Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Fellowship 2010

A comparative insight into the Virtual Assistance Industry

Visit to the USA
6 September to 11 October 2010

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Dr Mike West                Virginia Commonwealth University
Katherine Inge              Virginia Commonwealth University
Lissa Duty and Julia Lilly   VADFW Dallas Fort Worth VA Network Group
Tracy Smith                 Tracy Smith Consulting Services
Charity Van Fleet           Eagle Eye Web Services
Julia Fuqua                 Lioness Virtual Assistance
Sarah Herbert               Fellow VA based in Sierra Commons

A big thank you to all the fellow VA’s who completed the questionnaire for the report.

Plus everyone I met as part of my journey across America who were incredibly friendly and welcoming.

Lastly, this fantastic visit would not have happened without all the help from my partner Jamie Macleod and my wonderful team of VA’s, Denise Shaw and Pippa Mell who looked after everything so well back home.
Executive Summary

In the UK the Virtual Assistance Industry is slowly growing, but with a great deal more to accomplish with the raising of awareness to businesses and organisations to the benefits of working with a professional hourly rate Virtual Assistant.

With the looming cuts in the public sector there will be a percentage of highly experienced administrators looking for work with extensive skills who could easily provide Virtual Assistance from their home offices to businesses UK wide. Businesses are being forced to look at where they can make huge savings, with more and more unable to afford the costs of employing a full time administrator, where as an hourly rate admin cost would be more manageable and cost controllable.

My visit to the USA in Sept/Oct 2010 researching the growing US Virtual Assistance Industry highlighted a great deal of similarities between the UK and the US along with many differences in attitude, outlook, forward progress and resilience.

This report highlights the research undertaken in four different States, meeting with fellow Virtual Assistants, colleges and universities, business support organisations and companies.

The initial aims of the project were followed throughout and which opened new doors into further areas of relevant research like the new ‘Teleworking Bill’ passed by the US Government Administration.

It seems ironic in pursuing this fantastic journey to the USA through the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust to study the VA Industry, to come full circle meeting with and creating a really strong friendship with a fellow Virtual Assistant, Laura Bumpus based near Lake Tahoe in northern California.

Laura founded the ‘Veterans Portfolio’ www.veteransportfolios.org supporting those veterans who come back from war in places like Iraq and Afghanistan helping them in finding employment, training through college, identifying their transferrable skills, helping them to integrate back into family life and society. All her hard work, persistence and dedication provided from her home office as a professional Virtual Assistant.

I will be working closely with Laura in January 2011 helping her to progress the Californian Veterans Portfolio programme forward plus, to find out what support is provided here in the UK for war veterans with a view to replicating her programme here.
Project Aims

I undertook this exciting research project as a partner of Virtual Administration currently providing virtual hourly rate admin/business support to companies and organisations UK wide and internationally.

Our aim is to:

• Look at how Virtual Assistance operates in the US and how we can research and monitor their development and systems.
• Create large scale awareness in the UK to businesses about the benefits of working with Virtual Assistants.
• Bring the Virtual Office Professional Degree Course to the UK, finding a University to take a lead role in its development.

With all the knowledge and experience gained and the continuous good business working relationships built from our visit to the USA, our aim is to:

• Continue gaining as much knowledge, contacts and information about the developing Virtual Assistant Industry in the US, to help push the awareness of Virtual Assistance to businesses in the UK.
• Look at changing the current policy on self employment offered through our Job Centres in the UK.
• To influence the establishment of more ‘home working call centre’ style virtual assistants. Giving people the opportunity to work around the family at home, while providing a professional call centre style service to large companies and organisations. We want to see larger companies adopting home working practices taking away the unnecessary need for travel to and from an office.
• Look at the interaction the college has with the business community, what work is being done with the Chambers of Commerce in raising awareness of Virtual Assistance to businesses.
• Identify what the changes are in the reform of the benefits system, tackling the number of women on incapacity benefit who could benefit from learning about the opportunities of homeworking virtual assistance considering this as an alternative career route.
• Continuously lobbying the government making them aware of the much needed push on ‘homeworking’ as a serious change to Britain’s future.

Methodology

My five week tour of the USA visiting organisations, Chambers of Commerce, other Virtual Assistants, colleges and universities was the main source of primary research to be carried out by personally meeting people by appointment and having the wonderful opportunity of staying with Laura Bumpus and her family in Lake Tahoe and Professor Cyndi Dunn in Sacramento, California.

I conducted a great deal of secondary research beforehand using the internet and making contact with different people letting them know of my forthcoming visit to the US, which initiated meetings and helped plot my journey.

I created a questionnaire which was completed by Virtual Assistants both in the USA and the UK.

I kept a daily blog of my travels and meetings taking along my own laptop.
Main Report

Visit to Washington DC

Visit to Richmond in Virginia

Visit to Dallas and Fort Worth in Texas

Visit to Sacramento, Lake Tahoe area and San Francisco

Questionnaire completed by Virtual Assistants in USA and UK

Homeworking and Freelancing

Teleworking

Women on Incapacity versus Home Working Virtual Assistants
Visit to Washington DC

Meeting with Nancy Seeger

Arrived safely in Washington DC (first time flying too) and what a fantastic city to visit.

We spent the first few days visiting Capitol Hill, The White House, Washington Monument and many of the other wonderful memorials and monuments. Very hot temperatures of 95 degrees and overwhelmed with how pristine white and clean the whole place looked.

Our first meeting with Nancy Seeger who ran her own business called Arts Assistance, an orchestra administrator of 16 years offering web design and graphic design from her home office premises.

Nancy designs the IVAA International Virtual Assistants Association’s Summit websites. 2010’s Summit took place on the 7th October which I took part in as a guest speaker.

A fantastic opportunity to ask Nancy lots of questions about working as a successful Virtual Assistant based in the Washington DC area and how her business has grown offering her specialist services to performing arts businesses.

Nancy passed on some great contacts within the VA Industry based in different States who I already started to make contact with.

Research found on Teleworking

I hoped to visit a few organisations based in Washington DC to find out more information about the recently passed Teleworking Bill but was unable to make any appointments during our visit.

So instead found information online and sent out emails to the main contacts dealing with the new Teleworking Bill with a view to gaining more detail.

Please see further information on Teleworking towards the end of the report.
Visit to Richmond Virginia

Meeting with the Rehabilitation Research & Training Center at Virginia Commonwealth University

Met with Dr Mike West, Director of the Telework Project and Katherine Inge, Director of the Self Employment Project at the Rehabilitation Research & Training Center at Virginia Commonwealth University.

They have worked with organisations on telework projects for a number of years, running pilot projects looking at what makes a good homeworking teleworker, specifically looking at the characteristics of a teleworker.

They raised the awareness of teleworking pointing out that even now employers see teleworking as a reward to employees rather than being a necessity.

Mike said that for many years, their Vocational Rehabilitation agencies shunned self employment as an option for their clients. That seems to be slowly changing, however, particularly in the face of high unemployment and underemployment in recent years.

Mike kindly sent me an email detailing more information about the project they worked on.

The Telework Research Project was not directed to self-employment but to salaried home-based work. It included a survey of businesses on their policies and practices related to telework as an accommodation, followed by a demonstration project on providing telework to Workers Compensation clients and disabled veterans. The survey part of the project found that employers typically did not have designated telework positions and were unwilling to offer telework to anyone, including employees with disabilities, from the first day of employment.

They tended to allow working from home only after seeing how they work in the office first, and then only as a reward. Most also required that the employee spend at least a part of his or her work week in the office. Both of these conditions are counter to the reasons people with disabilities want or need to work from home.

The placement project was conducted through two subcontractors, Expediter Corp in Pittsburgh and CORA Works in New Jersey. Both of these companies find people with disabilities home-based jobs and provide accommodations for them in order to do the work, but in different ways.

Expediter works with businesses and disability insurance companies to assist Workers Compensation clients to return to work either with the company at which the employee was injured, and if that's not feasible then with another company.

CORA Works uses a model in which it (CORA) is the employer and obtains contract work to send to their home-based employees. Both models were fairly successful, but there are problems with each.
• Expediter faces the problems of finding employers who will hire home-based workers sight unseen, and it has taken about 20 years to develop the trust of the businesses who hire their clients.
• It's also expensive, requiring much travel to the client's home for assessment and accommodations.
• In some cases, they have to subcontract to a rehabilitation agency close to the client.
• The CORA model also has its drawbacks.
• In this model (as with almost all other companies offering home-based work), the individual is not an "employee" but an independent contractor. That means that CORA cannot provide their clients with training, equipment, materials, etc. If they do, the client becomes an employee, and CORA can be found in violation of U.S. tax laws and can face still penalties for not following rules regarding tax withholding.
• In addition, the worker may experience downtime if CORA has no work to send them, which means a break in income.

Katherine had more involvement on the home based self employment side and mentioned the ‘Self Employment Grant’ which was made available through the Office Disability and Policy Dept which was trialled throughout New York, Alaska and Florida.

The availability of Developed Start-up Projects – whereby interested people looking at going self employed can still receive Social Security Work Incentive payments and put money aside separately to save towards starting a new business while staying on benefits.

Mike and Katherine provided us with a fantastic pack to take away including:
• Video on ‘Self Employment – Start-up in the USA’
• Start-up resource documents on self employment
• A mentor guide to Increase Customized Employment Outcomes through T-TAP
• Business, Disability and Employment – corporate Models of Success
• VCU – Rehabilitation Research and Training Centre on Workplace Supports and Job Retention

Both Mike and Katherine provided us with some great contacts:
• The Midwest Institute of Telecommuting - [http://www.mite.org/](http://www.mite.org/)
• Expeditor Corporation - [http://www.expeditercorp.com/](http://www.expeditercorp.com/)

Definitely wish to keep in touch with Mike and Katherine as a great source of continuous development in this area.
Visit to Richmond Virginia

Meeting with the Greater Richmond Partnership

I had already met members of the Greater Richmond Partnership on a visit from the US to Nottingham’s Bio City in the UK in March 2010. We attended a seminar on the benefits of working with companies in Richmond Virginia and setting up businesses in the Greater Richmond area.

We met with the Greater Richmond Partnership in their offices in Richmond and enjoyed our visit chatting with Rowena Fratarcangelo, Gregory Wingfield and Sara Dunnigan. They were intrigued with our research project and had not come across the Virtual Assistance Industry but could see the potential benefits for businesses working with hourly rate VA’s.

Sara had already sent me an email to say that large employers like Capital One were already exploring teleworking arrangements for their employees. She mentioned that the State offers cash to help companies establish teleworking arrangements through a program called TeleworkVA.

I researched the website http://www.teleworkva.org/ and this is what they promote below:

**Telework!VA can help your company offset the cost of starting up or expanding a telework program. Qualiﬁed employers can receive up to $35,000 (up to $50,000 in speciﬁc areas of Northern Virginia) while reducing overhead expenses, preparing for business continuity, helping their employees become more productive, and decreasing their impact on air pollution and trafﬁc congestion!**

Sara also mentioned the number of new initiatives designed to help individuals in their pursuit of self employment, one federally funded pilot called GATE. I was able to find this link below on the internet which described the funded pilot as a grant which served Dislocated Workers who are 50 years of age or older and expressed an interest in business ownership through self employment. http://www.positivelyminnesota.com/Programs_Services/Dislocated_Worker_Program_%28DW%29/Project_Gate/1Project_GATE_II_FAQ_for_Service_Providers.pdf

Rowena gave us a very interesting newspaper article dated 14 Sept 2010 from the Richmond Times business newspaper about ‘Working Moms Best Companies’. It talked about a magazine called the Working Mothers which lists the 100 Best Companies for mothers. From the newspaper article it stated that 70% of mothers work and women outnumbered men in the workplace last year for the first time in US history.

Carol Evans, President of Working Mother Media said, “The immense influx of women into the work force demanded changes in workplace culture as companies strove to keep working moms talent and loyalty”.

All of the Best 100 Companies offered paid maternity leave, flexitime and elder-care resources.
It also stated that 44% of US companies offer telecommuting while all of the 100 Best Companies offer the option to work from home.

Maria Curran, Vice President of Human Resources, of the 6 companies based in Virginia called VCU Health System said, “It acknowledges our strong culture for placing our employees at the very centre of everything we do”.

Since our return back to the UK we have started to look at the Top Family Friendly Employers taken from the www.workingmums.co.uk website. There are quite a few familiar names like B&Q, Jaguar Land Rover, Lloyds TSB, KPMG, National Grid PLC and the Metropolitan Police Service.

I hope to research further into these larger companies to find out what their thoughts are towards teleworking/virtual working and to see if any work is taking place directly with home working Virtual Assistants.
Visit to Richmond Virginia

Visit to Capital One Head Quarters

Rowena from the Greater Richmond Partnership kindly organised a visit to Capital One’s headquarters just outside Greater Richmond.

The Capital One headquarters was a fantastic place of work to look around – a huge campus covering an area of about 100 acres employing around 7,000 people. The area comprised of about 8 buildings and a lot of parking space areas which were all packed to capacity with cars – a very busy place. You definitely needed a car to get around the place.

This visit provided a vision of significant change in culture and attitude with both employers and employees, a forward thinking focus on looking after and retaining employees. The state of the art facilities and technology and innovative training and development tools gave a huge impression of how much this particular company invests in their employees.

What made a massive impact was how the layout of the offices/work space was provided for people. Basically an employee finds a preferred place (hot desk) to work from, logs on computer, uses instant messenger (similar to what we use on Skype) to show they’re logged on and ready to start work. The emphasis on the production of quality work, providing the right environment which gives the employee much more incentive, trust and flexibility was great to see actually working in a successful setting.

They mentioned that on Friday’s the building can seem very empty due to a large percentage of employees working from home accessing their work remotely, logging in at home to do the work, providing a further flexible option for employees.

This gave rise to the concept of teleworking being virtual with the option of working from home with a mix of working on site at a purpose built office environment so employees get chance to interact with each other, attend meetings and training sessions, striking a good productive balance of work.

I did ask about the use of video conferencing due to the number of office bases in different states and countries – they explained that video conferencing was used regularly but still felt that technology was still not stable to the quality they really required e.g. someone would not be able to get sound or talk as part of the group call etc.

The actual buildings inside were extremely well thought out, lots of internal café areas for employees, places for relaxation with large TV screens, a fantastic indoor gym and lots of outside sporting areas as part of the campus for playing team games – very big on team building and getting people to integrate together. They even had adult swings and a tree house, a perfect hideaway if you need time to yourself or a quiet area to chat.
Please see the map below of the Capital One West Creek Campus (HQ). This gives you an idea of the size of the complex.

I am in the process of contacting Capital One offices in Nottingham to find out if they have adopted this way of flexible working and change in working culture.

Map of Capital One Head Quarters
Visit to Dallas Texas

Meet up with Tracy Smith – fellow Virtual Assistant

I was introduced to Tracy Smith through the IVAA International Virtual Assistants Association. As a member of this organisation I had volunteered my services as a mentor to new start-up Virtual Assistants, which is how I came to meet Tracy, she was looking for support in starting up.

It was such a delight to finally meet someone who I had been speaking with on Skype to see where they lived, an area called Lewisville north of Dallas. Tracy had not long set up her new VA business and was doing incredibly well finding new clients and producing work from her home office. She had found the IVAA a great source of help and support and was using their RFP’s (Request for Proposal) online system a great way of responding to securing new pieces of work.

Tracy also invited me to attend a network group which she had recently joined called the VADFW Dallas Fort Worth VA Network Group.

Meet up with the VADFW Dallas Fort Worth VA Network Group.

We met a fabulous group of ladies from the VADFW Dallas Fort Worth VA Network Group comprising of Lissa Duty; Julia Lilly; Kay Wright; Charity Van Fleet; Cindy Flood; Sharon Tousley and Tracy Smith. What a great lunchtime meet up we all had, a lovely meal thanks to the Glory House restaurant, we all did a lot of laughing which is always a good sign. Plenty of photographs taken afterwards – some funny ones too!

Tracy Smith kindly invited me along to do a short talk/presentation about my Churchill Fellowship and what information research I would be doing during my trip to the USA. There was a good selection of start up VA’s along with those who had been going a good while, so plenty of questions and answers from all of us to share.

It was a really good opportunity to find out how big the VA industry was in Dallas and Fort Worth and to learn that this particular group had a membership of a 42 VA members, which Lissa and Julia organised regularly on a monthly lunchtime basis.

We each took a turn in introducing ourselves explaining what our main VA services were which highlighted a highly professional set of VA’s with some really strong and much needed skills to offer to businesses.
They all agreed that the term VA was still new to a lot of businesses and still under-recognised. We discussed the most preferred and best ways of marketing our skills with networking being the most productive form of meeting new people and building on making good contacts.

It was interesting to discover the background of each VA and how they evolved into taking the VA route. We all agreed working from home was wonderful and how important it was to create a good balance of attending network events to break up the monotony of working from home which can be lonely and the necessary need to meet and make friends with other fellow VA's.

I thoroughly enjoyed answering questions on how I grew my own VA business, how I found other VA colleagues to sub-contract work to, which enabled me to visit the USA for 5 weeks on this fellowship leaving my clients in the capable hands of my colleagues Denise Shaw and Pippa Mell back in the UK.

I learned a great deal of information from these ladies, especially how important the use of Social Networking was to a lot of their clients. Plus we talked about the different ways in which they charged for their services either by the hour or on a retainer basis.

We discussed the issue of some larger VA companies that had chosen to do down the route of franchising their VA business. There was a strong agreement that giving a person a territory to concentrate on getting business from seemed to go against the whole ethos of working as a Virtual Assistant which allows you to work for any company anywhere. But as the same time understood the option of buying into a franchise could be seen as a less scary/risky option as opposed to doing it alone.

My immediate impression of this group was an overwhelming wish to keep in touch with each of the ladies. They made both myself and partner Jamie very, very welcome, incredibly easy going and approachable, open to share, ask questions and so hospitable.
Visit to Irving Chamber of Commerce

Charity Van Fleet of Eagle Eye Web Services very kindly arranged an introduction and visit to the Irving Chamber of Commerce, getting in touch with the organisation immediately after the lunch meeting to visit. Charity was a member of the Chamber and spoke very highly of how they helped small businesses.

We drove to the Irving Chamber of Commerce following Charity in the car and received a warm welcome and a great tour of the building which originally was a bank. The new technology used in the building was great to see. The lady from the Chamber who showed us round the building was very much aware of the term Virtual Assistance which was good to see and appeared to have good relationship with Charity. She gave us a fabulous run down of the demographic, economic, history of Irving and its central location relationship to other States in the US, with its continuous growing, innovative and exciting plans for the future. A thoroughly enjoyable visit…
Meet up with Roietta Fulgham at American River College

I had previously met Roietta two years ago on her visit to Colchester and Cambridge in the UK on an international business convention along with Prof. Cyndi Dunn from Sierra College.

Roietta teaches part of the Virtual Office Professional Degree course online at the American River College in Sacramento along with being the President for the CBEA California Business Education Association in Sacramento.

I’ve worked with Roietta on quite a few events she organises throughout the year, for example the diamond anniversary of the CBEA organisation in November 2010. Roietta likes the time difference of 8 hours ahead in the UK as it enables us to turn work around incredibly fast.

Roietta gave us a tour of the college and introduced us to many of her students and teaching colleagues who were very interesting to chat with, getting a comprehensive insight into what their thoughts were on subjects like education, health, politics in general and how they compare between the US and UK. I was surprised how easy and laid back there were to chat about the Californian politics and how the past few years had been incredibly difficult for people living in the region.

She explained that over the last few years unfortunately businesses have become less and less involved with colleges and universities, generating less interaction, sharing experiences and knowledge with students. She also felt there was very little interaction with the Chambers of Commerce too.
Lunchtime gathering with guests from Sierra College & others

Luis Sanchez the Dean at Sierra College invited us to a lunchtime meeting along with Prof. Cyndi Dunn and Prof. Denise Bushnell from Sierra College, Michelle Ulrich from Virtual Business Marketing and Patricia Beckman from Cybertary.

We all shared information about each of our businesses/occupations discovering how each started and grew their exciting careers in the virtual world.

Luis and Denise were incredibly friendly and very keen to keep in touch. Luis kindly said he would be happy to assist with any further research I needed to complete. We had previously met with Michelle on an earlier occasion and were glad to learn her thoughts around the growing VA industry especially covering the topic of people with disabilities and illnesses that stopped them getting work in the traditional office setting. Still seen as a huge barrier to employers, they felt that employers were still wary of working with disadvantaged people due to fear of recriminations.

When asked about details on current and past students attending the Virtual Office Professional Degree Online course, there was no information available about the number of people who may have had disabilities and what made them choose this particular career path.

Patricia was very interesting to chat with, her company Cybertary http://www.cybertary.com/ offers Virtual Assistant Franchises throughout the USA. It was intriguing to discover her journey taking the business to the next level with a highly successful team of VA’s providing professional hourly rate services to businesses.

It was highlighted that many Chambers of Commerce were still unaware of the Virtual Assistance Industry and there was very little connection with government regards promoting Virtual Assistance as another career option to the unemployed.

The VA term is still unheard of within many industries in the US and doesn’t have a recognised title on business listings for internet directories, still recorded under ‘secretarial services’.

There was a definite feel from the colleges and education in the US that qualifications were deemed more important than experience. The higher degree gained the better options on the jobs/career ladder would be open to you. Where as in the UK it seems to be the opposite way round, solid experience in the relevant role is more preferred, with experience of knowing that some employers don’t always have time to train a new comer or money to spend on training.
Virtual Assistant gathering with students from the VOP Degree Course in Sacramento

VA gathering at Julie Fuqua’s home

This was a wonderful opportunity to finally meet up with some of the students I had previously assisted teaching as a UK guest teacher in February 2010 as part of the Virtual Office Professional Degree Course. Along with meeting other VA’s new to the degree course who were in their early stage business start up and those who were more established.

Julie Fuqua of Lioness Virtual Assistance very kindly hosted the event at her home and provided great food and drinks for everyone.

I had already worked with Julie previously as she was also guest teaching alongside me on the VOP degree course. Professor Cyndi Dunn also helped out with the hosting introducing me to everyone as they arrived. It was a fabulous experience to chat and interact with everyone to find out how they were all progressing.

Sharon Broughton, an implementation coach in Virtual Assistance was really interesting to speak with. She runs different courses and specialises in the shopping cart creation and online marketing, targeting top end corporate companies, allowing her to charge much higher prices for her expert services. She was well established in her field with most of her clients found via word of mouth.

It was good to meet Joanne Lange owner of ThePersonalAssistant.com, Joanne was a delight to chat with and interesting to learn of her specialism in appointment booking for clients. She kindly answered a few questions regards social networking and the different apps she used for business. Here favourites were Dragon which enabled her to dictate notes to herself and the app called Square used for credit cards. She highly recommended this one for taking payment from clients as there was no monthly charge and the fees/interest rates were very reasonable. She strongly believed that ‘face to face’ networking works alongside social networking and that social networking had increased her revenue, using a combination of blogs, phone and email campaigns, social networking and producing good quality newsletters.

It was so good to finally put faces to names from the emails and Skype phone calls previously made over the last year with the students.
Visit to Auburn near Lake Tahoe & Sierra Commons in California

Meet up with Sarah Herbert and Laura Bumpus at Sierra Commons

We stayed with Laura Bumpus (fellow VA called Virtual Business Aid) and her family in Foresthill near Auburn in the Lake Tahoe area in northern California and had a most wonderful time and didn’t want to leave. I met Laura through the guest teaching I did in February 2010 with Sierra College for the Virtual Office Professional Degree course, Laura was one of the students on the program.

The area where Laura lives is so beautiful, very peaceful with some fantastic views but you definitely need a car for any journeys. We had the fabulous opportunity of visiting Donner Lake which took us through California and Nevada City and then onto Tahoe Lake which was absolutely magical.

Laura is an incredibly innovative and exciting person to be working with, she is the founder of the organisation Veterans Portfolios [www.veteransportfolios.org](http://www.veteransportfolios.org)

The organisation supports veterans who come back from war in places like Iraq and Afghanistan and their families, in helping them to find employment, training through college, identifying their transferrable skills, helping them to integrate back into family life and society. All of which is undertaken as a working Virtual Assistant from her professional home office.

On the Wednesday we met with Sarah Herbert another fellow VA student from the VOP degree course living in the local area of Sierra Commons in Nevada City. Sarah introduced us to Robert Trent, Director of Sierra Commons, which is a purpose built innovation centre for business ignitors (start-ups). This organisation offers numerous options of working for start-up businesses, for example hot-desking with a daily rate or monthly rate.

Robert who set up and ran the whole project showed us round the building which had open plan areas as well as closed off office space, a conference room and a sound proofed booth for working in and making telephone calls. Robert explained how he obtained funding to get the project off the ground and was currently looking to replicate this business space model elsewhere.
Visit to San Francisco in California

Staying with Dr Cyndi Dunn and visit to San Francisco

Professor Cyndi Dunn kindly offered her home as our main base while we stayed in California and looked after us very well. It was a great opportunity to spend time with Cyndi as I had worked with her on the Virtual Office Professional Degree course assisting as a virtual UK guest teacher in February 2010 and due to assist with the teaching again in Feb/March 2011.

She gave us a tour of Sierra College introducing us to fellow teaching colleagues again getting a good insight into their thoughts on education, life in general and the economic outlook for California.

We visited the area of San Francisco, driving over Golden Gate Bridge was fantastic, the bay area around Fisherman’s Wharf and Pier 39 were wonderful to see.

The Trolley Bus tour was a fun ride through the city, up and down the really steep streets just like the film clips from the Steve McQueen film ‘Bullitt’.

China Town was exciting to see, so different to the rest of the city with so many different kinds of shops to visit.

Visit to the Hub-Bay Area

We visited the ‘Hub – Bay Area’ in downtown Berkeley in San Francisco. Very similar to the Hub in London’s King Cross but on a smaller scale, this was an interesting organisation to visit.

A nice young man called Hai Vo showed us around the building and explained how the ‘Hub’ system worked.

The project was a socially run organisation that enabled businesses to use the premises as required on a flexible basis. So for example they offered the use of the facilities for 5 hours for $25 per month, so you could literally come along with your laptop and plug in as and when you want to.
Virtual Assistance Questionnaire Responses

Responses collected from Virtual Assistants based in Dallas and Fort Worth, Washington DC and California are shown below. Some answers are detailed with more information.

1 What training courses have you done over the last 2 years?
- WordPress
- FBA Business Pages
- IVAA Conferences
- VA Classroom Social Media Course
- Constant Contact Course
- Google Adwords Course
- Thrive Online – The VA Series by Acmen Works
- Toothakers 6 Weeks to 6 Figure VA Success Teleseries
- Dreamweaver
- Flash
- Eportfolio
- EResume Course
- Social Media Course
- Small Business Management Training
- Project Management
- Records Compliance via American Records Management Association
- Assertiveness Training
- Photography Course

2 How did you originally find out about Virtual Assistance Industry in the US?
- IVAA.org
- Virtual Assistants International Group (Australia)
- Via a friend
- Sierra College website list of courses
- Read an article about a lady already running a VA business
- IAAP International Association of Admin Professionals
- General Internet Research

3 What response do you get from chatting to businesses in general, have they come across Virtual Assistants before? Do you find that it is still new to a lot of businesses?
- Strong perception in the US that working from home is still a get rich scheme
- VA still seen as surprisingly new
- Clients come via referral so are aware of VA
- For the Texas area – they don’t find it to be too new
- A lot of excitement chatting about it but still a majority of people never heard of VA
- Less aware of than a year ago – have to explain more about what a VA does
• People struggle to understand how it can save them money! Difficult to convince them to outsource work sometimes
• Still unaware that VA exists and what we do
• Still a new concept but get a lot of interest

4 Are you concentrating on one geographic area with your VA services e.g. local, whole of USA or worldwide?
• Whole of the USA
• Mainly US and some Australian clients
• USA and worldwide
• USA and UK but had problems with time difference
• Worldwide

5 How do you currently market your services? What do you prefer to do and what works best and creates the best results from your marketing?
• RFP’s - Request for Proposals
• Networking
• Chamber of Commerce
• VADFW – Virtual Assistance Dallas Fort Worth
• IVAA – International Virtual Assistance Association
• Social Media Blogs
  ▪ Facebook
  ▪ Twitter
  ▪ LinkedIn
  ▪ Newsletters
• Referral Service
• Networking with VA’s
• Subcontracted work with other VA’s
• Word of Mouth
• Own website
• Teach a free course on small business – this creates new work
• Free directories online
• Community Involvement

6 In the UK we have a government run organisation called ‘Business link’ which enables start-up and small businesses to access free support. Do you have any organisation like this in your area?
• SBA – Small Business Association
• Irving Chamber of Commerce is amazing support
• Irving Womens Network
• Women in Business
• B-Harmony Group
• Dallas area good with providing general business support
• Plenty through Social Media
• Not always enough available in the smaller areas
7 Are you a member of your local Chamber of Commerce?

8 Do you feel that the Chambers of Commerce understand Virtual Assistance and are they happy to pass on your services to other members who may benefit from your services?

Comment received: Spoke with South Nevada County Chamber of Commerce & Irving Chamber of Commerce – they only seem to focus on selling at you

9 As part of my research study into Virtual Assistance for the Churchill Fellowship I am looking at the differences between the US and the UK on the use of technology. What technology do you use for your business?

Cloud Computing
Aweber
Constant Contact
Skype
Online Calendar
Microsoft Office
Twitter – all though some said this was a waste of time
Online Apps
Basic Camp HQ.com
YouTube
Facebook
Blogging
10 There has been a significant move towards Social Media as a major marketing tool for businesses. Do you feel it has made a big impact on your business?
Yes definitely all round from all Virtual Assistants asked

11 Do you feel that Social Media is just another trend that will have a ‘sell by date’ and is another marketing tool that everyone must keep up with to stay in the game and ahead of the competition?
• No Social Media is here to stay
• Need to keep ahead of the game and up to date with technology
• Far too many people offering the expert Social Media Services
• Expect to see a replacement Twitter or Facebook
• Businesses will miss out on moving forward if not using Social Media as a marketing tool
• Like the TV it will be here for a long time
• Think of the Obama Campaign to get him into office – they used Social Media big time

12 We are seeing a massive change with our new UK Coalition Government who are hoping to drive more and more of the public sector services back into the hands of the private sector. This is opening the doors of opportunity towards greater outsourcing of services.

This will make more companies more accountable for their services, pricing, quality and reliability, allowing more companies and freelancers like Virtual Assistants to offer their hourly rate services to organisations that traditionally only employed people on contracts or via recruitment agencies.

Do you see this as a foreseeable opportunity that could emerge from the US Government?
• This happened with the Regan administration in the US – utilities and airlines were privatised
• Entrepreneurial firms, consultants and the freelance market are more open to outsourcing to Virtual Assistants, plus creative types like artists, musicians and authors
• Big business has a much harder time with change and lacks flexibility
• The US is slow to adopt the telecommuting model of employees working from home so I think the US Government will probably be of the last adoptees
• The Obama camp has gone more towards the social government – created the more public rather than the private. Hoping to see Obama out of office to make that change the other way. The private sector can provide the services much better and would benefit more from privatisation. Would see much less of the social side if the Republicans get back in. Currently causing a 15% increase in the health insurance due to the healthcare bill. Health insurance putting families into bankruptcy fastest in 30 years.
• We can’t even get our government to encourage businesses to stop outsourcing jobs to other countries, so I don’t have a lot of hope for that in the near future. Don’t want to get on a soapbox – but Obama is growing government here not helping push more toward the private sector.
• Can see it happening now – having to downsize, rethink their advertising costs, clean up some of the waste, definitely think that companies will start to look at the virtual world, using VA’s helps on costs of employment. It has to be the thing of the future.
• The majority of Americans want the government out of their lives and businesses. With the change in the last election, we hope this will happen
• I certainly hope so! Unfortunately I think the US is headed the opposite direction. Based upon what I have read and heard through the recession is that most of the stimulus money that the US government has spent has been on public sector jobs (except the money they put into unemployment which has now run out for millions of people). Private sector in the US is falling apart. So this means the US government is growing (despite the fact that the US can’t pay for it). Any where there is economic growth there is opportunity for VA’s, no matter which way the government goes there is opportunity for VA’s.

13 I am interested to establish how many Virtual Assistants have chosen this specific career path due to being made redundant from a previous job, want a change in lifestyle or have been forced to make a change in career due to disability or continuous ill health issues. Here in the UK we have a very high percentage of people who claim benefits for incapacity and disability. A percentage of these people who if were made aware would hopefully jump at the chance of working from home as a professional Virtual Assistant using their previous admin skills. Do you feel it is still seen as a huge barrier to business owners/companies working with people with disabilities and health issues?
• Many companies have difficulties coping with short term disability leave and long term disability leave.
• Many VA’s come to the field here in the US because their corporate situation let them go because of ongoing ill health situations
• Some of the clients and other VA’s who I contract with or purchase services from have health situations that make working outside of the home difficult, being able to set up their own work space to their specific needs and hours has enabled them to set up in business successfully
• Worried that it’s a solution to everyone who is disabled – not a one fits all system
• No I don’t feel disabilities and health issues are a barrier so much. The barrier I see here is trying to get businesses to see the advantages of having either an employee or a contractor who works out of their home. Telecommuting could save so much time, money and help with pollution and environmental issues and reduce our dependence on foreign oil – and yet it’s like pulling teeth to get businesses to even consider the possibility. It seems to be a control issue which I hope this changes in the near future.
• In the past businesses have had to cross some barriers to employ people with disabilities and health issues. Government regulation has helped the disabled stay employed here in the US. Because of that, I do not feel that businesses have any barriers (other than personal) that would prevent them from hiring someone with a disability. There will always be issues of missed time off work or performance issues but these are regular issues that employers have to deal with anyway. With that said a company working with a VA many not be faced with those issues because the VA can choose their own working hours.
• Yes there is still a concern here but hopefully this will change
• I was downsized in February of 2009 due to economic conditions at my company. Being 55, it has been difficult to secure employment due to my age and considered being over qualified. Age discrimination is huge in the US. I had to look at new ways of utilizing my skills.
• I don’t think companies are opposed to working with disabled people as much as they have been in the past. I think technology opens the door for these people and most companies realise the overall good it does for our economy to get those folks back into work. I chose to become a VA because I was not challenged enough in the work place and I never had control over my financial future. To sit year after year and wait for a 50 cent raise finally struck me as absurd. I just don’t understand why it took me so long to see it.
• There is an incredible opportunity for people to have a career and have a successful career. I can’t imagine that a company would need to know that I don’t drive well, rather see working with a VA as an added bonus. For people who are homebound this is an incredible opportunity.

14 Are you aware of any government run schemes/projects that help people with disabilities and long term health issues learn about other career routes with a view to working from home?

• Government workforce organisations called ‘Workforce Texas’, which helps people get back to work
• The US have a lot of scams around home working – giving home working a bad name

15 Are you aware of the Teleworking Bill which was passed early this year enabling more people who work for the government to work from home (telework) for a set amount of working hours in the week? I am keen to learn more about this to find out if the US Government intends on rolling this process out further into main stream employment legislation.
• I was not aware of that but think it is a good idea. Traffic in metropolitan areas is such a problem that would help alleviate stress to infrastructure of roads. Plus, if people could work from home example, two days a week, this may increase productivity due to the tiredness of long hours commuting with the high volume of traffic on the roads.
• My husband works for a large company which allows him to telecommute two days a week from home, his calls are diverted to his cell phone and he logs in via a private network to provide support.
• Industries are moving in that direction. Certainly hope to move this way. Countries are looking to the US to see how they deal with solutions. Capital One customer service is US
based but the credit card service gets outsourced. Southern hospitality is ingrained in people and is key!

- I am keen to learn more about this to find out if the government intends on rolling this process out further into main stream employment legislation. I know a bill was passed but haven’t heard that it was actually implemented or that it would roll out to the rest of the mainstream population. How nice that would be!

- I am not familiar with this bill. If it is passed, it would take the US years to get it in place and launch

- I am keen to learn more about this. This would need to monitor this closely for abuse. It is a great idea. Working from home brings a better quality of life.
Virtual Assistance Questionnaire Responses - UK

Responses collected from Virtual Assistant’s based in West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, Manchester, Nottinghamshire and London are shown below. Some answers are detailed with more information.

1. What were your main reasons for becoming a self employed Virtual Assistant?

2. Your background in administration is it:

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<th>Experience Level</th>
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<td>Over 15 years</td>
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<td>10 – 15 years</td>
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3. Do you hold any formal qualifications in administration?

If so what qualifications are they?

Shorthand
4. How long have you been running your own VA business?

5. Have you found since running your own VA business that it has changed your outlook:

6. What response do you get from businesses when attending network events?

- To most of the barristers I meet at social and educational events in the course of providing member services to various Bar Associations, working from home is not unsurprising to them as many do themselves; they appreciate the value-for-money services I provide and understand the pros/cons of being, like them, self-employed.
- My young family means I can't attend networking events but I hope to in the future.
- Very positive. Business owners can see the immediate benefits of having me in their corner. However I do think that this is to do with the way I portray it- I have a marketing background and this has been key in my success in taking on new clients and growing my business. I am very strong on marketing.
- Not a lot of response – many don’t understand it
- Depends where I’m networking. I’ve met people who have no idea what a VA is, others who think that ‘there’s loads of us about’ and that ‘anyone could do that’ and other such comments. I’ve also met lots of people who see the value in outsourcing and are very receptive to the services I offer. I choose my networking events very carefully now.
7. Do you feel that the VA Industry is still unheard of when chatting to businesses?

- Yes, it's an unfamiliar term; there are VA's working under various guises. It is acceptable to 'offshore' services to people miles away, yet there is an untapped resource here in the UK!
- Definitely yes
- Not in the circles I move in however I realise that 'the world at large' may not be aware of VAs yet. However it tends to be the 'old school' that are completely unaware. The new businesses, tech businesses, young people and media centred businesses are aware of VAs.
- Yes
- I think it depends on the business and the location. Lots of small business owners know about VA's but larger businesses tend to go along the permanent employee route. The VA industry is growing but there are a lot of PA's and secretaries out there who have never heard of VA's either.

8. What are your biggest barriers to getting more work from businesses?

- Fear of change/better the Devil you know mentality; one prospective client was reluctant to change from their current provider even though they were increasing their prices and were allegedly inefficient; conversely, word of mouth is definitely the main way I get business and I am gaining a wider reputation for providing efficient, value for money services.
- Unable to 'put myself out there' due to family commitments
- The client's cash flow. Often they are at a growth stage in their own businesses where they need help but don't always have the income coming in guaranteed themselves. It is a vicious circle sometimes but one that is typical of small business. I spread my risk by having plenty of clients in differing fields so if one drops off the radar I still have others.
- Not being able to sell myself
- Getting people to realise that you're not there to pick up the phone or do their paper filing. Some people just don't realise that geographically, you don't have to be in the same place. People like this don't understand the true role of secretaries/PA's. They don't see the value in the role and therefore dismiss its importance.

9. Roughly how many hours per week do you want to work as a VA?

- Full-time and over-time during the 'legal terms' with leave taken when my clients are on holiday; that's the way it is!
- 10 to 20 hours per week for now – this will increase as my children get older
- I have structured my business so it operates 24-7 and for clients, it works 24-7. However I want to work approx 20 hours a week. Some weeks are more, some less but this is what I aim for.
- Working towards a fulltime working week
- Anything over 20hrs (fee earning)
Homeworking – future of business in Britain

My research into Virtual Working took an automatic route into the direction of Homeworking.

A report online published in 2008 by Charles Orton-Jones talked about ‘homeworking as the future of Britain’. These were his findings:

- Companies that refuse to permit home working face a serious challenge: hanging on to staff. No industry is immune from this issue, not even traditional professions, such as law.

- A decade ago, female lawyers would rush back to work six weeks after having a baby. In a profession where being made a partner was the all-consuming goal, staying at home to raise a child was career suicide. Lawyers Direct has changed the rules of the game. Set up by James Knight in 2002, Lawyers Direct is a traditional corporate law firm but does not have central office. Instead, its 65 lawyers work from home with half of the staff being men indicating its strong appeal for working this way.

- Spark Energy is a young gas and electricity firm, and boss PJ Darling says his salesforce work harder from home. “They are happier and more productive when operating from home, so it works for them and the business.”

- Data consultancy firm Jaywing says its decentralised structure, where 92 of the 95 staff work from home, means it can attract and retain older members of staff who would resent trekking into an office each day.

An article from the website ‘Business Woman’ written by Beverly Elliott in September 2010 strongly advocates the new generation of ‘stay-at-home mums working’.

Home businesses make up almost a third of the country’s workforce and bring in around £360bn, with more than 1,400 new home businesses being created every week.

Home businesses are the ideal solution for mums and dads who feel guilty leaving their children in childcare and nurseries while going off to work. Starting up a business from home enables the parent the best of both worlds spending quality time with the children while putting in the hours to run a business.

It’s important to consider that the home business route is an ideal way to encourage, inspire, create a sense of purpose and well worth, getting these people into work who might otherwise not contribute to the economy.
Managers are still strongly opposed to home working

Taken from www.smallbusiness.co.uk in October 2010 it stated from a survey undertaken that most bosses still outlaw home working. More than three quarters of small business managers are rigidly opposed to flexible working for their employees.

A survey of more than 600 senior decision makers by research company YouGov highlighted that 77 per cent do not allow their staff to work from home. Of this percentage, more than 85 per cent say they need their employees to be physically onsite, while 12 per cent do not have the technology to allow home working. This is a very simple IT procedure which can be overcome very quickly and cheaply.

Some 11 percent of those who prohibit home working say it is because they believe their staff would be less productive. The Virtual Assistance Industry has significantly proved otherwise.

However, of the 23 per cent who do allow flexibility, 60 per cent say it increases productivity. The motivation experienced by staff working from home, building better working relationships with employees are a recognised benefit.

We hope that the recent arctic weather conditions experienced, having a huge effect on business operations will make managers rethink their options regards to employees, allowing them to work from home.

David Cameron praises the ‘courage’ of freelancers

23 November National Freelancers Day

Taken from an article on www.businesszone.co.uk on business trends on 23 November 2010 the Prime Minister praised the 1.4 million individuals in the UK who have ditched the comfort of a regular wage to go freelance.

Mr Cameron made the comment in a letter to the Professional Contractors Group (PCG) to mark National Freelancers Day. He said “I can’t tell you how much admiration I have for people who leave the comfort of a regular wage to strike out on their own. It takes a lot of courage and without that courage the country would be a much poorer place”.

He continued to say “The 1.4m freelancers in our country make a massive contribution to our economy. More and more people are choosing freelancing, recognising that it strikes the right balance between work and life in the 21st century, and as we go for economic growth this Government is getting right behind them”.

From this article it stated from a poll by the Professional Contractors Group (PCG) and ComRes that 60% of business leaders said it would be difficult for their company to operate without freelancers and 55% claimed freelancers were essential to growing the UK economy.
The Institute of Work Psychology at Sheffield University –
Looking at Remote Working

Dr Carolyn Axtell has conducted research with organisations for 17 years working with both public and private sector organisations. Most of this research has looked at the impact of new technologies and the new ways of working for employees. She has been invited to contribute to publications and conferences in the area of remote and virtual working as a result of her activities in this area.

During my visit to the USA in September Carolyn held a joint seminar in Sheffield, UK talking about the benefits of Virtual Working to a room full of company owners and directors. My colleague Samantha Hayes attended the event on my behalf making direct contact with Carolyn, which enabled me to meet with her in November at her office at Sheffield University.

I was fascinated to find out from the huge amount of research carried out, that Carolyn confronted a high percentage of issues, problems and barriers that hindered the success of virtual working.

Here are a number of them below:

- Reduced passing of information and instruction / communication problems
- Lack of visibility / potential isolation
- Time zone differences
- Differences between locations
- Potential overload of work
- Trust issues
- Control issues

Each of the issues and potential barriers as above that people foresee before trialling out the services of a Virtual Assistant can be easily understood, identified and solved with very little effort. From my own experience of 5 years providing virtual admin support services to businesses, 99.9% of those business owners/directors worked with have only seen the benefits of working with a remote virtual worker. The only negative aspect of virtual working is that some business owners still prefer to meet the virtual worker face to face before any work commences. Understandably this option is not always available.

With regards to the passing of work instructions it is a priority role of the virtual worker to make sure that all instructions are clearly defined and understood. Again, this has not been an area of huge concern in my own experience, a solution to any problem or small hiccup has always been resolved, giving rise to a continuation of work and stronger good working relations. Customer Service is number one key to running any business, looking after both clients/customers and work associates.

The only negative adverse side has been the onset of the recession. This has created the domino effect whereby the client’s own work slows down which has an understandable knock on effect on the amount of work pushed our way. On a more positive note my meeting with Dr Carolyn Axtell has created the wonderful opportunity of undertaking a research project in February 2011. Information on this project can be found on the next page.
Research Study on homeworking Virtual Assistants

An equal number of homeworking Virtual Assistants from the UK and US to take part in a voluntary research study.

This would involve answering a few simple questions at the end of each working day over a period of two weeks.

This study would specifically look at end of day stress levels working from home, being in charge organising their own schedule and hours, client demands and the work life balance.

The study would also provide recommendations on how to tackle burnout and stress which would be based on the findings of the study.

Dr Axtell has guaranteed full confidentiality - so nobody's individual scores will be identifiable in the report - the findings will be based on the group as a whole, not on individuals.

A key thing is that the findings and recommendations would be specific to our particular type of work (homeworking Virtual Assistants) - so it would be very relevant to our industry.

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Teleworking in the USA
New Bill passed in the House of Representatives

An important quote below highly recognised as a home working professional Virtual Assistant.

“Work is something you do, not someplace you go”. US Representative Frank Wolf

“There is no magic about strapping ourselves into a car, driving sometimes up to an hour and a half to our workplaces, and sitting in front of our computers all day. Teleworking is a win-win for employers and employees and the federal government should be the model for Teleworking in the 21st Century workplace.” US Representative Frank Wolf

Bipartisan Telework Bill Passes the House

Taken from this website - http://wolf.house.gov/index.cfm?sectionid=84&parentid=8&sectiontree=8,84&itemid=1155

On Wednesday 14 July 2010 Washington, D.C. - The House of Representatives passed legislation which would establish policies for eligible federal employees and integrate a robust program into the federal government’s Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP).

This bill will help federal employees meet the needs of those counting on them, ensuring that the federal government is able to operate on the most basic of levels during a terrorist attack or natural disaster. Currently only 56 percent of federal agencies have incorporated Teleworking in their COOP plans.

Rep. Frank Wolf (VA-10), a lead sponsor of the bill with Rep. John Sarbanes (D-MD), and an advocate of Teleworking issues for over 20 years, praised the legislation as a cost savings measure which will help the federal government implement a flexible workplace strategy proven successful in the private sector.

Wolf also noted that options can reduce traffic congestion and air pollution, save gasoline, and improve worker productivity and morale.

Case Study found on the US Patent and Trademark Office

This US government department uses Telework as a cost-effective way to manage human capital, boost productivity and improve the quality of employees’ lives.

The Telework program in the trademark office started as a Council for Excellence in Government (CEG) cohort project 10 years ago and today 86% of those eligible to Telework in the trademark operation, more than 230 trademark attorneys, work 4 days a week from home.

There is still a downside that people scrutinise the cost associated with kitting out federal workers with laptops, printers, scanners etc. It is said that the Congressional Budget Office estimate this will cost $30 million in administration costs to implement the Telework bill.
Interesting facts and figures on Teleworking in the USA


Telecommuting provides new employment opportunities for the under-employed
- More than twelve percent of the working age population that’s disabled (16 million). A full three quarters of unemployed workers with disabilities cite discrimination in the workplace and lack of transportation as major factors that prevent them from working.
- Only seventy-five percent of women, still the traditional primary caregivers, age twenty-five to fifty-four participate in the labour force (compared to ninety percent of men). Almost a quarter of women work part-time (16.5 million), compared to ten percent of men.

Telecommuting slows the brain drain due to retiring Boomers
- 75% of retirees want to continue to work—but they want the flexibility to enjoy their retirement.
- 36% of retirees say the ability to work part rather than full time or to work from home would have encouraged them to keep working—even if it didn’t provide health benefits or meant a temporarily reduced pension.
- 38% of surveyed retirees indicated that being able to work seasonally or on an independent contractor basis would have encouraged them to delay retirement.

Telecommuting reduces staffing redundancies and offers quick scale-up and scale-down options
- Having access to a flexible at-home workforce allows call centres, airlines, and other to add and reduce staff quickly as needed.
- The need to overstaff, just in case, is greatly reduced.
- 24/7 worldwide coverage is easier to staff with home-based help.

Telecommuting expands the talent pool
- Over 40% of employers are feeling the labour pinch; that will worsen as Boomers retire.
- Provides access to disabled workers.
- Offers alternative that would have otherwise kept parents and senior caregivers out of the workforce.
- Over 70% employees report says the ability to telecommute will be somewhat extremely important in choosing their next job.

Snapshots taken from articles found on the internet

Joe Davidson writing for the Washington Post’s Federal Diary blog noted that in the crippling snowstorms of winter 2009/10, the government saved about $30 million a day because some federal employees Teleworked rather than losing days off work.

John Berry, director of OPM, The Office of Personnel Management, is a strong advocate of and said it can be used to keep the government operating during snowstorms like the February blizzard that closed Washington-area offices, which cost the government between $70 and $100 million in lost productivity each day. Although the OPM has for years encouraged agencies to incorporate into their (COOP) Continuity of Operations Plans, only 56% of agencies have done so. Supporters say that this percentage should increase with the new Telework bill which requires Teleworking to be part of the COOP.

On the negative side a 2006 report from Booz Allen Hamilton said Teleworking costs could be higher than anticipated. The cost of buying laptops, printers, scanners and Teleworking equipment for a large number of government employees could cost more than $5 million per year.
How do we engage women on Incapacity Benefit to consider an alternative using transferable skills to become homeworking Virtual Assistants?

Following a research study on ‘Women on Incapacity Benefits – 2009’ by academics at Sheffield Hallam and Dundee University currently Britain has an estimated 2.6 million people of working age claiming Incapacity Benefit.

It stated that nearly 1.1 million were women very much residing in the UK’s older industrial areas such as the Welsh Valleys, North East England, Merseyside and Clydeside.

The researchers from the universities found that both men and women claiming came from the same sector of the labour market. Estimating that 60% have no formal qualifications and that claimants’ previous work skills and experience came from low-grade manual jobs.

Professor Steve Fothergill from Sheffield Hallam Research Team highlighted a substantial ‘hidden unemployment’ amongst these people, where only a minority said they would be unable to do any kind of work. It stated that a percentage of these women felt detached from the labour market facing continuous substantial obstacles into finding work, making it more and more difficult to break the cycle.

Making contact with Professor Steve Fothergill

I contacted Professor Fothergill with my questions regarding these issues asking him who in government actually reads the reports produced by himself and colleagues at the different universities. This was his reply below:

Tracey - Thanks for your note and your interest in our work. Your central question is ‘who listens to what we’re saying?’ Two points here.

The first is that the report you have seen is actually only one part of a stream of work touching on incapacity benefits that we’ve undertaken over the last decade and a half. In general terms we know that this work has been hugely influential in shifting perceptions - there is a realisation now that IB is not just about disability but about labour markets too, and especially about older industrial Britain, where in effect there is a lot of hidden unemployment.

Second, regarding this particular report on women, we’ve scattered the message far and wide and I’m aware that at least some parts of government, especially DWP, know what we’re saying. Whether they always listen and take note is a different matter, especially when new ministers are bringing their own pre-conceptions (prejudices?) along with them.

Your particular concern is about re-engaging women in homeworking in secretarial / admin roles. You need to bear in mind that it’s actually only a modest proportion of women on IB who have these sorts of skills / experience - maybe only one in ten according to our figures, though that still equates to 100,000, though not all of these would be interested in working again.

DWP should have a live interest in going down the routes you suggest. The reform of IB will, in due course, require all but the most severely ill IB claimants to draw up plans to ‘progress towards work’. I’d love to give you a single prime contact in DWP to talk to, but in practice responsibility for these matters tends to be spread across many individuals, except at the very top of course. You might try writing to the new Secretary of State (Ian Duncan Smith). You should get a helpful reply and perhaps a contact name.
Following receipt of the above email from Professor Fothergill I wrote to the Secretary of State Ian Duncan Smith and received a letter as shown on the next page.

**Conclusions drawn from the reply:**

To continue raising the awareness to government asking how do we get business owners/managers to adopt a different way of working using homeworking Virtual Assistants to provide their administrative/business support services on an hourly rate instead of employing someone direct?

Can government raise awareness of ‘Homeworking Virtual Assistants’ and business support services offered from people working from their home offices as a massive benefit to businesses, saving them thousands of pounds on wages, taking away the cost of providing office space, computer equipment, training and parking provisions?

We need to get rid of the whole out dated home working theory as ‘scamming’ which has been previously adopted and is still seen by some business owners/managers.

How to encourage those people on Incapacity Benefit to try a different career route with a view to becoming self employed homeworkers offering virtual admin/business support services.

Tackling the Job Centres into changing their current offerings of ‘employed jobs’ only and to look at displaying self employment opportunities as an alternative.
Dear Ms Clarke

Thank you for your e-mail of 4 June addressed to the Secretary of State. You wrote about home working for those in receipt of payments from the benefits system.

I have been asked to reply on behalf of Ministers. As I am sure you can appreciate Ministers receive a large number of letters each day and they cannot reply to them all individually.

Tackling unemployment is a priority for this Government. It has announced its plans for radical reforms of the welfare to work system and the implementation of the Work Programme. The Work Programme will be a single integrated package of support providing personalised help for everyone who finds themselves out of work regardless of the benefit they claim.

Once implemented, the Work Programme will supersede much of the complicated raft of national programmes currently on offer and these will be phased out. The core Work Programme will be delivered by contractors drawn from the private, public and voluntary sectors, as well as social enterprises. The Government will offer these providers stronger incentives to work with the harder to help, paying them out of the additional benefits they realise as a result of placing people into work.

This will mean that everyone, from younger and older jobseekers and those with disabilities, will have access to a fully integrated and coherent system of back-to-work support for the first time.

The Government is determined to move quickly and aims to have the Work Programme in place nationally by the summer of 2011. It is currently reviewing
the best way of doing this and will announce further details as the design and implementation of the Work Programme progresses.

The Department contracts with a wide range of private, public and voluntary sector providers to deliver employment programmes which complement the services delivered through Jobcentre Plus. Information regarding its procurement process is available from the ‘Supplying DWP’ website at www.dwp.gov.uk/supplying-dwp/. However, please note that following the formation of the new Government, the contents of the website are currently under review and therefore may be subject to change.

Yours sincerely

Mrs K Creais

Business Delivery Team

Public, Parliament and Stakeholders Division

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Recommendations

- To continue influencing the Coalition Government on the importance of home working to businesses. That home working should be taken much more seriously with professional, highly experienced people supplying quality business support services to companies and organisations UK wide and internationally.

- The extreme arctic weather conditions experienced this year in the UK displays a serious need for Virtual Assistance to be made far more available to businesses. A huge awareness raising campaign required to pursue this, making businesses aware of the benefits. This will then create the work for experienced PA’s, secretaries and administrators currently out of work or facing redundancy an alternative career route.

- With the onset of faster broadband with fibre optic cables this will create for better quality communication technology for businesses – which goes hand in hand with virtual working and teleworking.

- That we should continue to study how the US Government are progressing and rolling out their new ‘Teleworking Bill’.

- Look at the UK Governments reforming Benefits System. Tackling the short and long term benefit dependents and finding out what currently they are offered in terms of re-training, options to go self employed and making them aware that home working is a real opportunity.

- Investigate what currently the UK has in place for veterans returning from war and how a ‘Veterans Portfolio Agency Programme’ could be set up and run by home working Virtual Assistants.
Conclusions

On a personal basis

The biggest impact on me personally was the wonderful hospitality and kindness from everyone I met in every part of the USA visited. The automatic built-in American outlook of a positive way forward in periods of extreme economic difficulties was overwhelming.

Here in the UK we seem to thrive on the ‘doom and gloom’ and negative stories force fed by the media. The American ‘can Do’ approach was felt wherever I visited.

I was told during my visit to California during the really difficult economic times that employees were given IOU’s instead of actual wages/money, people still continued to work with an overwhelming optimism that things would get better. Here in the UK we seem to have a nation of people who prefer to strike!

There was a definite independent attitude towards going forward, whether this involved looking for work, improving their education/skills or starting up a business in a difficult climate. I found the American ethos to be extremely infectious and created an enjoyable enthusiasm which made me feel quite sad about the UK attitude to work and self improvement.

On my return from the US I have been made much more aware of the ‘sometimes negative response’ expressed from people here in the UK towards the US. Of how little is known about the USA and its people, how they operate in business, their continuous strong resilience and how they always appear to recover from an economic recession much faster than us.

This has made me realise that you have to go and visit places yourself to gain first hand information and knowledge. You need to experience the places and the people in real America not the glamorised tourist areas regularly visited by the Brits. My short experience of living with a family in northern California opened my eyes and had a huge positive impact on myself – a life changing experience.

On a business footing

The American ‘can do’ attitude, forward thinking outlook definitely paints the picture of positive business which was definitely evident in Dallas, Texas.

I was told on my visit to Irving Chamber of Commerce (just outside Dallas) that a number of Fortune 100 companies traditionally based in California were moving their head quarters to Texas because of much lower business taxes and low cost of living. The Dallas and Fort Worth areas seemed to have shielded better from the downturn and showed a definite upturn in business during my visit. Fellow Virtual Assistants based in these areas were working very hard with a substantial customer base with a view to strong growth.

Richmond in Virginia showed continuous significant growth with a solid grasp on their monetary budgets, balancing their books, celebrating their positive move forward. My meeting with Rowena from the Greater Richmond Partnership was very insightful, creating a fantastic starting block for any new business starting out.
From my visit and research undertaken using different Virtual Assistant Associations based in the USA, I didn’t find any one particular State that readily adopted working with Virtual Assistants. But there did appear to be more working Virtual Assistants in Texas and California who showed strong growth and success in gaining clients and sustaining continuous virtual work.

Education

After spending time with different professors and lecturers at two of the main colleges in Sacramento, California, I was made aware that getting a good education in the US was a high priority for people. The higher degree gained the more opportunities available. Here in the UK experience seems to be more highly regarded. Employers ideally want someone who can walk into a job and start straight away. Training is not always a priority due to cost implications.

Following the recent students demonstrations in London and the angst surrounding the whole university system in the UK – I don’t personally feel the UK is ready to take on the Virtual Office Professional Degree Programme which is being currently run in Sierra College, Sacramento, California. I think there needs to be radical changes here in the UK before this programme can be integrated and made available through the state education.

From my experience of going into colleges in South Yorkshire and Derbyshire presenting to students talking about the benefits of working from home as a Virtual Assistant, the teaching practices in the UK still appear to be ‘traditionally old style’ as opposed to the advancing virtual teaching methods adopted by colleges in areas like California.

The only way forward would be to privately set up the Virtual Office Professional Degree Program through an established UK training company who has access to our UK Accreditation Councils and Bodies.

I am continuing my work with Dr Cyndi Dunn and Sierra College as a guest teacher on a virtual basis for the Virtual Office Professional Degree Program which starts again in February 2011 for a period of 5 weeks which I shall thoroughly enjoy.