



# VIRTUAL ASSISTANTS

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While the use of virtual assistants (VA) may never become universally accepted, most SIORs have not only seen the trend growing in recent years, but believe it will become even more prevalent in the coming years.









"I think that we will see more and more people using VAs over the next five years," predicts John M. Adams, III, SIOR, CCIM, who is a principal with Avison Young in Knoxville, Tenn. "There are always those that are either late adopters or who won't make any change at all, but I think that with the way video conferencing has improved over the last five years, it makes it much easier to communicate with that person that is across the country from you. This allows you to have face-to-face interaction."

"For those of us with smaller or independent CRE firms, they will be ubiquitous

and I foresee more than three-quarters of such firms will work at some level with VA's," adds David L. Liebman, SIOR, JD, LEED, Green Associate, managing broker with Merit Partners in Chicago. "The advent of technology and the capabilities of many people who live in developing countries bring them as close to us as the onsite administrative assistant, and at a much lower cost.

"Even larger CRE firms will continue to utilize them in the future to compete with the medium and smaller firms who are already utilizing them day-to-day," he continues. "The cost implications and the higher efficiency levels will be too compelling to ignore."

"I think I'll be using virtual assistants more," Steve Eisenshtadt, SIOR, CCIM, senior vice president - FBC, Brokerage Services with Friedman Integrated Real Estate Solutions in Farmington Hills,

MI, shares. "I've played around with the idea, but I am interested in doing more with virtual assistants. The cost is less than employing a full time assistant."

But Mark Triska, SIOR, executive vice-president with Colliers International in Pleasanton, Calif., has other thoughts. "I'm an old school broker," he says. "When somebody says 'virtual assistant' I think of a gal or guy sitting in the Philippines who has a college education. If I wanted to send them a database and say: please extract the manufacturing companies and put together a mailing list oftentimes an administrative person does that, but they can't show a property for me or quote a price for me."

Still, he concedes, "If you talk to my counterparts in their early 30s you might hear something different."

## Most Experience has Been Positive

Most of the SIORs we talked to have had some experience with virtual assistants, and by and large it has been positive. "I have used E-Lance in the past — only for two small database related projects,"

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says Eisenshtadt. "The cost was low, since the service providers were from outside of the U.S.A."

He adds that he's heard from other commercial realtors who use virtual assistants for a variety of functions. "I've also listened to an interview with a full time real estate virtual assistant who employs a staff of five people, specializing in working for commercial realtors," Eisenshtadt adds. "She provides marketing services, including social media, and database services."

"I have two VAs: one for purely administrative, and one that helps with more complex, project related tasks," adds David Ariola, SIOR, president of Chicago Realty Company.

"We used the VA when we first started our company to assist with flyers and marketing materials," says Adams. "She had been a marketing assistant for a commercial brokerage before her husband was transferred. She understood what we did and was very helpful, and we used her until we could justify hiring someone full-time in the office."

"The negative, he continues, was that she was on the other side of the country. "Looking back on it, we should have used some sort of video conferencing," says

Adams. "We only talked via phone and email. There were several times that we needed something done quickly and she wasn't able to get it done. She often times had a previous commitment from another client. We were only using her for a few hours per day, so we could not expect to have her waiting on us to give her a project."

Liebman says he is currently working with his second VA in the last 12 months. "The first was a single VA, referred to me by another VA who worked with a friend. The single VA happened to be in my area and was also doing work for another local SIOR," he shares. "I no longer work with that single VA. The second VA is a group out of India called Flatworld Solutions. I found them through web research and am working with them now."

## Advantages, Disadvantages Noted

Even the SIORs who work with VA's note there are some disadvantages, but in general they say the positives outweigh them. "It takes work off my plate that I hated and never got to," says Liebman. One of the downsides he reports, "the single VA required **way** too much oversight, and defeated the purpose of the

engagement. Trouble signs arose early in the working relationship (over-reactive compensating behavior; way more detail-oriented than was necessary for project work; etc.)

"If they understand my objectives clearly, they are time efficient and good communicators, they're terrific helpers and make me much more productive," he continues. "It's hard to know if they're any good until you actually work with them, despite any pre-screening, recommendations, or tests of their work product prior to engaging them."

Ariola offers the following advantages: A) You only pay for the time you use - you don't need to hire someone full time; B) You have the flexibility of independent contractors versus employees; C) You can use multiple VA's with different skill sets.

On the downside, he notes, "You need to adjust to working together while never seeing anyone in person. You also need to clearly articulate expectations for task completion." He says it helps to have a completely cloud-based system (Ariola uses Google+).

Adams agrees. "You don't have the face-to-face interaction that can be important in explaining a project," he

observes. "Since they are virtual, it can be hard to get them to react if you have a tight timeline. If you are using a VA service, you may end up working with a different person each time you reach out. This can create issues in explaining the same thing over and over or not having consistent work."

On the other hand, he observes, "The advantage is that you are typically only paying for the hours they are working. You can cut down on the size of your office, because they are not taking up space. They have their own computer and are not looking for health insurance or benefits."

"The positives of my experiences were that I was able to filter and screen for the best service providers using E-Lance," says Eisenshtadt." The people I selected were very responsive; they hope to get more business from good service and they are subject to public feedback from past clients."

The disadvantages, he continues, "are the hurdles to communication with virtual assistants in different countries. They include restrictions on communication from time differences and international calls. Also, using the cheapest virtual assistant isn't always the best route to go. Working with someone with experience in commercial real estate is worth the extra cost, in my opinion."

Despite the noted advantages, Triska says he does not plan to change his approach, insisting that the value of VAs is too limited. "My assistant can do everything other than generate new business," he notes. "She responds to my e-mails, drafts offer for leases or sales – a lot of what I do on a daily basis. What she cannot do is close deals or generate new business, or a lot of the relationship building and presentation work I do – but she has a license, she

can show buildings and quote prices. When I'm gone on business or vacation she can basically take over my desk and run the business."

A lot the younger brokers, he continues, look to automation to improve their business. And Triska, who has been in the business for 28 years, does use SIRI to send texts, dial calls, and send e-mails from his database. However, he adds, "my assistant is basically an extension of my practice. I am basically her employer and pay for her work and I also pay a bonus on how we perform together; she is as motivated as I am to get business done. I'm not sure a VA, who works on an hourly or piecemeal basis, would have the same motivation and team ability." ▼



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