

The Virtual Assistant

by Blanche Evans

According to Internet trainer, Allan F. Hainge, real estate agents should be spending very little time at a keyboard, meaning that their job is listing and/or selling real estate.

That's where a virtual assistant can come in. Virtual assistants can work for one agent or more than one agent performing a wide variety of real estate-related chores that will save the agent time and money, all while working out of their homes. I

The virtual assistant takes the role of the temp and elevates it to the status of entrepreneur. Because the virtual assistant is self-employed, bills only the hours work or by tasks completed, and is dependent on referrals and steady work flow from existing clients, s/he can be the perfect solution for a busy agent.

Virtual assistants offer several advantages over a paid employee, with all the benefits of outsourcing. They save the agent employee tax and benefits problems while demonstrating the loyalty and steadiness of a company employee.

As more agents move their marketing and communications to the Internet, virtual assistants become more and more the obvious solution to staffing problems. With skills such as graphic arts design or editing, they can be useful to a real estate agent.

What equipment should the virtual assistant have?

A virtual assistant should have all or most of the following: a recent model IBM-compatible computer; a top email and email merge program; a contact/office manager program such as Top Producer; a working knowledge of the most popular office programs such as Microsoft Word and Power Point; familiarity with Internet idiosyncrasies (such as how to write emails to AOL users which is not as easy as you would think;) and other office equipment such as a FAX machine, high speed Internet access, if available; familiarity with the local MLS information access program and its features; the ability to research information, upload photos and stitch them into presentations; familiarity with virtual tour technology; and more, depending on the types of tasks the virtual assistant is hired to do.

A virtual assistant can be in town or work several states away, in some cases. A virtual assistant can be on call or paid a weekly salary like any other employee.

What types of work do virtual assistants do for agents?

Virtual assistants can be the agent's techie, or marketing assistant; it all depends on what the agent needs.

North Carolina radio personality and broker Jerry Fowler, www.jerryfowler.com, has an assistant named Amy who lives several states away, yet she handles all of his advertising and web site design and management.

Amy handles the following for Fowler:

- Tips for newspaper
- Weekly classified ads
- Weekly display ads
- Weekly flyer for radio show
- Weekly flyer for BNI leads club

- Weekly flyer (4 up) of listings faxed to Realtors
- Monthly ad for real estate books
- Monthly newsletter
- Monthly prospecting from real estate books
- Flyers for listings
- Just listed/Just sold postcards
- Develop new FSBO programs
- Marketing pieces for Expired listings
- Create marketing material for open house parties new to the neighborhood for buyer reps)
- Relocation packets
- All web sites updated
- Press releases
- E-zine articles

Fowler pays Amy on commission, based on the number of closings each month. "The advantage to me is that I don't have to provide office space for her, I don't have to pay her a fixed salary or provide insurance, vacation pay, or sick pay," says Fowler. "The advantage to her is that she gets to work at home. She doesn't have to fight traffic going to and from work, she doesn't have to buy a fancy wardrobe, and she doesn't have to abide by a rigid, 9 to 5 schedule. Many people enjoy having a flexible work schedule."

Amy can handle work from several agents, so she's still able to enjoy a nice paycheck every month, says Fowler, and thanks to her laptop, she doesn't miss out on vacations.

What do virtual assistants get paid?

Fowler pays Amy a flat rate based on number of closings, but another agent might offer a flat monthly rate with bonuses for certain production levels. Other virtual assistants charge an hourly fee of \$15 to \$35, according to Staffcentrix president and CEO, Christine C. Durst, www.staffcentrix.com. The more the virtual assistant has to offer, the higher salary she or he can command.

"As cable Internet, wireless Internet, and other broadband solutions grow in the marketplace, the VA will be well-placed to leverage the additional communications tools and grow even closer to the small business or startup client," says Durst.

Where do virtual assistants get found?

Durst's company places virtual assistants in a number of industries. Another source, The International Virtual Assistants Association, <http://www.ivaa.org>, also has a comprehensive directory of virtual assistants.

Other virtual assistants get started by notifying local brokers that they are looking to get into the real estate industry and would like to assist a top producer with their technology and Internet solutions.

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