



by Williesha Morris

**F**ollow  
t h e  
t e r m

“virtual assistant”

closely in the news and  
the main name sprouting up

nowadays is iPhone’s Siri. But when was the last time you mused about becoming a virtual assistant (VA) and shortening your commute to a few minutes?

The dream of becoming a VA is as real now as it was when the industry blossomed many years ago when the Internet became an indispensable tool. In fact, with all of the reliable tools and programs, becoming a VA is even easier now.

There are essential steps—even a few unorthodox tips—to becoming a successful VA.

### Deciding on the perfect services

Crafting the right service offering is the primary key to beginning a VA business. Offering too many or too

few services will burn you out or bore you. Take what you enjoy the most in your current administrative position and decide if it’s something you could pursue for multiple clients simultaneously.

Michelle Dale of Virtual Miss Friday at [www.virtualmissfriday.com](http://www.virtualmissfriday.com) has a simple formula whenever making any business decision, including how to choose the right services for your business. She considers them the “golden rules, the key to having a successful business.”

If you think to yourself, “I just don’t know if this is

## Tip for attaining success as a VA: **The First Steps**



*Just make a start, get started. Start learning, and, at the end of the day, it's your business. So if you want to change anything in it, if you don't like a client anymore, it's your prerogative to stop that and to move in a different direction. A lot of this is down to your own learning. If you don't try anything, you're never going to learn what's right for you. I can teach you everything I know, but that doesn't mean to say that it's always right for you as an individual. So it's about really learning from other people, finding mentors, finding people to look up to, to learn from but then adapting and making sure that you take what they teach you and you make it your own.*

Michelle Dale, Virtual Miss Friday



right, I just don't know if I should be doing this, the first question you have to ask is, 'Is it profitable?'

"The second question is, 'Is it useful to other people?' And the third question that you need to ask is "Are you going to find personal fulfillment out of doing it," Dale said.

The goal is to get a minimum of two "yes" answers to the questions. If the answers are all "no," simply don't do it.

"Anytime I want to make a decision, any time I think to myself, 'Should I be offering this service? Should I be launching that program? Should I be working with that client?' I ask those three questions."

VBM Pro's Sara Speicher's advice at [www.vbmpro.com](http://www.vbmpro.com) is "first and foremost, I think you have to find out what you are really passionate about."

"You don't have to do what the industry does." She suggests putting together a list of services and researching pricing structures. Then go the extra step by determining what clients may be interested in but didn't ask for. Create several pricing packages and let the potential client decide.

"It's so hard to say 'no' in the beginning," Speicher said. "You may take on tasks that you don't enjoy do-

ing. You have to evaluate it."

She said it's about "knowing your own value. I think that we as women in general, I think we struggle with that. Always deliver more than you promised."

### **Creating a personal brand to find and maintain clients**

Becoming a business owner is a daunting process, but owning your identity and having confidence is how VAs find clients.

"I believe in the energy and law of attraction," Speicher said. "I've been able to attract clients who want exactly what I love doing."

A lack of confidence held Dale back at first.

"You think or you believe that you need to be at some sort of academic level or have some sort of qualifications to go out and be a business owner or an entrepreneur when that's simply not the case," Dale said.

"Personal branding is a big thing," she said. "If you want to obtain clients very quickly, the best thing you can do is show the client who you are."

Place a professional photo or video on your VA site, "just so people can see you and can see that you are the real deal," Dale said. "Be hon-

## **VA Statistics\***

from the Virtual Assistant Network

**Gender:** Female .....**96.8%**

### **Education:**

High school.....**51.8%**

College/Trade School....**59.2%**

On-the-Job Training .....**52.7%**

### **Is Your Business:**

Full-time .....**58.9%**

Part-time.....**41.0%**

### **How long did it take before you had your first paying client?**

**23.2%** already had one arranged

**30.9%** in the first month

**24.7%** in the first three months

### **Have you niched yourself?**

**56.5%** said no

### **What is your hourly rate (USD)?**

\$31-\$40 .....**31.9%**

*\*top answers*

est with people and tell people your story, and be confident when you are communicating to people."

"If there's anything that's going to make a client choose somebody else over and above you it's when they see somebody who is offering the same thing but does it with twice as much confidence," Dale said.

### **Don't niche, just get out there**

While networking is the go-to option for brick-and-mortar businesses, working from home often means isolating yourself.

"Even though you are virtual and you work online, a lot of people make the mistake of hiding," Speicher said. She encouraged new VAs to push themselves to reach out to local organizations and media.

"They are always looking for experts, speakers, someone to bring



## Michelle Dale

*Virtual Miss Friday*

Youthful desire and drive led Michelle Dale of Virtual Miss Friday down the path to virtual assistance. She quit school at 16 to find her way.

School never gelled with Dale. She told herself she'd rather have a dead-end job than go to school and figured she'd have to accept her fate. After holding various jobs that kept her away from home from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m., at age 23, even after working not-so-dead-end jobs, she decided enough was enough.

"I never really found anything that I thought to myself, 'I really love this.'" She didn't lack ambition. By this age, she had already bought and sold five properties. She needed to find her joy.

"The motivation (to start my own business) was purely for travel and being pretty miserable," said Dale with a laugh. She booked a one-way trip to Egypt and did some research. Unfortunately, when she began in 2005, the VA industry was still in its infancy.

She started educating herself on different programs such as Dreamweaver and PhotoShop. Freelance website design was her first foray into virtual assistance.

She realized she was out of her element, however. Because she was so new to Web design, she didn't charge for her services at first. Then she began to focus more on administrative duties and hired others to help with Web design.

Since then, she has grown to over 100 clients and a 20-plus team. She hopes to move more into consulting and continue to teach new online business owners her secrets to becoming successful.

value," she said.

Dale and Speicher started up by going against typical marketing advice. They chose not to niche at first – i.e., selecting a target audience to focus their marketing.

"The best thing I did when I started my business is to focus on people who really needed my services, and I didn't care who they were at the time," Dale said.

"When I started doing that, that's when I started doing a lot of business. What happened is I found my niche from working with different people and from learning what I liked about them, what I didn't like about them, seeing patterns," she said.

"I've never really had a niche market," Dale added. "I worked with so

many varieties of clients that I tend to look for more characteristics and personalities of the individuals I'm working with as opposed to an industry or an age group or a location."

Speicher didn't want to limit herself in the beginning. She said the important factor is to stay ahead of clients in terms of their needs and seeing trends, much like you would as an administrative assistant in a company.

These similarities and skills such as multitasking and organization can make the transition from a corporate admin to a virtual assistant simpler. But Time Etc.'s Barnaby Lashbrooke at [www.timeetc.com](http://www.timeetc.com) points out distinct differences.

"The relationship obviously between a VA and a client is very dif-



## Sara Speicher

*VBM Pro*

Sara Speicher of VBM Pro was in the middle of huge changes in her life two years ago when she decided to become a VA.

"I found out I was pregnant and lost my job in the same week," Speicher said.

Thankfully, she grew up in the entrepreneurial environment, and saw how rewarding it could be but also how challenging. "I always wanted to have something flexible," she said to end her multiple-hour commute to work. Also, her family lives overseas and she wanted to be able to communicate with them on their hours.

Her business background allowed her to become a virtual business manager (VBM), which incorporates the basics of a VA with added skills such as managing other VAs. She loves her work. She offers a free manual for choosing a VBM.

"It changed a lot from where I started," she said. "I wanted to go against all odds."



## Barnaby Lashbrooke

Time Etc.

Barnaby Lashbrooke's successes started early in life. At age 17, he began a Web-hosting service in his bedroom.

His web business started at the right place at the right time. He built it up to about 24,000 customers by the time he sold it. "I'm sure by modern standards, that's not very big, but it was not bad considering we didn't have any investment or anything."

He immediately set up Time Etc. after selling his Web business. Success was not far behind.

"It's all I've ever done. I don't really know anything else. I came straight out of school and started a business," he said. "I've never had a job."

Once he needed help to get every day things done, Lashbrooke turned his need into a service for others. He began hiring virtual assistants and matching them up with the right clients.

"So it all really started because I had this idea that would be great for business owners to get some support." His business now brings in more than \$1.5 million.

## Tip for attaining success as a VA: **Marketing**



*I think probably one of the things is to learn about Google Adwords and learn how you can generate inquiries that way. The benefit being that for comparatively little money you can turn your Google Adwords on and instantly attract inquiries. It takes a while to learn it. It's really controllable.*

Barnaby Lashbrooke, Time Etc.



ferent to the relationship between an executive assistant and their boss," Lashbrooke said.

He said the key to success in this new environment is being proactive, marketing yourself and knowing the precise needs of the customer, even if you've never met and have only communicated briefly.

"I think you need to be very entrepreneurial," he said. "To be a successful VA, **you have to be able** to think like a business owner to easily tailor services to fit around the needs of the busy business owners that they're supporting."

Trial and error is what sparked Speicher's business and helped maintain positive relationships with her clients, particularly with pricing her services.

"It's an evolution. Mistakes will happen," she said. "Don't wait for everything to be perfect. Don't wait for the perfect website. Don't wait for the perfect blog post. Get out there. And if something doesn't feel right from the beginning, listen to your gut."

# RESOURCES

## For aspiring VAs

### The essential start-up basics:

- Computer/laptop
- Headset/microphone
- Internet
- Skype account

Lashbrooke and Dale

### Software:

- **Customer relationship management:** InfusionSoft
- **Email marketing:** MailChimp
- **Payments, Invoicing:** PayPal, Freshbooks
- **Word Processing/email:** Google apps/Gmail
- **Cloud Storage:** DropBox
- **Social Media Management:** Hootsuite
- **Project Management:** Asana, Basecamp

Sara Speicher, VBM Pro

### About the author:

Williesha Morris is both a virtual assistant and a freelance writer and enjoys helping other small business owners and freelancers find their writing voice. You can find her at [MyFreelanceLife.com](http://MyFreelanceLife.com) and on Twitter @willieshamorris.