

The Commonsense Virtual Assistant

Becoming an Entrepreneur
Not an Employee

by

Joel D Canfield

and

Sue L Canfield

Sample Chapter

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The Commonsense Virtual Assistant
please visit <http://ChiefVirtualOfficer.com/>

A note from Sue:

My work experience began at the age of 17 as an assistant in an insurance office. After 24 years working for other people, I started my own business in 2005 as a virtual office professional. This last year I met many virtual assistants online who asked me about my business and how they can succeed as virtual assistants. The more I communicated with other virtual assistants, the more I realized that new and aspiring VAs (Virtual Assistants) needed basic guidance on how to run a business.

Since Joel and I have owned and operated our own businesses for many years, we wanted to share some basic commonsense information that can help you as a new or aspiring VA run a successful business. This information will also help those looking for a dependable virtual assistant know what they should expect from a virtual assistant.

There are many more things that could be covered in more detail. Maybe we'll put them in the next book.

Thank you to the many virtual assistants from across the country who replied to my requests for comments on what it takes to succeed as a virtual assistant. Some of your comments are included throughout the book.



And one from Joel:

Sue and I have worked together for years. We wouldn't change it for the world. This book will help you see how you can be just as happy working for yourself as we are.

There are a lot of 'how to' guides out there. This is not one of them. This is more of a 'why to' guide, to help you see how people think, and how you should think, to get genuine satisfaction from your business.

When it comes to the skills we use (or would like to use) to make a living, many of us are self-taught. Often this leaves holes in our education. Some we're aware of, others, we're not. This book will help ferret out the latter and allow them to be filled in before they cause problems.

The 'commonsense' part of the title refers to the fact that little, if any, of this information is revolutionary in nature. Its purpose is to help you ensure your foundation is solid and complete.



Introduction

So You Want to Be a Virtual Assistant

The virtual assistant industry is growing rapidly. Just about anyone can say they are a virtual assistant. You have a computer, internet access, and the desire to work from home. Voila! You're a virtual assistant.

But is that enough to succeed as a virtual assistant? Do you have what it takes to run a business?

Yes, a virtual assistant is a business owner. Successful business owners need to have good business sense. As a business owner, you, the virtual assistant, need to understand what it takes to run a business.

Running a successful business entails a variety of tasks. Just some of the things you want to consider when running a business as a virtual assistant are:

- Business plans and mission statements
- How to read and understand profit and loss statements
- Set rates and revenue goals
- Do you need to hire a business coach, tax accountant or attorney?
- Create action plans and branding strategies
- Follow a code of ethics
- Business licensing
- Contracts
- Insurance
- Client file structure
- Project tracking
- Time management

Of course, you'll need the actual administrative skills clients will expect from a virtual assistant (or any assistant, for that matter.) While this book isn't about those skills, we're

including a short and certainly incomplete list of things we'd consider essential for any VA.

- Excellent spelling, punctuation and grammar. Not just good. If you're not exceptional, you'll struggle.
- A professionally designed website. Joel does web development for a living. He knows that, while your neighbor's nephew or niece can build your website, they aren't necessarily going to create the most search-engine and user friendly, easily-maintained professional presence for you.
- A place to work undisturbed when necessary. Your clients do not want to picture you working in your jammies at home, even if they know that's what you're doing.
- A reliable computer not shared by other family members. You don't want your significant other or the kids wreaking havoc, even accidentally, with your clients' files and your hard work.
- Reliable internet access. Otherwise, you're not virtual.
- A reliable printer. Color laser printers are inexpensive enough that, if you're buying something new, that's a good option. Another option would be an all-in-one device: printer, scanner, fax and copier.
- Reliable phone service—preferably with cheap long distance. You'll be on the phone a lot. You don't want to spend a fortune on long distance, and you don't want to be worried about the cost if your client needs time to chat.
- Dependable transportation—virtual sometimes includes driving to the post office, the office supply store, and whatnot.
- Basic knowledge of email
- Word processing software—preferably Microsoft Word; whether or not it's the best, it is the industry standard.
- Spreadsheet software—again, Microsoft's Excel is what most folks use.

- Time-tracking ability—your accounting software, Excel, something more than notes on a scrap of paper.
- Reliable local print shop—printing is a professional job; don't assume you can fill your clients' print needs unless that's your profession.
- Business cards
- Letterhead—you're a professional; look like one.
- Know how to create a business letter
- A tool to create PDFs (Adobe's portable document format)—there are free tools at Adobe's site (<http://www.adobe.com/acom/createpdf/>) for one-off needs, and inexpensive tools like PDF995 (<http://pdf995.com/>) which are adequate. You probably don't need the expensive Adobe Acrobat software. The Adobe Reader, which is free, allows you to view PDFs, but not create them.
- A business checking account. This is separate from your personal checking account. That's why they're named the way they are.
- Accounting software for invoicing—whether you use an online service or software on your computer, tracking your own income and expenses and creating client invoices can get very complicated if you don't have the right tool to manage the process.
- Meet any legal requirements for operating a business where you live. Will you need a business license? Will you need a license to operate a business from your home? Do you need to file a fictitious business name statement? Find out what the requirements are where you live. Some places, they're minimal. Other places, you can be in serious trouble if you don't cross all the Ts and dot all the Is.

Optional and Advanced

These tools and services are nice to have; many are free. We use them all.

- PayPal account—Once upon a time PayPal (<https://www.paypal.com/>) was the unwanted step-child of the credit card world. These days, most folks don't think twice about using it. We receive just as many payments via PayPal as we do by check.
- A toll-free phone number—It's cheap. You can get a toll-free number for about \$10/month most places. Ours includes enough minutes that we rarely pay anything additional. Don't make your clients pay for phone calls. (Another fun thing: most phone companies are willing to spend some time helping you find a 'vanity' number, one that spells something. We just recently got the toll-free number 877.3 BIZBA6—prefix, a single number, and our business name. Pretty cool.)
- Online file transfer—Fast internet access is becoming the norm. Rather than waiting for a CD in the mail, transfer even very large files online. Box.net (<http://box.net/>) has a free version, and inexpensive paid versions. If you have a friendly helpful webmaster, they can set up something similar which would have little or no ongoing cost.
- Internet phone—Skype (<http://www.skype.com/>) allows you to use your computer or a regular phone to make phone calls over the internet instead of a regular phone service. A single monthly fee for all your calls, local, long distance, or international. GoogleTalk (<http://www.google.com/talk/>) is free, and allows you to use your computer's microphone and speakers or a headset to talk to other GoogleTalk users.

- Jing (<http://www.jingproject.com/>) is a great tool for creating tutorials and demos. Start it up and do a screen and audio capture from your computer. Show a client how to do something, once, and they can watch the file and listen to your explanation as many times as they need to.
- Digital faxing—eFax (<http://www.efax.com/>) gives you a real fax number folks can use, and you'll receive an emailed PDF of the fax. For a fee, you can use them for outgoing faxes as well. Your own fax machine is the best option, but eFax is a viable alternative.
- Digital signatures—Echo Sign (<http://www.echosign.com/>) is an easy-to-use system which uses email and digital encryption to allow you and a client to sign documents without having to wait while paper is shuffled back and forth through the mail.

Yes, it's a lot. You may have good reasons why some of it's unnecessary. But remember that a prospect who's looking for just the right VA may assume you have the list of basics above, and might just assume you have some of the advanced stuff, too. Don't risk disappointment if you don't have to. If you have any questions or comments on this list, we'd love to discuss it—it's one reason our contact information is at the back of this book.

"For those of you looking to launch a VA practice (or any business, for that matter!), spend as much time delving into business development as you do learning technology and perfecting your service offerings." ~ Rachel Rasmussen, Rescue Desk, LLC

Business Owner vs. Employee

A virtual assistant is no longer an employee. A VA is a business owner. The service we offer is virtual assistance. But our title really is Owner. In order to be taken more seriously, many virtual assistants give themselves a title that reflects the

fact that we are business owners and not just 'assistants'. My title is Virtual Office Administrator. Others call themselves Internet Marketing Strategists or create a title that reflects their skill set.

The point is that a virtual assistant is a business owner. When you think of yourself as a business owner, your actions will reflect that and your clients will respect you as a business owner.

"I believe one of the things it takes to succeed as a virtual assistant is a total mindset change. After working in the corporate world for years, it is tough to get out of the employee mindset and into the business owner mindset. And not everyone is destined to be a business owner. You have to weigh the pros and cons, then determine if it's right for you. Once you have made that determination, then comes hard work and persistence." ~ Vickie Turley, A Balanced Alternative

"Owning and running a business is not for the faint of heart. But with dedication, commitment, and enthusiasm it will be one of the most rewarding adventures you'll ever undertake." ~ Rachel Rasmussen, Rescue Desk, LLC

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About the authors

Joel D Canfield is a web application developer turned business consultant. He's written two more business books, *49 Commonsense Business Observations*, a 109-page introduction to his peculiar style of business thinking, and *The Commonsense Entrepreneur*, a fuller treatment of the subject of his first book. It's also the origin of much of the material in this book.



Joel has successfully operated his own small businesses during the past 25 years and worked with and for service related small businesses for over 30 years. He has experience on the front line in customer service and service implementation, and in virtually all aspects of the back office: accounting, management, credit and collections, data entry, information technology, labor, design, and facilities/maintenance. In addition, he is a digital coach, helping people of all kinds to get the most from technology without becoming a slave to it.

As if that weren't enough, he is also, in no discernable order: a husband, father of seven, musician and songwriter, and a genuinely polite person. Oh, and he wants to live in the west of Ireland someday.

If you have comments or questions or would like to see how Joel can help your small business, he'd love to hear from you.

Sue L Canfield has done lots of stuff. She's smart, hardworking, and has great legs. Among other things.



Her professional business experience as an Administrative Assistant began in 1994, working for a local office supply store. Since then she has worked in several different industries including the automotive, real estate, and Internet industries.

As General Manager of Joel's business since 2003, her responsibilities include all accounting tasks, appointment setting, creating proposals, assisting with website design and creating web-based tools for small businesses.

As a virtual office administrator, her mission is to partner with her clients, helping them save time and money by providing administrative and marketing support. Working together they create and implement strategies to promote their businesses. Values of sincere interest, reliability, high integrity and remarkable service motivate clients to refer her services to others.

Her hobbies include poetry, reading, planning a move to Ireland someday, and spending time with friends and family.