

## Chapter 1

# Much More Than Typing

**T**he business support industry has changed radically in the past several years, and many of the entrepreneurs we've interviewed said that the business they built originally looks almost nothing like what it has become. Even more, each one had difficulty forecasting how the industry will change in the next 10 years because it is so dynamic. We surveyed 40 members of the Alliance for Virtual Businesses and interviewed a few of them further so we could give you current information, feedback, and statistics about how they entered the industry, built their business, and how they continue to tailor their services and skills to make their businesses thrive.

There are many terms for this type of business from “administrative support services,” “office support services,” and for many, “virtual assisting services.” No matter what title you apply to this business, it still doesn't fully explain the vast scope of services you can offer since these businesses now offer everything from desktop publishing, web design, and many more sophisticated and talented service packages. Given the growth of the industry in the past several years and the trends for even greater growth, it's easy to assume that the more flexible you are in your ability to customize your services, the better you will do.

The size of the market for business support services is difficult to estimate for a number of reasons—primarily because the U.S. Bureau of the Census mixes other types of businesses with business support services. Also, the providers, services, and customers are constantly evolving with technological advances. Many of our surveyed experts are talking about using remote desktop access to conduct virtual meetings, using Voice over IP to teleconference, and using online meeting rooms and online conferences.

Keep in mind that this is a professional service business and your services are always going to be needed. Depending on your specialty, seasonal fluctuations may vary, but if you offer a portfolio of services, most likely one service demand will complement a slowdown in another. We will cover the vast variety of services you can offer and think about which services will balance each other and how you can gain the knowledge and training necessary to truly be a specialist in each area.

As a virtual assistant, be prepared for the reality that the company you start today will likely bear little resemblance to the one you'll be running in the future. Sharon Williams, chairperson for the Alliance for Virtual Businesses gives the following four forecasts for the industry in the next five to 10 years:

- 1.** Virtual assistant entrepreneurs will begin standardized training and certification programs making them more widely accepted among professional organizations and throughout the industry.

2. The industry will receive greater recognition and acceptance as a viable and cost-effective alternative to on-site staffing.
3. Virtual assistants with mediocre skills will realize the demand in the industry that requires tech-savvy and highly-trained experts.
4. Savvy virtual assistants will continue their education, increase their familiarity with new and changing technologies, and develop targeted marketing strategies to educate ideal clients.

As long as you pay attention to what's going on in the market, stay flexible, and continue to educate yourself on new technologies, your chances of having a strong, profitable operation are excellent.

### INDUSTRY TRENDS

Let's look further into the trends for this industry from some successful owners. Sharon Williams says that "savvy [owners] are breaking new ground and educating the business community about the advantages and benefits of partnering with them. As a result, the industry is exploding. More and more industries are aware of outsourcing and demand highly trained and qualified service providers.

Since external and intra-industry awareness is evolving, service owners, individually and as part of organized media and promotion campaigns, must keep up

*"I was surprised at how few companies really understood how much money could be saved by not hiring a full-time or part-time employee. I still spend a lot of hours educating companies on the benefits of outsourcing."*

—Michelle Schoen,  
The Permanent Record

with increasing demand. Currently, there are unlimited opportunities for business growth and development. I expect this trend to continue for years to come."

She explains that "virtual assisting and outsourcing is a relatively new industry. Since its origin in the mid-1990s, more than 20,000 professional office support staff located around the globe have transitioned into savvy business owners. I recommend that newcomers considering this industry as a viable business opportunity take advantage of much of the resources, education, and networking offered, as it will aid in their development and ultimate business growth and success."

Sherry Watkins says that the industry has changed a lot since she's been in business. "Four years ago when I first started watching the industry, many people were hesitant of hiring someone they could not meet in person. Today,, more and more businesses are realizing that they can get the expertise without the face-to-face, and this offers them freedom from the hassles of being an employer on top of trying to do their business. Now they are not limited to the work force in their local communities. I see a surge of growth coming in the next five to 10 years as more entrepreneurs take advantage of the technology and freedom this industry offers. We, too, are no longer limited to our local communities."

### Is It In You?

Who is likely to start a virtual assistant company? Many of today's owners were employees doing similar tasks for other companies and saw the opportunity to be in business for themselves. Some wanted full-time businesses; others were looking for a solid part-time income source. Most saw the demand in the industry and have found it a rewarding experience. Even more, they saw that by becoming an expert at those services, they could surpass their competition and gain loyal clients. Do you have the resolve to craft your skills and become an entrepreneur?

Next we'll show you some of the startup stories from some of our surveyed entrepreneurs, and although their businesses vary by location and services provided, the common thread among these operators is that they all did the type of work involved before they actually began running their own company. This explains one of the biggest challenges of starting and running a virtual assistant service: the need to go beyond pure technical skills and experience and understand how to manage and grow a business.

*"I think the industry will become increasingly more computerized."*

—Gay Lynn Kirsch,  
Executive Secretarial Services

### STARTUP STORIES

Charlene Davis had been a full-time legal assistant when she started her part-time homebased business in Florida. Her goal was to have more time and flexibility to be at home with her newly adopted son, but to not completely give up her career and income. In fact, one of her key challenges is keeping her business part time and small. "I could easily turn it into a big business because I've gotten a lot of referrals and I turn down a lot of work," she says. "Fortunately, I don't [need] the income, and I prefer to keep my hours light. I choose when and when not to work, and I keep my client list very short and manageable."

Sharon Williams tells that she was "downsized from government employment and promised [myself] that no one would ever determine if I received a paycheck again. I saved a date and opened my business doors without having one client and said, 'I can do this.' I have since built a successful international practice."

Diana Ennen started her business to be with her son. "He went to day care for three weeks and I just knew it wasn't for me, having others raise him and spend more time with him than me. I also knew I could do better than working at the medical office I was at. I practically ran that office and after two years, I received a small 25-cent raise. I knew I was worth more. Plus, I was tired of being someone's secretary."

For Gay Lynn Kirsch, this was her second homebased business. She had started one in South Carolina that she ran part time while working a full-time job. She then came to the DC area and was working full time when she was laid off

## Trend Analysis Checklist

*To track emerging trends that can affect small businesses in general and your business in particular, you need to stay informed.*

- Read a major metropolitan newspaper, as well as one or two papers serving your local community. This way, you can stay informed on current events on both local and global scales.
- Join associations that serve your industry. To find an appropriate association, consult the *Encyclopedia of Associations*, published by Gale Research. You can find this publication in larger libraries.
- Keep track of bestselling nonfiction books. Although these books may not always apply directly to your business, they may reveal trends that you can use to your advantage.
- Contact government agencies or consult government publications for industry-specific information. The departments of Commerce and Labor as well as the Census Bureau, for instance, have data tracking various industry trends. You might also consult large libraries (particularly those in large public universities) for information gathered by the government. Such libraries often have sections devoted to government publications.
- Contact manufacturers, wholesalers and distributors serving your industry. They can furnish information on their products and on market research they may have done.
- If you have access to an online information service, you might be able to find a source of the latest information on your industry.
- Subscribe to relevant trade periodicals and newsletters. Many trade associations publish periodicals, which are usually filled with valuable management tips, industry trends, buying guides, etc.
- Attend industry conventions and inventor trade shows. These venues offer an exciting array of information regarding specific industries as well as new product ideas.
- Read journals and magazines on a local as well as national level that deal with small-business or business in general. Publications like the *Wall Street Journal* and *Entrepreneur* magazine are valuable sources of trends that are developing on a national scale, and of detailed information on specific business opportunities. Local business journals that cover key developments in your own community are also important because you can track new ideas and trends that appeal to a specific geographic market.

*Check out more checklists like these at [Entrepreneur.com](http://Entrepreneur.com).*

while pregnant and after she had her baby, decided to reopen the business in her new area.

Janice Byer says, “I ran my father’s company from my home and when he retired, I knew that I didn’t want to go back out to work. I wanted to work from home. It just felt right to me. Not to mention, I had a very young daughter at the time and couldn’t imagine going back out to work and putting her in day care.”

Lyn Prowse-Bishop said her reasons were “a combination of needing the money and wanting to be available to my new child. I was on 12 months maternity leave from my full-time job. Maternity leave is unpaid in my field at the current time. Six months in, I found I needed to return to work because the money ran out and my husband’s salary was not enough to cover all our expenses. I approached my boss with the suggestion that I return to work six months early if he could be flexible and have me for only two days a week on site and work remotely the other three and had even drafted a proposal. He was not at all interested and said I should return at the end of my 12 months. I then went out and got a job share role in a law firm working two days a week and pursued the idea of working from home for myself. Within six months, I had discovered niche marketing and had my first client. Within 12 months, I had three clients. By 18 months, I was working full time at home.”

Sherry Watkins wanted to get rid of her commute. “Five years ago when my husband and I purchased our home, we set a goal to eliminate the 60 mile one-way commute in five years. The growth in technology has literally wiped away the necessity to commute, combined with the fact that I had a back injury last summer and the commute became too much. We’ve met our goal and now we don’t need to commute.”

Lanel Taylor started a business because of the need for the services and autonomy. “I was going back to school and needed something flexible to allow me to work around my school schedule. I continued with it after I graduated because of the need for my services and I liked what I’m doing.”

Carol Deckert needed the income but found that she was overqualified for many administrative positions. “The company employing me at the time went out of business and I was told by the Unemployment Bureau that my skills were too advanced to be an administrative assistant. I then began working for myself as a secretarial services owner, now known as a virtual assistant. I have now found my niche as a Virtual Marketing Assistant.”

Lisa Wells has a bit of a different story. “My husband received military orders to move from Camp Pendleton, California, to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. The job market in North Carolina was extremely tight for my position as an IT Specialist. So I decided to start my own business.”

# Self-Assessment Work Sheet

*Use this self-assessment work sheet to see if working for yourself is right for you. After you've completed all the questions, look for a pattern in the answers. For example, do you see a need for your services and skills in areas where you excel?*

▲ List at least five things you like to do or excel in at work:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

▲ List at least five things you don't like or areas where you need to improve at work:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

▲ List three services that would make your life easier at work:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

▲ When people ask you what you do, what's your answer? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

▲ List three things you enjoy about your work:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

# Self-Assessment Work Sheet

▲ List three things you dislike about your work:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

▲ When people tell you what they like most about you, they say: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

▲ Some people dislike the fact that you: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

▲ Other than your main occupation, list any other skills you possess, whether you excel at them or not: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

▲ In addition to becoming more financially independent, you would also like to become more: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

▲ List at least three things you would like to improve about your personal life:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

▲ List three things you think need to be improved in your industry:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

*Adapted from Entrepreneur magazine's Start Your Own Business*

## Sit This One Out

**If you have small children and you're starting a homebased virtual assistant service, don't try to do it without a sitter.** You won't be able to concentrate on your work if you're also listening for the kids. To be fair to yourself, your company, your clients, and your children, arrange for someone to watch them while you're working and meeting with clients.

"You can always run errands with the children in tow—it may take longer, but it's not a real hardship," says Charlene Davis. "But when you're actually working on projects, you need time to do it uninterrupted, when you can really focus on the job itself."

Keep in mind that if you're going to be at home working within earshot of the kids, you can hire a younger, less experienced, less expensive sitter than you might hire if you were going to be out.

Wendy Weightman had numerous reasons to start her own business. "I needed the extra money in addition to my husband's income but wanted to work part time on my own terms and have flexible hours to achieve a better work/life balance. I also wanted to save on time and costs of being an employee, such as two hours commuting each day, expensive work clothes, bought lunches, getting home and cooking dinner late, reducing family stress at the end of the day, and helping my teenagers with homework problems, etc. I had wanted to work from home for years and finally finding out about the industry on the internet made it easy for me to get connected and start my business—my dream job!"

Joann Voss began doing transcribing for court reporters at night to supplement her income from her full-time office manager's job. "I became overwhelmed with how much outside work I was getting, so I quit my job and started doing this full time," she says. That was in 1984; today, her company, Voss Transcriptions specializes in audiotape and videotape transcription, and does work for clients across the country.

Bill Pypes' path to owning a virtual assistant service was less traditional. His wife actually started the business he now runs in Iowa. She was successfully working from home, and after their second child was born, Bill began helping her while he attended graduate school. When their third child came along, she opened a home-based day-care center, and Bill took over the virtual assistant service and moved it into a commercial office.

Each business owner has a different story, but of our 40 survey participants, most of them looked at this industry because they either saw a need for their serv-

ices, needed the extra income, wanted the autonomy, wanted to stay at home with their children, or had other motivations, but each has worked hard to make it a success and have met their goals.

### **THE SKY'S THE LIMIT**

To understand the future potential, take a look at how the industry has evolved. Over the past decade, the administrative demands of doing business have grown tremendously, creating a need for experienced support. With the advent of complex computer systems and increasingly sophisticated software and online capabilities, the skill and knowledge requirements of virtual assistants have also increased. The newest technologies today, according to the Alliance for Virtual Businesses are VoIP, whiteboarding, webcams, video podcasting, and online meeting rooms. Furthermore, they foresee autoresponders, PDAs, and iPods becoming more integral to the daily functions of the industry. Sharon Williams of the Alliance says "The influx and standardization of web-based secured and encrypted sites has revolutionized the transcription industry as [virtual assistants] now offer online, secured, digital dictation, and transcription services. Administrative support services and time accountability software can be tracked and reviewed by team members. [Now you] can share client desktops via access software such as GotoMyPC and PCAnywhere. [Owners] meet with clients in interactive meeting rooms, equipped with whiteboarding and VoIP capabilities. As a result of the influence of these innovative technologies,

### **Profit Prophet**

**A virtual assistant service is not a get-rich-quick operation. Like most legitimate businesses, it takes dedication, hard work, and a lot of time to build a profitable company. But with a well-thought-out, enthusiastic marketing plan, you'll probably see your income exceed your cumulative expenses three to 12 months after opening your doors. How much you'll ultimately make depends on how hard you're willing to work, how many hours you put in, and the type of business you start (small, one-person shop, or larger operation with employees).**

If you work alone, keep in mind that you'll only be able to bill about 75 percent of your available business hours—the rest of your time will be spent marketing, doing your own administrative work, and on other nonbillable tasks. And even though you can get "out of the red" fairly quickly in this business, it could take a year or more before you are actually working full time on clients' projects.

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client information is easily accessible and the services are more accountable and marketable.”

At the same time, the general business landscape has changed dramatically. Big businesses are looking for ways to streamline their operations, and one popular option is outsourcing, where they retain another company to provide a service that may have traditionally been done by employees. Small companies want to stay lean and profitable, so they, too, are turning to outsourcing, rather than fattening up their payrolls.

Combine the obvious need with the new way of operating in the business world, and you have a dynamic young industry wide-open with opportunity. In fact, even though there is so much opportunity, if you don't have a clear plan, specific services, and a target market, your chances of success are slim. But with a lot of thought and preparation, and a minimal amount of cash, you can quickly be on the road to profitability.