



8 Vital Steps to Kick Start YOUR Virtual Business

By Di Chapman

Owner - Becoming a Virtual Assistant

www.iceni-it.co.uk

Di Chapman is an award winning Virtual Worker who has practiced in both the UK and Europe. She won 2 awards for her innovation in E-Business specifically for her Virtual practice which she started in 2000. She is the co-owner of the free directory site for established Virtual Assistants, The Alliance of UK Virtual Assistants, which was also started in 2000 and has now started a resource site for new and aspiring Virtual Workers, <http://www.become-a-virtual-assistant.com>.

Di started her first business over 20 years ago and has a wealth of knowledge, having run courses for major UK Government Sponsored Small Business programmes as well as being one of the first IT Consultants to manage a training roll-out of Internet Explorer and Internet training in the UK, being in charge of the training and writing the material. She was also a beta tester for MSN for over a year before it was launched to the public on a 14.4 dial-in modem.

This book is designed and written for you, if you are thinking of becoming a Virtual Worker or have just started your VA Practice. Most of the content of the book is also suitable for any home based business that will be run via the Internet. There is also a resource site to support this book www.iceni-it.co.uk. The title of the site is '**Becoming a Virtual Assistant**' which hopefully says it all.

We look forward to welcoming you to a fast growing, exciting profession. It is hard work, giving you the freedom to decide what hours you work and as you build your practice, how much you earn. As with any business, you only get out what you put in.

Table of Contents

8 Vital Steps to Kick Start YOUR Virtual Business.....	4
1. Are you Virtual Worker Material?	4
2. How to Get Advice.....	5
3. The Basic Business Tools	5
4. Establishing Your Virtual Business Presence	9
5. Defining Your Skills	12
6. Building Your Portfolio	14
7. First Steps in Networking and Marketing	15
8. Leaving the most important till last?.....	16
Coming soon	16
The Definitive Virtual Workers Guide	16
Your help.....	17

Copyright © 2006 by Di Chapman & Becoming a Virtual Assistant, <http://www.iceni-it.co.uk>.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from the Author. Please see permissions in box above. Please see permission box above.

The information in this e-book is intended for educational purposes only.

Limits of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty:

This publication is designed to provide competent and reliable information regarding the subject matters covered. However, it is published with the understanding that the author is not engaged in rendering legal, financial, accounting or other professional services. Laws and practices often vary from country to country and if legal or other expert assistance is required, the services of a professional should be sought. The author specifically disclaims any liability that is incurred from the use or application of the contents of this book.

The author of this book has used their best efforts in preparing this book. The author makes no representation or warranties with respect to the accuracy, applicability, fitness, or completeness of the contents of this program. They disclaim any warranties (expressed or implied), merchantability, or fitness for a particular purpose. The author shall in NO event be held liable for any loss or other damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential or other damages. As always, the advice of a competent legal, tax, accounting or other professional should be sought. The author does not warrant the performance, effectiveness or applicability of any sites listed in this book. All links are for informational purposes only and are not warranted for content, accuracy or any other implied or explicit purpose.

This manual/text contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorised reprint or use of this material is prohibited.

8 Vital Steps to Kick Start YOUR Virtual Business

1. Are you Virtual Worker Material?

What does it take?

If you can work on your own and use your initiative to get yourself out of unexpected situations then working remotely **could** be for you. There are virtual 'water coolers' where you can contact other virtual assistants to help you but mainly you are on your own with your client.

Are you willing to take responsibility for your own destiny? All small business owners have to do this and this involves sorting your admin outside working hours – unless of course you outsource that side of your business.

Can you ignore other people's comments (including your family) when you say '**I am working**' and they just think you are 'doing a bit of surfing'?

If you can answer **Yes** to all of the above – then working virtually – being a VA could be for you.

How do you get going?

You may plan your start or you may find you need to start to support yourself in a sudden emergency. My start was an emergency as my husband was told he would never walk again (wrongly thankfully) and I had to give up my consulting work and stay at home to look after him.

Before I could even start to call my friends and colleagues, an ex boss called me to ask if I could do some work for the Lord Chancellors Office in the UK. I explained the situation and he came back to me and said that I could I write a Risk Register database from home, I bit his hand off 😊.

Suddenly I found I was a virtual worker and my career had begun. I then started to put my details in on-line directories as there were not any public Virtual Worker directories in the UK at that time. I almost immediately got a job from one of those. I joined breakfast meeting clubs and attended every networking meeting I could find. This was in 2000 and today in another country I am still working for one client I met when networking. Actually I brought all my clients to France with me except one who needed a physical presence in the UK. Today I am in the lucky situation of getting my work via referrals but it has taken 6 years to get to that stage.

If you have time to plan your start you will be able to organise your office and get your portfolio prepared. You can get up and running from zero, you just have to be prepared to get on the phone to anyone you know who might give you work. Don't give them a sob story, give them a good reason to use you for support – that they already know how good you are and as a self employed VA you will save them money and time. While you do the admin for x an hour, they can earn y.

2. How to Get Advice

Free advice

Most areas have centres where you can go for advice if you are thinking of starting up a business. The names will vary depending on country so you will need to look in your local telephone book or check on the Internet.

In the UK there are various courses/seminars for start-up businesses from Business Link, Chambers of Commerce, local Enterprise Centres, E-Biz clubs and town, county or government subsidised organisations.

You also get to meet new business owners who may want to use your services.

Some colleges run business start-up courses which are inexpensive thanks to grants from various bodies. It is difficult to be specific as they change on a regular basis but there should be somewhere in your area where you can go for advice.

Paid for advice

It is a good idea to get advice from an accountant and also a legal expert. Many specialists will give you a free initial consultation and you may well need an accountant to submit your end-of-year tax returns.

It would not have been possible for me to move my business to another country without the help of an accountant who has been a mine of information on other matters as well.

On a final note, we have a fantastic, designated person, who looks after our banking needs. She and her predecessors have gone out of their way to make things easy for us. This has been invaluable and something I wish had been available to me when I first started working for myself. It is not free as the bank charges business clients but very cost effective when you need help and know that there is almost a 'one stop shop'.

3. The Basic Business Tools

Office – Home or Away

Your first decision is where you are going to work. Most Virtual Workers work from home, in a room or part of a room. Working in part of a room is not ideal but if that is where you have to start it is acceptable. Everyone needs to realise that you are working and will not stop for a chat on the phone/Internet during your set working hours.

I regard my office as a place of work. I set my hours and when I am not working for a client I am working on my business.

Some VAs have such large practices that they work from offices; thus allowing them to employ staff. This is a different business model and not something that I personally would want to do. Some areas offer cost effective, subsidised office space. This allows the new business to start with a receptionist and other equipment they would not normally have at home.

If you work from home you will have to inform your insurance company as your household insurance could be invalidated if you do not do this.

When you hear that Virtual Workers can work from anywhere you obviously think that there must be some limit and of course there must, but I would like to tell you a little story.

We moved into a renovation – huge, 4 walls and a roof, a sort of bathroom and amazingly an internet connection as this was in the back of beyond. The bathroom was removed but the plastic garden gazebo that covered it was left – this in a barn with no doors in the winter. I set up office, had a heater at each knee and on some days wore almost every item of clothing not packed away. My clients did not suffer and the work was done. It was not something I would like to repeat but even today I have to vacuum out the PCs as work continues and dust and dirt are still being produced.

To work in difficult circumstances can be done, it requires a lot of dedication but then working from home needs a certain mindset.

Hardware

You will need a computer and peripherals. The choice is between a PC and an Apple. If you will be working on clients documents it is worth realising that they are not 100% compatible. I personally always have two working PCs as my business depends on my being able to work every day. If you want an Apple get a cheap PC as a backup and network the two together.

You will need a printer. If you are going to do a lot of printing a laser printer is the cheapest option. If you intend to do colour printing for clients consider a colour laser or a good inkjet printer. I have a laser and an old inkjet.

I do not send printed material to clients but do have to print out very large documents to proof them (300 pages+). I have an elderly inkjet as a backup (I think you are going to get used to the word **backup** – it is one of the most important words to ensure continuity of your business).

You will need an Internet Connection. It is best if this is a high speed connection but I worked with a dial-in connection of 14.4 kbps for many years when I first started working via the net. It is possible to work with a dial-in connection, you just have to be patient and make sure you do not take on work which requires you to send and receive huge files.

You will need a shredder. You will be printing out a lot of client work even if only to proof or check how it looks on paper. I print out e-mails with specific instructions to go in the clients file. When you are finished with this paper it should be shredded as should any personal or business papers relating to your business that you no longer need.

You may need a scanner. I used to do a lot of scanning and still do some as we keep scanned copies of forms etc for the business. I bought a top end multi-page scanner 5 years ago and it is still going strong. Most scanners come with OCR (Optical Character Recognition) software and this enables you to scan and put the text into a word processor.

You WILL need some method of backing up your work. You can do this via CD, DVD or one of the companies that back-up via the Internet. I

deal in large files and the Internet method would be far too costly for me so I backup to DVD.

You should have an Uninterruptible Power Supply. Many people confuse these with surge protectors. They have surge protection built in but do far more. Your telephone/Internet line can go via most of them so that is protected as well. With the built in battery power, if you have a power failure you have enough time to save and close your work before powering down your system in a controlled manner.

I once had a lightning strike and everything was through the UPS except an old PC which was not connected to the Internet. Everything else was OK except the hard disk on the old PC which was damaged beyond repair. I now run one UPS per PC.

As a side issue, the old PC was a Dell. As I powered up the PC the next day it came up with a message saying that the hard disk was badly damaged and should be backed up immediately. I did this and within a week it had died totally. Now I have nothing to do with Dell apart from buying their products and this I do to the extent that both my main PCs are Dell and I would probably buy a laptop if I needed a new one from them.

Software

Your **operating system** will probably depend on the age of your PC as most people stick with the system on the computer they purchase. I use XP Professional™ as the operating system and Microsoft Office Professional 2003™ as my main base software.

If you are going to be offering services that use this and other software you will need to ensure that you have the latest copy. It is not possible to run a software based business if you have an older copy than your client.

Keep all your disks and registration documentation somewhere safe. If you use downloaded software (more and more software is being delivered this way) you need to keep all your records so that you can contact the company and reinstall in the event of a hard disk or computer failure.

If you are not going to be producing files for your client, there is nothing stopping you using free products which you can download from the Internet. If you are going to be updating or sending clients files which they will then work on in Office then I am afraid you will need to bite the bullet and buy it.

One piece of software I would not be without is Adobe Acrobat Professional. I use this all the time. I can PDF almost anything that appears on my screen and send it to the client. If they use a different system I can send them a PDF of how it looks in Windows or in a particular browser without them having to have this on their system. More and more of my clients send me files to turn into PDF's. It is an expensive item of software but for me well worth it as it far exceeds the free or similar cut price products you can download. You can also use Acrobat on-line if you are in the US and this is a good way of paying for the product per item instead of buying the whole package.

Office Equipment

You need a good office chair which is adjustable. This is not a 'when you can afford it' item, it is a NOW item. You can do irreparable damage using a PC for a long time with a chair and desk that you cannot adjust.

I also have a desk with adjustable legs – expensive?, well I bought both the chair and desk from a company closing down sale in 1999 and they were both fairly new and very inexpensive second hand and very expensive when new. I know what they cost as I used to work for the company. I still use them today.

I have a second desk and chair as my husband is a trained accountant and sometimes works on the network or the Internet when I am working.

The desks have drawers with hanging files, they are fantastic. I keep all my current client files in these drawers and if a client phones I can grab them without getting out of my chair. With VOIP and cheap or fixed monthly rates for International calls, no client is too far away for a phone call. I keep SKYPE running as many of my clients have that also.

Specialist Equipment

You may need a laminator or other hardware depending on the type of work you are going to offer. If the client wants an expensive piece of equipment situated at your location you need to ensure that they supply it and insure it.

Try not to spend too much at the beginning. It is tempting to go and buy the latest expensive mobile phone or a Blackberry so that you can keep in touch while away from the office. I used to work with a client who left a message on her office phone saying when she would return to the office and asking for a message to be left, she never gave her mobile number to any clients – it was not necessary.

Imagine this – you live in a very remote location, by some miracle you have a fast Internet connection (the next town does not – so it really is a miracle). You have a normal phone line and a VOIP line plus SKYPE. What you do not have is any form of mobile phone service unless you leave your stone house and go outside and then the service is very flaky. What do you do?

Well what I do is save the money I would spend on a mobile phone and simply do not have one on contract. You can live without one, it is possible. I was one of those who had a very early mobile phone (or brick) and travelled a lot so could not do without it. I became addicted – then moved to a remote wooded area without a service and very quickly I stopped being addicted and found I had a little more money every month. I use this to buy learning materials so that I can extend my skill base offering to my clients. If I go on a long journey I just buy a cheap 'top-up' card for the time I will be away.

Using your local copy or print shop

Go to your local copy shop and take note of the services they offer, take a price list and keep it in a handy place. If you are asked to do a large mail-

shot or print and bind manuals you will probably find that they can do it far cheaper than you.

They will also do a professional job so you have no worries there. You will need to add in the time for organising the work and taking it to and from the copy shop.

I even turned the local copy shop into a client referrer. I gave them work and they took on work they knew I could cover and subcontracted it out to me – everyone is someone to market to - never forget that.

4. Establishing Your Virtual Business Presence

Your Business Name

This is very important for more than one reason.

Your business name is a reflection of your business

If you are unsure what I mean by that, let us take some examples

- Pixie Fairy Virtual Assistant
- Hooley Virtual Bookkeeping Services

Which one is the bookkeeping business? Which one is the business????????

Another example is your site description or your business description

- Mommys working site
- WAHM Advice Services
- Advice Services for Work At Home Parents

Only one of the above three would probably make sense outside the US or be regarded as a proper business name. Being virtual means you can work anywhere and so you need to be very careful that you have a neutral or specific business name. What works in one country does not work in another – you only have to look at these two words, rubber and Sellotape – in the UK a rubber is what other countries call an eraser and Sellotape is similar to Scotch Tape, used to mend tears in paper or stick items together, no playgroup would be without it. Check your name and description on the internet and in dictionaries for meaning, you might just be surprised.

My business name is Icenit. It has been running for about 20 years and has had various spin-offs. I have kept the base business name as I am well known by this business name. If I was starting again I would get a business name that was specific to my business niche.

Website

Every Virtual Worker needs a website, you can't be Virtual without one

This may seem a very 'in your face' statement, but it is true. I have had a lot of work from my website; it is somewhere to send prospective clients so they can see exactly who I am and what I do. This 'warms up' the client and makes it easier for them to agree to work remotely with you.

Don't use free sites with adverts all over them if you are trying to sell yourself and your business. It is worth paying for something that reflects your professionalism.

Blogs

An alternative to having a website is having a blog. I am not at all sure how well this would work for a VA or small service company but it is free.

You can go to www.blogger.com and start a free blog. There are free instructions and tutorials on the Internet to help you get started. You still have to get your clients to visit your blog and while Blogger is free it does not look like a website and does not have pages as a conventional website does BUT it does get you a virtual presence.

For a complimentary copy of probably the best blogging book around, send an e-mail to va@iceni-it.co.uk with Blogging in the subject and we will send you the link to the book on our site. This page is in a secure area and is not generally available.

Domain name

You will need a domain name that is similar to your business name – it is a good idea to buy your domain name when you agree your business name so you know they are both the same.

Try to choose a name that sounds businesslike. You should buy the .com of your domain name. If you are based in another country that has its own extension you should buy that also.

Hosting

You will need professional hosting. If you only have a basic site you only need basic hosting so there is no point in paying for services that you will not need.

You will need some form of autoresponder so you can leave out of office messages when you are on vacation etc unless you can afford to have another VA cover for you.

Now I have more than one website I use autoresponders to let people know that I will get back to them within 24 or 48 hours depending on the site. My work site and Virtual Worker support site I monitor daily so there is no need for an autoresponder unless I know I will be out of the office for more than 24 hours.

I have found that hosting in the same time-zone that you live in is the best option. I have often had to deal with problems for clients whose hosting companies are in different continents. If the help-desk is only open when I am asleep it is almost impossible to get a speedy solution to a problem.

One hosting company I have dealt with has a turn around of almost a week if you use their on-line 'help desk'. This is just not supportive enough for me. I supply my clients with a help desk, me! They know I will sort out the problems and get back to them with regular updates, you should expect the same service.

Also make sure you have a person you can talk to if you want to do anything unusual or have queries about your site set-up. I have been asked to set up SQL databases and load scripts, if I have problems I know that I can pick up the phone and have immediate help. I have also had advice on how to deal with problems that arose when I used a third party autoresponder and lost my list, I wanted to take this 'in house' but did not think it was possible. Not only did they tell me which software to buy but helped me set it up via telephone.

If you live in Europe, I host my client's websites and offer a cost effective yearly payment service, <http://www.htmluk.com>.

Contents of your website

The contents of your website should be a minimum of the following:

- **Home page** - detailing your company
- **Services page** - detailing the services you offer
It is better if you can have more than one services page so a prospective client understands what you do and what you do not do.
- **About Us page** - detailing your skills, experience and any other information. List only **relevant** qualifications.
- **Contact Us page** – contact details. Putting a form on this page will allow the client to contact you directly.
- **Terms and Conditions page** – **you need to detail how you work and how you expect to be paid.**
- **Privacy page** – a privacy statement is becoming more and more important in certain countries, you should check to see if you need to put one up on your website. Clients like to know that their personal details are going to be kept private and this is reassuring. These details can be on the same page as the Terms and Conditions.

Some search engines look for a privacy policy.

- **Site Map** (this is important to help your Search Engine Ranking and to let your visitors find content easily).

DIY or professional – how do you want to appear?

You can **build your own website** using a word-processor or other non specialist package that saves to HTML. This will be fine if your clients only use Internet Explorer to view the pages but other browsers may well not show the pages as you expect or at all. Your site will also look 'home made' when you are trying to give a professional image.

Microsoft Front Page™ has always been a product of choice if you have the Office suite but Microsoft have said that they will discontinue it during 2006. Front Page does not write pure HTML and has unique code so again it may show very differently in different browsers. Many of us now use Firefox as the browser of preference so you should at least check your website in IE, Firefox, Netscape and Opera (but this can be buggy as I can

get different results with the same version of Opera running on the same version of XP looking at the same webpage on different PCs).

There are many HTML lessons on the Internet which you can take for free and you can then write the site in any text editor or freely downloadable HTML editor.

Professional packages such as Dreamweaver™ are fairly expensive but worth it if you are going to do more than one site. A new package on the market is far more cost effective and very easy to use – take a look at [XsitePro](#) – it even has videos to train you how to use it **before** you buy it.

It comes with ready built graphical templates – all you have to do is input the text and some graphics and you have a site. It is almost impossible to get a badly designed website with this product.

Have your website built by a professional website author. This will cost more than buying the software but a website can take a long time to write and you have to pay for the time it takes. This does mean that you will have a professional website but you will have to pay each time you want the website updated.

Your website is the public face of your business. When I started out the public face of my business had to be printed as there were no websites.

I had a designer design my company logo and business image. I then had business cards, headed paper, postcards, compliment slips, brochures and invoices printed. I then had my phone number changed by the telephone company – I was devastated.

The cost of the printing alone was more than I would now pay for a good website and there is nothing worse than seeing a brochure with little stickers on showing the change of phone number or address.

To update a website for a detail like this takes minutes and you can get business cards for the cost of postage from Vistaprint – www.vistaprint.com. I have used them for years.

Having a professionally designed and built website can make you money, having a badly designed, home-made site can cost you clients.

5. Defining Your Skills

List what you did before

Make a skills matrix for your own use - in a word processor or similar package.

List all the skills that you have gained during your paid and voluntary work. If you have any qualifications in any of them, put this by the side of the skill. Finally put the years that you have been doing this work by the side of this.

You now have a basis for the skills that you can offer clients. Never offer a client a cv, you are not looking for a job. Offer them a profile of your skills made up from the matrix but expressed as the '**Skills your company offers**' or a similar heading.

Basic Virtual Assistant services are office based skills. Most but not all VAs offer transcription or some sort of document production.

Transcription – digital

Most transcription undertaken by VAs today is digital. The files are sent via the net and the finished work is returned as a document.

You can either download the software and use 'hot keys' to start and stop the dictation or you can purchase a complete system with headset and foot pedal.

It is imperative that you have the software to read the clients files. You may also need software to take one type of output file and turn it into another that you can use.

Graphic Design

If you have experience of working with graphics or design you can offer this as a skill as well as the standard services. This type of work is always in demand.

Think about teaming up with a website author so that you can provide the graphics and they can build the website.

Offer to provide business graphics, business cards, headed paper and website graphics as a package – think of any way you can provide a service to your prospective clients.

Website Design and Build

If you are **qualified** to offer this service, this can be a very good add-on to general Virtual services. You should be able to produce a website to W3.org standards.

All clients want websites that will be found in the search engines. This requires skill and knowledge. It is best not to offer a skill that you are not fully conversant with as a website that cannot be found is not just useless, when your client realises this it can do you a great deal of damage.

Everything else that a business of any size might need

Look at your matrix. What can you offer; Marketing services, e-mail management, telephone answering or specialist advice?

Put these details in your Portfolio and on your website. Make sure clients know what you can offer. Be pro-active with your clients and over-deliver proving you have the skills to do other work for them.

Make it a habit to learn new skills. I download tutorials from the Internet, buy e-books and do whatever is necessary to ensure that I am up-to-date with technology – well I thought I was. Recently a client asked me to put a Podcast on his website.

I have put sound and video files on sites for a long time but I had never been asked to do this before. It was just a case of doing some research on the Internet and putting up the links. It did not take me very long to learn how to do it and next time I am asked I have it all written down and filed in a step-by-step guide.

6. Building Your Portfolio

Create a house style

Create or have created for you a specific style that you replicate on your website, business cards and other business documents.

If you have more than one business, you may want to have a different 'house style' for each. With modern technology this is not very difficult and you can quickly set up your documents in your word-processor.

Examples of your work (privacy)

If a client is unsure about using you, send or show them examples of similar work you have completed.

Be sure to remove any details that relate to other clients.

I used to have a complete set of business documents in a 'house style' that I invented. I would give this to people who were thinking about or had just started a new business. I had my logo as a water-mark behind every page and my copyright on the bottom of each page. This worked very well and I was not aware of anyone copying the documents.

I also gave away copies of training manuals for superseded software that I had written. From this I got work producing manuals for other projects.

References and Testimonials

References and Testimonials are the most important things you can have.

When you are starting out you will probably only have references from previous employers but as you gain clients **ASK** them for testimonials. Some clients will offer them if they are pleased with your work.

Use both of these on your website and in your portfolio. Leave the clients name, business name and also website address if they have one – prove that they are from real people (do get consent from your clients first).

Business cv – not a 'give me a job cv'

Once you are in business for yourself you have to forget the 'work related cv' and get into the '**business related portfolio**' state of mind.

You will be telling the client what you want to be paid and calling the shots. It is a very different arrangement and so I decided that I would not use the term cv but would always refer to **My Portfolio**. This was all part of getting me in the '**I run my own business**' mentality.

Detail the type of work you are looking for

You should have your skills matrix, your portfolio of samples and your references and testimonials. You will also have worked out how much per hour you are going to charge (this is far too big a subject for me to delve into here but do be sensible – you can lose work if you are too cheap...)

Now you need to work out **what you do not want to do**. You may take anything when you start up, but if you are doing something you hate it will show. Be prepared to turn down work that you are not skilled enough to do or simply not prepared to do.

In the same way a client may choose one VA from three or four quoting for one piece of work, you must be prepared to say **No** to the occasional client. If it is a bad fit you will not keep the client for very long and you could get a bad reputation.

7. First Steps in Networking and Marketing

Join a VA or SME group that allows its members to offer work to other members without any payment

Yes I know that these are as rare as hen's teeth, but there are groups out there, perhaps specialising in one specific task. There are also VA groups who allow members to post work on private bulletin boards.

If you join a VA group, research it well and ensure that you will get the work directly from the client and not through the owner – who 'may' take a cut.

If you join a paid VA directory, do a search on Google or another search engine and make sure it is on the first page at least – search under virtual assistant and not the directory name. Make sure that your details are in a public directory and not one hidden – what is the point of joining a directory if your details cannot be found?

The best thing to do is ask other VAs which groups they belong to and whether they generate work for them. In the beginning you may join a group for support but most will also offer marketing advice.

Before you pay for qualifications to accredit you as a VA or undertake VA coaching, speak to others who have these qualifications to see if they have really gained them business. Some of these qualifications are very expensive and you have to work a long time to recoup the expense.

Breakfast meetings

If you are an early bird and do not have personal commitments, Breakfast clubs can be a fast way to gain new business. They are not cheap. My personal experience was as a member of BNI (Business Network International – a worldwide organisation). At first I thought that it was very expensive and also that I was not getting anything out of it. I was a member for 2 years and left when I moved.

That was 8 years ago and I have just lost the first client I gained there as they are closing that part of the business I have been working with and I also still have another client on-going. It has paid for itself – and I have changed location and country during that time.

There are other clubs – BRE is one in the UK and I am sure that there are local breakfast clubs in most towns.

Business Link, Chamber of Commerce or Enterprise Centre meetings

I was involved as a speaker for all of the above organisations in the UK. They were mainly evening or lunchtime meetings and would consist of a speaker or two and time before and after for networking. They were normally free or almost free and we were 'fed and watered' as well!

For all networking meetings you need loads of business cards. DO NOT print them yourself, there is a link to Vistaprint above where you can get a thousand cards for less than the paper you buy to print 'home made' ones on.

It is not what you know but who you know...

If you, like me, live in a very rural area you may assume that none of the above will work for you – you could be surprised. I get referrals from people I have come into contact with via the Internet. You use the same skills that you would when networking physically – i.e. you listen to people's problems and help where possible – for free if appropriate.

These people will remember you and refer you if they think someone can use your skills.

8. Leaving the most important till last?

Goal setting

If you cannot set goals you will never make it working for yourself. Goal setting is a very powerful exercise that enables you to achieve what you want.

A goal is a dream written down and dated. I could write a book on the subject but that is pointless as many more experienced than I have done so and we have a link to a very special online system called Simpleology in our members resource area. To access this area, please send an e-mail to va@iceni-it.co.uk with resources in the subject and I will send you full access details.

Free courses

If you are unsure about something, do an Internet search and you will no doubt find a list of sites offering free courses. In the last year many of these courses have had video added to them and I find them really useful.

There are videos on how to write HTML, get a domain name, buy domain hosting and upload your site to your domain – all free. This is just the beginning.

Train to Gain

By this I mean train to gain new skills that will enable you to support your client's needs. Don't offer a skill until you are sure you have mastered it. Try it out on yourself or as a free service for a colleague. If the course does not offer a qualification, prove you can do it by showing your client the work you have already done.

Train to improve the skills you already have. I even resort to paying for courses that I know I NEED.

Coming soon

The Definitive Virtual Workers Guide

I am currently working on a complete 'start-up' system for VAs and SMEs who work from home. There will be an ebook and complete set of files that will enable you to start your business with the least amount of work and effort.

It is based on my 6 years experience as a VA and all the information I have had to produce during that time. I do not believe that there is any point in each and every company repeating this process when I can set out templates and tick-lists that will not just save you time but ensure that you have everything you need to get going.

For the release date and further information, please send an e-mail to va@iceni-it.co.uk or visit <http://www.become-a-virtual-assistant.com>.

Your help

If you have any suggestions for subjects that you feel could be included in the Definitive Virtual Workers Guide or another free ebook for VAs and SMEs, please contact me at va@iceni-it.co.uk and I will do my best to provide the information.

For loads of Free information, articles, resources and support, visit <http://www.iceni-it.co.uk> – the home of ‘Becoming a Virtual Assistant’.

I hope you enjoyed this book
Di Chapman