

Virtual Offices – What & Why

In this article: An overview of virtual offices, how virtual offices are used, the cost benefits of using the services of a virtual office assistant and the history of virtual offices.

Overview of the Virtual Office

There are at least three concepts associated with the term 'virtual office'. It is used to describe the growing number of employees who work from home or on the road; a facility that offers space for rent that includes access to meeting rooms and reception services; and companies that offer the services of virtual assistants to complement or replace full or part-time staff. The emphasis of this article is on the latter.

At an increasing pace the Virtual Office concept is replacing the traditional office. Surveys reveal that a greater percentage of the workforce desires a more "mobile" definition of an office. The new generation of entrepreneurs is embracing the virtual office instead of the traditional on a global scale. Many companies are incorporating the flexibility of a virtual office into their culture. Corporations like Accenture, IBM and Crayon are at the forefront of publicly-traded companies actively utilizing the virtual office concept. Even the world of academia has discovered the advantages of a virtual office. The virtual office industry has spawned a sub-industry; companies are now developing products and services specifically for virtual office applications. Companies have barely scratched the surface of the concept of virtual offices. Working virtually is the future for all businesses that seek to:

- Make the world an extremely connected place, reaching smaller towns and cities across the globe.
- Reduce carbon footprints by lowering consumption of fuel and electricity by eliminating distance variables and expanding boundaries for working creatively.
- Cash in on the interaction technology wave and ensure that anything other than talent, skills, intelligence and aptitude are irrelevant (like a worker's previously limiting physical location).
- Expand hiring choices and provide a more comfortable working environment, less stress and a more balanced lifestyle while increasing personal productivity with time and money saved from zero commuting.
- Cut commercial real estate costs with viable alternative rents or leases and reduce large set-ups, hierarchies and innumerable administrative functions.
- Have staff flexibilities instead of hiring secretaries

Common Virtual Office Users:

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| Home-based entrepreneurs | Accountants |
| Attorneys | Law Firms |
| Mobile salespeople | Therapists |
| Doctors/Dentists | Mediators/conflict resolution |
| Business consultants | Chambers of Commerce |
| Frequent travelers/foreign companies | Real estate |
| Senior management | Stock brokers/financial planners |
| Collections agencies | Mortgage Companies |
| Trainers/instructors | Trades (Home service industry: roofers, electrical, plumb, landscape, construction, repair/remodel, etc) |

Virtual Office Assistant Services

A virtual assistant is often a “lone eagle” working from home, who rarely meets their clients face-to-face. A virtual assistant typically has no access to CTI Software. Rates run \$15 an hour and up.

Answering services/call centers operate from a centralized location for the purpose of receiving and transmitting a large volume of requests by telephone. Users lament problems of security, impersonal staff with high turnover, language barriers, translation errors and a less-than-professional image.

Voicemail is a low-cost technology that stores voice messages electronically. In customer service applications voicemail has limitations. Used for customer service voicemail has become synonymous with frustration. The complaints are legion and have inspired many spoofs on the voicemail experience.

Virtual offices are experiencing growth even in a recessionary economy, and not just in the United States. As businesses look to trim expenses, virtual office services help reduce overhead while keeping professionalism high. For example, by paying for space and communication infrastructure on an as-needed basis, businesses can keep office expenses to a minimum. The portability of today’s technology also allows for a more flexible work environment.

History of the Virtual Office

The virtual office idea came from the convergence of technological innovation and the Information Age. The concept has roots in the Industrial Revolution, where parallels to current work styles, specifically working from home, have been drawn. The term was first used in a 1983 airline in-flight magazine article about portable computing. The virtual office concept is an evolution of the executive suites industry. However, the inflexibility of an executive suite lease doesn’t work for many business models and helped spur the virtual office concept. The first commercial application of a virtual office occurred in 1994 when Ralph Gregory founded The Virtual Office, Inc. (now known as Intelligent Office) in Boulder, Colorado.

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