

# Virtual Assistants Are an Effective Outsourcing Solution

By Edward Poll



Law firms of every size and lawyers in every practice area face increasing client pressure to build greater value and increased efficiency into the legal services cost structure. In particular, sole practitioners and small firms (which according to the American Bar Association account for 90 percent of the 1.1 million U.S. lawyers) are often reluctant to take on full-time administrative help because of the cost of payroll and benefits and the time needed to get an assistant up to speed. As a result, the concept of administrative service outsourcing is growing in popularity. The principle of outsourcing is fundamental: lawyers do what they do best—practice law—and let others do what they do best, most efficiently and at the least cost to the client.

Large firms frequently outsource such administrative services as records management, transcription, research, document review, patent searches, data entry and billing. Often the outsourcing is to employees of large organizations located throughout the U.S. and as far away as the Caribbean or India, all linked to the law firm through high-speed Internet connections. Because it involves high volume commoditized services, this is typically not an option for sole practitioners or small firms. These lawyers will find virtual assistants (VAs) to be a far more viable outsourcing solution.

## Defining VAs

VAs are paralegals or administrative specialists who work offsite and online, creating work product tailored to the firm's specifications and practice. Technology allows access to such services without hiring a person to work full time on the lawyer's payroll. As an independent business owner, the VA is neither employee nor subordinate. VAs more closely resemble an accountant or any other business consultant with whom the lawyer has an ongoing, collaborative relationship. They become familiar with the practice and attuned to its business needs as much as any service provider engaged for a substantial length of time. Virtual assistants are an outsourcing strategy that can give lawyers the best of all solutions to the need for help. Lawyers

get a professional team member selected to specific criteria, attuned to the business and professional needs of the practice. Lawyers using VAs are relieved of the cost that in-house staff can represent, and are freed to do more client representation and business development.

### Selection Criteria

Virtual assistants should be selected like any other professional service provider. It is important to ensure that the VA has the technical skill and sophistication to conduct an effective online business relationship and is not just working part-time or providing an incomplete service package. Such factors as these should be taken into account when making a choice:

- An informative, well constructed Web site as evidence that the VA has the technical skill and sophistication to conduct an effective online business relationship.
- A personal consultation, face-to-face or by phone, in which the VA should be willing to provide information on qualifications and professional references.
- A successful business track record of at least two to three years.
- A realistic cost structure that avoids both inappropriately low rates (which can signal a lack of business sense or a part-time focus) and rates too high to accommodate the firm's own cost structure while providing value to clients.

In addition to these business considerations, VAs should have specific professional qualifications. A paralegal should have credentials from an accredited educational institution, and should demonstrate knowledge of local rules regarding court and civil procedure in addition to practical legal insights. Depending on the need, a

VA paralegal can also be expected to prepare documents for various proceedings (summons, complaints, motions), summarize depositions and conduct research. An administrative VA should demonstrate the ability to organize documents and chronologies and create and maintain client files.

A virtual assistant should be able to conduct all these activities electronically from a remote location. That assumes and requires compatible email, word processing, document management and database capabilities. If the firm's word processing system is WordPerfect, engaging a VA who works only in Word can create far too many complications. The same is true for other software products: Excel versus Lotus, Quicken versus QuickBooks. There are, of course, other document exchange tools—fax, overnight courier, even surface mail. But effective electronic integration is a must.

### Making the Choice

The IRS has very clear guidelines to determine whether a service provider is an employee for federal tax purposes. These require having independent control of the work process and not relying on the employer for direction about how a task should be done. To realize the financial advantages of a VA relationship, ensure that the person engaged is an independent contractor—not just a temporary or part-time assistant.

Temps can be a viable solution to personnel needs, but for anything other than the most basic clerical assistance, firms are wise to work with an agency specializing in temporary legal personnel. The agency can provide a temporary on a long-term basis, known as “temp to perm.”

It is essential that lawyers and law firms understand what their needs are and what it takes to meet them in order to find the best VA outsourcing solution. The selection decision itself is ultimately a matter of evaluation and compatibility, just as in forming any professional relationship. The firm must be honest about its requirements for integrity, initiative, professionalism and technical skills, and be sure to check out all references and credentials of the candidates before making the decision final. It is also worthwhile to seek information and assistance from relevant professional organizations such as the Virtual Assistant Networking Association and the Virtual Assistant Chamber of Commerce. Both are at the same Web site, [www.virtualassistantnetworking.com](http://www.virtualassistantnetworking.com). Such investigation is essential because the goal of the virtual assistant relationship is to give the firm a competitive advantage while enhancing services to clients. The outsourcing relationship with a professional VA should create more than cost efficiencies—it should be the foundation of an effective team that enhances the practice.

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*Edward Poll is the author of 11 books, including the seminal works, *Attorney & Law Firm Guide to The Business of Law*, 2nd ed. (ABA), *Selling Your Law Practice: The Profitable Exit Strategy* and his newest, *Disaster Preparedness & Recovery Planning for Law Firms: A LawBiz Management Special Report*. You can reach him at [edpoll@lawbiz.com](mailto:edpoll@lawbiz.com) or (800) 837-5880. Visit his Web site, [www.lawbiz.com](http://www.lawbiz.com), to subscribe to his free monthly newsletter, *LawBiz Tips*, or his blog, [www.lawbizblog.com](http://www.lawbizblog.com).*

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