

VAS ARE THE NEW PAS

by Liz Hoggard | [Evening Standard](#) | 26 October 2009

Emails shoot in from the "boss" at 7am. She's called Karen and she's an accountant. She is also called Sarah, and she's a management consultant.

Another is Martin the hedge fund manager, and there's Keith, the analyst. Their offices are in central London, yours is in your Surrey living room.

You're wearing jeans, they're wearing suits. At least, you think they might be. You've never met them.

This is the life of the virtual assistant. They are the real-life fem-bots, who run the lives of some 30 individual business people simultaneously from their own homes - on a paid-for-by-the-hour basis.

They will take a call from one client who needs a holiday booking while doing another person's filing at the same time.

They can draft letters, attend webinars, manage online diaries and keep in touch with several people at once (with no face-to-face contact) yet still seem as devoted as the old-fashioned "personal" assistant. Even booking doctor's appointments, finding nannies or sending reminders about a niece's birthday are no trouble.

"Clients don't really want to know that you're working for anyone else," says Sarah-Jane Adler, a VA who works through the virtual assistant service Buy:Time (www.buy-time.co.uk).

"They just want to be able to give you a piece of work or make a request and know it will be done. The beauty of it is that they only have to pay for the hours worked."

"One of my clients is a gynaecologist," says another VA, Justine Curtis, "and I've never ever met him. Everything takes place online or via email. I've only ever spoken to him once."

And so VAs have become the recession-friendly answer to the PA - exactly what the self-employed and small

businesses need as the economy contracts again and full-time assistants prove too expensive.

They come with their own desk, laptop and iPhone and don't require annual salaries. And yet they work around the client's needs - either on a regular ongoing basis or for one-off half days or weeks.

Founder of Buy:Time Claire Brynteson first set up the business when, working in a blue-chip bank, she realised her own need for an assistant.

When the recession hit, she feared it might wipe away her market, but the past 18 months have been more profitable than ever.

"Most of our client base is working twice as hard as they used to. And more new businesses are starting than ever before, with a lot of people going it alone.

"He or she will be used to having the structure of PA support in a company, and now all of a sudden they are in a home office or working out of a members' club such as 1 Alfred Place, but still won't know how to get their BlackBerry synchronised or IT systems working."

For each client, a VA will have an individual work email address through which to communicate with a client's business contacts.

"I am their PA/assistant/whatever, giving the image of a larger business," says one VA discreetly. Some clients have virtual London receptions; giving VA's a London dialling code even if they are based outside the M25.

And, it's not just for the rich and highest-flying. These days many frazzled Londoners need to outsource work - from freelance journalists to entrepreneurs. When you hire a VA you get all the benefits of outsourcing.

No employer liabilities, tax and benefits issues - your VA is self-employed. Plus you can justify paying for extra help in terms of your own improved efficiency.

Brynteson charges £29 an hour, whether it's high-end work such as accountancy or mere typing. "OK, you're paying someone £29 to stand in a queue at the post office to send off your visa. But it makes sense - hopefully you can earn more than that in your own job," she says.

The clients are not the only ones who benefit. The flexible lifestyle of a VA makes it an attractive career move for former City workers. They can work from home on their own timetable, away from the nine to five.

Jacqueline Long runs her own VA business, Whatever Whenever (www.wwva.co.uk). She took voluntary redundancy from the City last year after 17 years working alongside high-profile executives at companies including Hiscox, Saatchi & Saatchi Advertising and the London Stock Exchange.

But actually she's loving her new autonomy. "My business has gone from strength to strength. My clients range from a business writer to a photographer to a hairdresser and an image consultant."

The funniest moment came when she was sourcing fancy dress outfits for a launch. "There I was trying out a SpongeBob SquarePants costume in my kitchen."

Of course there are challenges for the new super-temp. There are no colleagues to chat to over the printer. It's goodbye to the drunken office party.

"You can miss the interaction," says Curtis. "You don't see too many faces each day."

But you could argue there's a new equality. VAs don't really have bosses - they have customers. And you don't have the boring routine every day.

"One minute you might be at a business meeting or doing some research that is quite cerebral," says Brynteson.

"The next you're putting on a pair of jeans and going shopping or cleaning out a cellar or doing some photo albums or loading an iPod. It's never dull."

LITTLE BLACK SUIT VS JIMJAMS AND FLIP FLOPS

OLD-STYLE PA

- Wardrobe: little black suit, Jimmy Choos
- Office environment: blue chip bank
- Lunch: Coq d'Argent
- Attitude: borderline hostile
- Most likely to say: "Sorry, but I leave that to the temps"
- Least likely to say: "Of course I'll cancel the hairdresser"

NEW-LOOK VA

- Wardrobe: pyjamas, flip-flops
- Office environment: your own home or members' club such as 1 Alfred Place
- Lunch: beans on toast
- Attitude: flexible
- Most likely to say: "I've just uploaded the annual report to your iPhone"
- Least likely to say: "I'm leaving early with a hangover"

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