

Virtual necessity

For new businesses, a virtual assistant can be cost-effective

By Sylver McLaren
Journal staff writer

She had three young kids and had just moved across the country when she and her husband split up.

"It was 1996 and I found myself a single mom of three, 3,000 miles away from friends and family and I had no emotional support. Worse, I had no job," says South Surrey businessperson Tawnya Sutherland.

She was working as a virtual assistant (VA) long before recognizing it and long before becoming known as the Donald Trump of VA. Offering administrative support to businesses virtually from her home materialized from a combination of necessity and from drawing on her administrative background in order to the pay rent and not pay day care expenses.

"I decided offering my skills virtually may be the answer. Becoming a VA led me through a series of choices that created an incredible lifestyle," says Ms. Sutherland.

"How do you like my commute?" she says heading up the stairs from the living room. Her home-based office has everything she needs to run her VA business, which has grown to include a forum, a VA business start-up system, newsletters and among other innovative services, hosting and producing the internet radio show, The VA Talk Show.

The hard part at first she said, was the lack of "water cooler" time.

"You know, the bits of conversation



Tawnya Sutherland has created a huge virtual assistant network, in addition to her own business. Sylver McLaren Photo

throughout the day with friends and colleagues whom you can relate to, both professionally and personally. Sometimes you just want to talk shop."

So in 2003, Ms. Sutherland developed the Virtual Assistant Networking Association (VANA), which is now the largest on-line forum for established and

aspiring VAs worldwide, with 7,100 active members using the free resource.

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Using a VA helps control start-up costs

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"This was my way of filling the void. I had no place to go to be with like minded people when I started out,"

It also felt good to reach out to other working mothers and offer them hope, advice, critical business information and companionship, things Ms. Sutherland says she wishes she had when starting out.

VAs are sometimes mistaken for simply home-based secretaries, however, they are largely executive-level independent entrepreneurs providing administration, creative, managerial, technical, office and personal support services from their own using the latest available technology.

A VA is not a tele-commuting employee, but a business owner who provides services for a fee or retainer.

By using equipment like the phone, fax, and email, as well as specialized or niche technologies, VAs can support client's and their businesses without ever having step foot inside the offices.

New technology makes an impact on how companies conduct their business. Business owners are continuously looking for ways to manage their companies smoothly and efficiently. Hiring a VA, who owes, and knows how to use, the latest software or component creates the opportunity for businesses to modernize without footing the bill for (sometimes) - expensive emerging technologies and for the expenses associated with training staff to use it. Upgrading technologies can be

expensive and time consuming.

VAs can help businesses grow and operate on a more proficient level using their different skill sets or technological niches. They will be able to assist and advise you on administrative matters, bookkeeping, scheduling and client contact, or other more-specialized support such as Web site maintenance and market research...matters pertaining to Marketing, Branding, Web Design and e-commerce.

As an independent business owner themselves, a VA understands the challenges involved with running a business. They invest in their businesses; they have the components and software needed to complete projects - saving their client from having to buy for every new project.

A VA takes care of all their overhead costs. As a worldwide organization, VA's have a resource pool available to call upon. If there is a time constraint, they have access to numerous connections who can be called upon to complete the job.

And commuting is never a problem with a VA. The work will get done even during the worst weather, traffic accident or clogged-bridge incident.

Technology has brought skilled people out of the office and back into their homes. For some, it's a matter of choice, for others, like Ms. Sutherland, it was a matter of necessity. Either way, the VA is just a phone call - or text, or email, or page, or sms, or webcam away.