

A stylized illustration of a witch with long, flowing dark hair, wearing a black pointed hat with a brown buckle and a black dress. She is smiling and holding a wooden staff that is stirring a bubbling white liquid in a dark blue cauldron. Blue smoke or steam rises from the cauldron. The background is a dark blue gradient.

Outsourcery Secrets

All You Need to Know
About How to Use a Virtual Assistant

by David Oswald

Outsourcing Secrets

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All you need to know about how to use a Virtual Assistant

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Foreword

If you intend to download this book and look at it when you “have time”, then it will not work for you. It’s not one of those types of books, it is a fast and practical read, and if you are the slightest bit interested in outsourcing your work and having a better life then you will read it straight away.

First we look at how a Virtual Assistant can fit into your business, and what you can expect from a Virtual Assistant. Then we look at possible objections and the real value you can expect. After that, we talk about growing your business, and how you can achieve the life you envisioned when you first started out.

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How Do I Know I Need a Virtual Assistant?

Do you remember when you started your business, determined that you were not going to work for someone else anymore? What were you looking for? The freedom to be your own boss, deciding when and how much you were going to work and getting to keep all the profits?

If you're like most budding entrepreneurs, you will have found that the reality is very different. Instead of being stuck at the desk of another company, you find you're chained to your own desk, often working late into the night in order to get everything done.

And did you ever realize how many hats you would have to wear? All the job functions done by different people in the company you left are funneled into one person – YOU – as you try and become an excellent accountant, marketer, attorney, graphic artist, researcher, writer, website designer, and, oh yes, producer of whatever it is you set out to do in the first place.

All of which suggests that you need support staff, but who can afford to employ people when they are starting off? It can be very informative to keep a log of where your time goes, so you can see just which tasks are draining your time and energy. If you do most of your work on a computer, there is a little free program called "Manic Time" (www.manictime.com) which will keep track for you, and can help point you in the right direction.

You may be pursuing your passion, but unless you are exceptional you are also involved with many necessary business functions about which you are not very passionate. You may have left the rat race, but you have substituted your own treadmill.

All this is to say nothing of the problems that you find with keeping a steady workflow. When times are slow you have to hustle with your marketer's hat on, only to find that in a week or two you have too many clients, all with ridiculous deadlines.

Happily for you, if you are reading this book you have realized that there may be an answer to all these problems, an answer that will let you get back to your dream of being your own boss without suffering the nightmares. It's an answer which is increasingly popular, even with the largest of companies, and it is called outsourcing. Nowadays it is easily possible to outsource your business, and this book explains the basics of outsourcing. Perhaps the most useful thing that you can do for your business is to discover the virtues of a Virtual Assistant, an outsourcing solution that learns your needs and that you can rely on.

Most entrepreneurs can use a Virtual Assistant, and they achieve greater benefits than they at first expected. If you do not use a computer or technology now, then you may be challenged to integrate a Virtual Assistant into your business, but if you are like most of us, driven by your Blackberry© and e-mails, the transition should be easy. Read on to find out about outsourcing basics, and how you can outsource your life.

What Can A Virtual Assistant Do?

Now if you're a technophobe, don't get misled by the name Virtual Assistant. It's not like virtual reality; the assistant is real and not a computer program. The "virtual" part is that the assistant can be anywhere in the world, as long as technology can connect you.

Virtual Assistants are highly skilled professionals, often with accreditation in various software programs and tasks. They work

on a contract basis rather than being employed, which saves a lot of administrative paperwork. They don't take up office space, either, as they work remotely from their own offices. They are a specific example of how you can outsource your business for greater efficiency and increased profits.

Virtual Assistants can have many different skills, and practically any function that you currently undertake which is not fully using your talents is a candidate for outsourcing to a Virtual Assistant. Many people think that they could not keep a Virtual Assistant busy, but once you start giving them work, you may wonder how you ever functioned before. Besides, it's not like taking on an employee; a Virtual Assistant may even work for several people with your job only requiring a part-time commitment to start with.

Here are some of the things that you can use a Virtual Assistant for:

- *Responding to e-mails*—most people would agree that this is a real time stealer, and many times you find you are generating the same response over and over
- *Setting appointments*—a Virtual Assistant can map out your week for you, and chase down those hard to reach contacts
- *Transcribing audio files*—taking meeting notes and survey details on a digital recorder means you can get them written up easily by your assistant
- *Copywriting*—if you are not an expert at copywriting, then you can find that someone who is when you need it
- *Editing*—unless you are in the 5% who produce perfect writing the first time around, this will be invaluable in maintaining the quality of the information you send out
- *Software development*—let someone who knows computers provide the programs

- *Research*—this can be done from anywhere, and again sucks away at your time, all you need is the final information
- *Customer database*—do you really want to spend your time filling out spreadsheets or databases?
- *Website design*—designers produce a professional job much faster than you can
- *Accounting*—another specialized task that you really don't need to learn
- *Live support*—a great way to look like a big business without having a call center
- *Newsletters*—a regular newsletter is a great way to stay in touch with your clients, but many solo business owners find it hard to prepare them on time

This list is really limited only by your imagination. With a Virtual Assistant, you can outsource your business and outsource real estate chores, leaving you free to do the valuable tasks. With the global marketplace that has opened up, you can find Virtual Assistants all around the world, with any skills you care to mention.

The amazing thing is that getting a Virtual Assistant to take over some of these tasks will save you money. As an entrepreneur, your time is valuable and if you spend your own time doing a \$10 per hour task you are pulling down your average hourly rate. Even when you reduce the hours per week that you work, you will bring far more value into your business by concentrating on your skill set, and leaving the mundane tasks to others.

Will They Work As Well As I Do?

One of the objections that is frequently raised when talking about outsourcing is whether anyone can do it as well as you

can. It can be very difficult to release responsibility for something you are used to doing to somebody else, and there is a natural inclination to think that they can never do the work as well as you.

The question is, what makes you think that you are an expert at answering e-mails, or writing up meeting minutes? I'm willing to bet that this is not where your valuable skills lie, and not what you went into business to do. If the mundane tasks can be outsourced to someone else, it leaves you more time to exercise your expertise and training, which is where your value lies.

It is natural to have a fear that you may lose touch with the day-to-day running of your business when you delegate the routine tasks. This may have been true a few years ago, but certainly is not now, when technology provides so many means of communication, most of it instant. When you are first learning to work with your Virtual Assistant, you can stay in touch as frequently as you need to be sure that the work is being dealt with, and you'll learn to trust your assistant more as time goes on.

In fact, if you consider the list of tasks which you can outsource to a Virtual Assistant, you may find several that you are used to struggling with, such as maintaining a website, where an outsourcing solution will provide a superior product in a faster time. The question in this case is not if the work is done as well as you do, but how much better it can be done by a Virtual Assistant, giving your business a more professional appearance. For example, in real estate outsourcing the preparation of flyers to someone with graphic design skills may increase your response rate.

The point is that by concentrating on the skills that you have developed in your life and in your line of business you are creating the best return for your time. By careful selection of

the tasks that you give to your assistant and by giving good directions, many of the more boring job functions will be dealt with adequately if not excellently without any time commitment on your part, leaving you free to direct your talents towards high-value profitable work, which inevitably means that your business will earn more.

How Do I Know If They Are Working?

There's another objection that comes up frequently when talking about outsourcing work, and that is how you can know if your Virtual Assistant is working or not. It seems people are very nervous that someone out of sight may be cheating them and not working at all.

There are several answers to this, but the starting point must be to ask yourself how you know that anyone, regardless of whether employed at your business or in another country, is working for you. If you had someone working in your office, would you keep going over to them to see what they were doing, or would you just expect them to be getting on with the task in front of them? If the former, then you will find that you are not cut out to be a boss and that people do not stay very long in your employment.

The ultimate test of whether anyone is working is whether the work is being done, and whether the tasks you have set are being completed. When you first outsource your business you have to be reasonable in your expectations, as it takes a certain amount of time and effort for work to be finished, particularly when you are coaching your Virtual Assistant on how you like things done. However, if you are seeing the finished product you have asked for, you know that your Virtual Assistant is working for you.

Now, this is not to say that there are no liars or cheats in the world, or in the outsourcing business, and in the next chapter we'll look at ways to find a reliable Virtual Assistant. Many professional Virtual Assistants use timekeeping software and will be able to provide you with a report of the time taken and the tasks worked on.

Once again, technology can also help you if you are distrustful of a new worker, and need to set your mind at rest. You should be able to communicate with your Virtual Assistant via e-mail, instant messenger, or telephone any time that you have agreed the Virtual Assistant is working for you. Bear in mind, however, that if you keep interrupting your Virtual Assistant they will have difficulty getting anything done! The point is that you are able to outsource your business and still retain complete control, even if your assistant is not in the same room.

Once you have got used to working with a particular Virtual Assistant, you will find that the trust develops. The Virtual Assistant will learn how much communication and feedback you would like to have, and how much you are content to leave them alone, acting on their own initiative to get the work done.

How Do I Find A Virtual Assistant?

So you have decided that you would like to at least try using a Virtual Assistant, and you're wondering where to start. After all, you want to be sure when you outsource your life that you use someone who is reliable and trustworthy, as they are going to find out all about your business.

Just because someone is working remotely from your location does not mean that you cannot apply the same criteria as you would if you were employing them to work in your office. If you

interviewed someone to come and work with you, you would look for good references, and appropriate skills and experience. You can use a similar method when outsourcing your business and selecting a Virtual Assistant.

There are several ways that you can find outsourcing assistance, and these are covered in greater detail in the e-book “101 Ways to Outsource Your Life and Business” which you can find at the website www.101WaysToOutsource.com. The three basic methods include direct advertising, searching for advertisements, and using one of the agencies which provide assistance.

You can advertise for outsourcing help on one of the online job boards, as this will reach the widespread tech savvy community that can provide the service you need. This is very similar to finding a direct employee through job advertising, but without the geographical constraints. As with finding an employee, you are able to specify the skills and experience that you require your Virtual Assistant to have, and ask for references. Unlike taking on an employee, you will not have to worry about providing benefits, increasing your office space, or calculating payroll taxes.

An alternative approach is to search the Internet for “Virtual Assistant” or for “outsourcing”, and review the hits that you get. Once again, you can screen the offers for the appropriate skills and take references.

When you are not able to meet the applicants, you should take particular care in determining that they are who they represent themselves to be. Be sure to do your research and also investigate their references to make sure that they are not just friends helping their colleagues get a job.

The third method of finding a Virtual Assistant is to use one of the many outsourcing agencies that have sprung up. Generally, they will take away the effort of having to confirm references and check skills, as they will have already taken this action for the people on their books. Of course, this is not free and you'll find that their charges may be a percentage of the hourly rates.

Handing It Over

You may be worried about how to start using the Virtual Assistant that you have found. You don't sit in the same office, so every time you communicate you must concisely convey your instructions so the Virtual Assistant doesn't go off in the wrong direction. You need to be clear on the outsourcing basics.

Firstly, understand that your Virtual Assistant is working for you and wants to do a good job so that you will keep using them. They will always seek to clarify any confusion, and use their best endeavors. Secondly, this is most probably not the first outsourcing job they have done, and they understand many of the difficulties that you are having. Not surprisingly, many small businesses, even in different industries, encounter the same problems, and your Virtual Assistant may even be able to come up with some innovative solutions.

You are the key person in your business, and it is up to you to keep it pointed in the right direction. Your initial list of the tasks that you do in a day provides a good basis for deciding how to outsource your life and what jobs your Virtual Assistant should tackle.

If you have too many tasks to hand over straight away, you need to look at each to see the benefits and ease of handing off. The tasks with the greatest cost-benefit from having someone else

do them should be your priority, subject only to how easy it will be to outsource them to someone else.

With some tasks such as e-mail, you can automatically forward general correspondence, or provide your Virtual Assistant with your login details so that they can directly access your account. Once you have set your Virtual Assistant going on a task, you can check it regularly, particularly at first, but don't spend too much time and energy on monitoring them; remember they are supposed to save you time!

It is a balance in the beginning, when you are building up trust in your Virtual Assistant and want to be sure that your company is represented as you would like. Your aim, however, must be to step back from the tasks allocated and get on with the higher paying work. The sooner you are able to let the outsourced tasks run on autopilot, the more you can concentrate on growing your business.

Your critical role in setting up your working relationship with your new Virtual Assistant is to give clear indications of what the Virtual Assistant is expected to do, how and in what format it should be delivered or reported back to you, and what your anticipated time frame is. With clarity in communication, you'll find that your relationship with your Virtual Assistant may be a long one!

Is It Really Worth It?

Up to now, we've looked at the savings in your time from using a Virtual Assistant, and also talked about the lower rate of pay when you outsource your business compared to what you can earn per hour. It's easily possible to make a case that you save

money when you use a Virtual Assistant, compared to doing all the work yourself.

But the other way of looking at it is to see how much more you and your business could be earning when you are released from doing the routine and mundane tasks. You spend more time doing the things you love, and these are also the things that produce the highest return from your time.

Suppose you are in sales, and suddenly found that you had twice as much time to follow up on leads and look after existing customers. Can you imagine the difference it would make to your bottom line? If you are a writer, then having twice the time means you can produce double the number of books. The investor who can outsource real estate tasks has more time to find good deals. You should be prepared for dramatically increasing your profits when you make the decision to hire a Virtual Assistant.

So the question is not whether it is worth hiring a Virtual Assistant, but rather what are you waiting for? The fact that not everybody is outsourcing their routine work at the moment means that when you take steps to do that, you have a great advantage over your competitors.

Despite the hopes of many people going into business for themselves, you seldom hear of budding entrepreneurs complaining that they have too much free time on their hands. Discovering how to use a Virtual Assistant to best effect can not only increase your bottom line, but also provide you with more time to enjoy the fruits of your labors. Most people take the opportunity to rebalance their lives, and give more time to their families without feeling guilty that work is not being done.

What If I Want More?

Now that you have seen some of the things that a Virtual Assistant can do for you, and perhaps even worked with one for a few months, you may be wondering what other things you can outsource. Looking back at the second chapter, you will see that they can help you with virtually any aspect of your business; you are literally able to outsource your life.

The best way to deal with this is to keep a diary for a month of all the things that you do in connection with your business. Then set aside a few hours to list all the services that you could have asked someone else to do, and use your knowledge about outsourcing to identify further ways that you can outsource your business.

For instance, your first Virtual Assistant may be dealing with all your correspondence and e-mails, but you may find your financial records are taking a significant time. The answer is to allocate this work to another Virtual Assistant, this time with accounting skills, again freeing up more time for you to concentrate on increasing your business.

In time you may find yourself setting up a Virtual Team of assistants to take care of your admin. You may even find that your first Virtual Assistant can recommend to you workers in different fields that they know and have already worked with. There has never been an easier way to expand your business without worrying about overheads and office space than outsourcing your business.

What's The Limit?

Where do you envisage your business going? Put aside your old preconceptions about how much expansion you could deal with, as the rules have changed now you are using Virtual Assistants.

There are still some functions that you will want to be personally involved with, and you never want to lose touch with your clients, particularly those who have been with you since you started the business. But outsourcing allows you to look on the expansion in a different light.

Have you ever had to call for service on something you have bought only to find you are speaking to someone in the Philippines or in India? The chances are that the company is a large one, but they still find that outsourcing various aspects of their work is the most efficient way to run their business and protect their profits.

Increasingly, manufacturers are having their goods made abroad, typically outsourcing to China, and are outsourcing their distribution to a fulfillment center. It is not necessary for the headquarters office to even see the product anymore.

So let your imagination run wild. Just how big do you want your business to get? If you can dream it, the chances are that you can plan for it.

Resources

To track your tasks and computer time, try Manic Time, a free download from www.manictime.com.