



On The Go, Job In Tow

By Kathie Hightower and Holly Scherer

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"I knew I wanted to work from home and be available for my kids."

That thought, expressed by Air Force spouse Charlotte Lingard-Young, is echoed by many military spouses and a key reason often cited when starting a virtual assistant business.

Lingard-Young's business, [C.Y. Virtual Solutions](#), puts her background in healthcare and master's degree in applied psychology to work for her clients performing Internet research, general and psychiatric transcription, and other services.

Army spouse Jeri Winkler combines a computer science degree with real estate experience in her virtual business, [The Secret Assistant](#). She provides real estate professionals with everything from database management to prospecting to website maintenance. Her familiarity with popular real estate software programs allows her to handle time-consuming office tasks from a distance.

Air Force spouse Janelle Davis combines a law degree and experience in commercial litigation and appeals to provide motion and brief preparations for her clients.

Virtual assistants are home-based entrepreneurs who run their own shows, offering business support services to other businesses via e-mail, phone and fax. Clearly, virtual assistant businesses cover a wide range of specialties.

Chris Durst and Michael Haaren, co-founders of Staffcentrix, have trained, taught or mentored more than 3,800 virtual assistants around the world. In their book, "The Two-Second Commute: Join the Exploding Ranks of Freelance Virtual Assistants," Durst and Haaren identify more than 80 varieties of expertise, ranging from basic word processing to high-end corporate consulting.

Many specialties listed in the book seem tailor-made for the background and experience of military spouses: event planning, expertise in foreign markets, interpreting, import/export support, non-profit support services, government procurement expertise, resume writing, fundraising and more.

Staffcentrix's Portable Career and Virtual Assistant Training Program™, geared specifically to military spouses, kicked off in 2002 with a pilot program at Cannon Air Force Base through
call forwarding & more.

support of the Air Force Aid Society. Since then, Staffcentrix has provided programs to many other military sites. Its train-the-trainer program certifies spouse employment professionals from all services. The military spouse virtual assistant community now numbers more than 2,300.

Eighty-nine percent of spouses who launched a virtual assistant business reported improved quality of life, according to a 2004 Staffcentrix survey. As one spouse said, "Our quality of life on the relationship front has always been solid but, when it came to career and finances, I was on a downhill slide while he was working his way up through the ranks. Now I am the 'general' of my own business, and the self-confidence I have gained through this experience has only helped me feel more supportive of his career. Yes, I was a wee bit envious of him before."

Recipe For Success

Of course, a virtual assistant business isn't for everyone. As Durst says, "The failure rate of small businesses is quite high and, unfortunately, a failed business can have a negative impact on a family's finances, time and quality of life. For the business owner, the failure can cause damage to self-esteem that can take a long time to overcome."

The first step of the Staffcentrix program is a thorough assessment of potential candidates to see if they have what it takes to succeed.

"The ideal candidate," according to Durst, "possesses a strong entrepreneurial aptitude, solid skills that can be performed virtually, a good knowledge of the Internet and how to use it for sending and receiving work, the ability to communicate effectively in writing, and 'fire in the belly' - that drive to make things happen in spite of hurdles that may stand in one's path."

You also need self-discipline, strong time management and organization, attention to detail and follow-through, networking ability and marketing ability - it's crucial to know how to sell yourself.

Another key requirement is family support. As Lingard-Young points out, "You must have your family on board with the idea. You will need time and space to work, and they will have to understand that."

Advantages To Military Spouses And Clients

"The advantage is you can work anywhere, anytime, for anyone," says Lingard-Young. "The business can be wherever you are and can move when you move."

Evy Packard-Williams is an Army spouse who focuses her [virtual assistant business](#) on marketing, desktop publishing and professional writing services. After years in the corporate world, she appreciates the flexibility this business provides: "I love being able to take the time my family needs and work when I can. I can work early in the morning or late at night if I have to."

The advantage to your clients is that they are spared overhead expenses such as rent, hardware and software. They pay no benefits; they pay only for hours worked. Some clients appreciate the fact that work can be completed in another time zone while they are sleeping, and others enjoy having a "satellite office" in another state or country.

And Disadvantages?

But if you aren't careful, the business can take over your life. As Davis says, "The key advantage to a virtual business is staying home with my daughter and setting my own hours... and the main challenge of this business is working at home with my daughter."

Other virtual assistants echo this sentiment. Lingard-Young says, "My biggest challenge is being able to balance my time so that my work does not take over all of my time with my kids - the main reason I decided to stay home."

As Durst points out, "Contrary to popular belief, self-employment doesn't mean you'll have more free time. On the contrary, you'll usually have less, especially in the startup phase."

And there is the boss issue. Every client you have is, in effect, a new boss. At the same time, you have another boss who never leaves you alone - you! As Durst says, "This new boss will follow you everywhere - the house, the car, the store - even the shower!"

Finding clients is challenging enough, but convincing some of them to pay on time is even more problematic. Furthermore, some of your work cannot be billed to a client. From accounting to learning new software to marketing, you do a lot of unpaid work.

Although your virtual assistant business is movable, it may prove challenging to continue effectively during an actual move. Winkler has moved her business three times since 2001.

"The first move was a nightmare and cost me a client," she says. "I thought I could handle the daily workload and the move at the same time, but faced Internet connection problems as we traveled cross country." Winkler has since learned to hire other virtual assistants to continue her work during a move.

As the industry grows, new services are providing marketing help. Staffcentrix and other associations, such as the REVA (Real Estate Virtual Assistants) network, provide requests for proposals (RFPs) from clients looking to hire virtual assistants for specific kinds of work.

Winkler's best source of clients is referrals from a national real estate organization. Lingard-Young's top source is RFPs from Staffcentrix and Guru.com. A broadcast fax to fellow Chamber of Commerce members produced one long-term client for Packard-Williams and other clients coming through referrals. Davis got her first client by dropping off her resume at a law office, and more clients have come through word of mouth.

Winkler believes it's important to have a great website and to "talk about your business to everyone."

Many virtual assistants find their businesses immediately profitable if they already have the necessary computer equipment, fax, phone lines, high speed Internet access and software. Others put their profits back into the business, get a loan or add personal money to the business while they build a client base. Virtual assistants charge between \$19-\$34 per hour for general administrative support and up to \$50 per hour for specialized services.

Is the challenge worth it? "It is for me," says Packard-Williams. "I love the freedom, flexibility and creativity of working on my own. I get to help provide an income, do work that I truly

enjoy and take the time necessary for my family!"

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© 2005, Kathie Hightower and Holly Scherer. Military spouses Kathie and Holly are co-authors of "Help! I'm a Military Spouse - I Want a Life Too: How to Craft a Life for YOU as You Move With the Military." In future issues, they plan to explore careers in financial services, legal services, federal government, DoD contracting, network marketing and more. If you have a question or a story to share, contact them at kathie@jumpintolife.net.

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Online Resources for Virtual Assistants

[International Virtual Assistants Association](#)

[Military Spouse Virtual Assistants](#)

[REVA Network \(Real Estate Virtual Assistants\)](#)

[Staffcentrix](#)

[Work-the-Web.com](#)
