filipinos themselves, succeeded in pushing the Japanese out of the Philippines. In exchange, and by previous agreement, the United States gave the Philippines its independence.

## International Standing

The Philippines is a proud member of ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), which provides for economic, political, security, military,

educational and sociocultural integration among its members. Their constitution actively rejects war, as a tool of foreign policy. So the Philippines values peace very highly.

## **Family Values**

Perhaps the most important aspect of Filipino culture and lifestyle is their dedication to family. Even into adulthood, the children continue to honor their parents' instructions and wishes. They will marry with their parents' approval, work where they are told, and sacrifice anything to help elevate the status and well-being of their parents, siblings, and even extended family. Current statistics show that nearly 3 million Filipinos have chosen to work in far-away countries, so that they can send money home in support of their families. Many even forgo starting families of their own, because their parents and siblings come first.

This is something that you will need to consider, if you're doing business with a Filipino VA. They are likely to need family time off, from time to time. Be as flexible as you can. You can always talk to your BPO's management for advice on how far you should go in this area.

## **Music**

Another important part of Filipino culture is music. Filipinos love to sing, as evidenced by the unlimited supply of Karaoke and Videoke bars in every city in the



country. No family event is complete without singing, at it is common to find Karaoke machines turned up to full volume, even at popular beach resorts and outdoor public areas.

The amount of musical talent you'll find amongst Filipinos is staggering. Countries throughout the world seek out Filipino bands and musicians to serve as entertainment in their bars, on their cruise ships, and all throughout the hospitality industry.

It's a good idea to find out about your VA's talents and aspirations. It can be useful for providing incentives, and having some knowledge about their interests can certainly help with building strong relationships.

## **Religion**

As mentioned earlier, the major religions in the country are Christianity and Islam. Regardless of which is common in a given community, people tend to be deeply religious. They do their best to participate in appropriate services and celebrations, and to follow the basic principles of their convictions. Traditional Muslim clothes are common sights in cities, particularly in the south.

## **Cuisine**

Filipino foods are influenced by a variety of sources, although Spanish tradition is very strong. Every meal must have rice, or else it is considered incomplete. Most

meals consist of rice, with something on top to flavor it. Amongst Christians, pork is very popular. It is prepared in a wide variety of dishes. Of course, Muslims consider pork to be forbidden. Chicken, and all kinds of seafoods, are also very popular.

Some typical Filipino dishes that are very popular throughout the country include adobo (a salty, sticky dish which usually consists of chicken or pork, or sometimes seafood), roasted pig (whole), a kind of ceviche known locally as Kinilaw, a few varieties of lumpia (wrapped meat or vegetables, which are sometimes fried, or sometimes served fresh), and Kaldereta, which is stewed meat with a tomato-based sauce and vegetables.

The Philippines is a tropical country, which means it has many fruits and vegetables that are only available within the tropical zone. Traditional Filipino vegetables include bitter melon, cassava leaves, pechay, banana blossoms, moringa leaves (locally known as malunggay), and green papaya. There are several other green, leafy vegetables which are unique to the Philippines or Southeast Asia.

Exotic, tropical fruits include durian (infamously stinky and spiky, but creamy and sweet), jackfruit, pommelo, longan, and rambutan. Mangoes in the Philippines are among the sweetest in the world.

In general, Filipinos love to eat. It is uncommon to attend a public event where some sort of merienda (snack) isn't served.

## Eating and Sharing

In the Philippines, it is considered rude to eat in front of other people without inviting them to join. Eating is an important social event, and sharing comes as second-nature. In old family traditions, food was served on enormous banana leaves, rather than on plates. The whole family would join in, eating with their hands from the same leaf. And this spirit of sharing remains to this day. So, if you're invited, it's a great idea to join in. But bring something along to share, too!

## Sports

The most popular sports in the Philippines are Boxing and Basketball.

When major boxing matches are scheduled, it is not uncommon for businesses to close, and for whole neighborhoods to stay home and watch the bout. One of the country's contemporary national heroes is Manny Pacquiao, the only 8-division boxing champion in the world.

Basketball is an ideal sport for the densely populated cities of the Philippines. It costs little to put up a hoop and backboard at local community centers and neighborhoods, and it doesn't have to take up a lot of space, so it's not hard to find a place to play. Many Filipinos avidly follow American basketball, and are intimately acquainted with NBA teams and their lineups. They

also have their own league, the Philippine Basketball Association, or PBA.

Filipinos also enjoy badminton, tennis, football, and a long list of other sports.

Once again, being attentive your VA's interests can help build relationships. So find out what their favorite team is, if they have one!

## **A Collectivist, Non-Confrontational Culture**

The Philippines is a country with a very high population density, and relatively lesser degrees of development. What this means is that Filipinos, in general, must find ways to get along with their neighbors. Houses in the Philippines generally have open windows or thin walls, because of the tropical climate. You can usually hear your neighbors talking at a moderate voice volume.

So Filipinos generally avoid loud arguments and confrontations, particularly in public. They don't argue with the server at the restaurant, if an order comes out wrong. In general, they'd rather eat what was mistakenly served. For the most part, a minor traffic accident doesn't result in a shouting match or a fight. Rather, they tend to try and laugh it off and move on. In most ways, this works out to be very positive. The peace is kept, and people are driven to help each other out in hard times.

I hope this little guide has been helpful for you, in beginning to understand the culture of the Philippines. Of course, a nation's culture is far too complex to fit within only a few short pages. This was only intended to be an overview. I am sure that you will learn a great deal from your own VA about their respective culture. That's half the fun of working with them!

And don't worry, your VA also knows that they're working with a foreigner. So they're not likely to be deeply offended, if you make a mistake. Just try and be attentive, and learn as time goes by. You'll likely discover that your VA is as curious about Australian culture and customs as you are about theirs.

## **Work Ethics**

For Filipino employees, work life is often quite unfair, as all the power is in the employer's hands. By law, a company needs to regularize their employees after a 6 month probationary period, but they don't, because there are many others who can and will fill their spot. They can be asked to work long hours, and have been conditioned not to complain and to accept these terms, for fear of losing their job. It is an "abuse and replace" mentality. This is the culture that we try to change, by instilling better work cultures. It is still a work in progress.

You might find that it will take a little while before your VA opens up to you, when they get to know you better as a person.

## Outlook in Life

Filipinos have a term: “One day millionaire”, which unfortunately means that they spend big on pay-day, and then skim on other essentials until their next pay day.

This means that most of them don't have savings, so when they have any medical situation come up, they borrow money, and the official loan interest rate is 12%.



# Some Final Thoughts

If you are a small business owner, particularly in the services or online sector, you are probably struggling to some degree.

It's not easy, trying to keep all the balls in the air, and often we do this alone. When I started my first business in 1997, I was very lucky to have a business partner. And whilst that business is still my main one, I've also started many others along the way. Some made it, and some didn't.

Just be aware that, if you are feeling alone and overwhelmed, there are inexpensive options for you to gain some much-needed support.

As I look back over the years, I've had some outstanding VAs support me. Jaris, my very first PA (and President of Virtual Done Well). What a team! There was



nothing that I could not share or ask with her, and we gave each other valuable support (she moved on to a very impressive corporate role).

Jam, who stood in for a while, and who gave outstanding support. Nova, the “comedian”, and one of the original “gang of 4” who looked after me till family commitments took her back to her hometown.

And my present EA Rose, who does a fantastic job of looking after me and our small team within a group of 5 staff.

All of these individuals became work colleagues, friends, confidantes and providers of encouragement, just when I needed it.

Don't ever feel that you have to do all of this alone. You don't.

I recently spoke with a client who has been using the services of one of our VAs for the last two years. He had gone through some tough personal and business issues, and he told me, quite simply, that his business would not have survived without the support of his VA, Ms. X.

At a time when he was struggling to cope, she stepped up to keep the essential communications and admin on track.

A VA is not some remote and distant “machine”. They are a living, breathing, integral part of your business.

And when you find a good one, cherish them, just as you would if they were there in your own office.

A common negative comment about VAs is that they “steal” local jobs. What utter nonsense.

In the first instance, business owners who have VAs on their team usually can’t afford local staff. That’s why they have VAs.

And secondly, having the support of great VAs allows you to grow your business, so that you can actually hire more local staff for the customer-facing work that must be done by a local.

For more information, here are a couple of resources for you:

The Virtual Done Well YouTube Channel:

**<https://www.youtube.com/user/VirtualDoneWell>**

The Virtual Done Well website:

**<https://www.virtualdonewell.com/>**

This includes a great blog, as well as contact details.



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