

HOW PROPERTY TRAINING LED ME TO OWNING A VA BUSINESS

Interview & words: **Julie Whitmore**

Whilst working as a management consultant for the NHS, **Justine Palin** enrolled onto the pin Mastermind programme in April 2020 to progress her own property journey, having been investing for many years. During this time, she recruited a virtual assistant (VA) to help her. Being a creative type of person, Justine had trained her VA on numerous different property strategies including rent-to-rent and HMOs. However, when Covid hit, Justine was pulled into supporting the establishment of the vaccine infrastructure rollout across Greater Manchester, which involved extremely long hours and no time to focus on property or Claire, the VA she had recruited.

Fast forward three years and Justine has gone on to grow her own VA business, The VA Property Company (TVAPC) employing 12+ employees supporting a boutique customer base across property and other industries.

Justine takes over the story here to talk about her organic growth and change in direction ...

Because of my involvement with the NHS and the vaccine programme, and the subsequent time restrictions that accompanied these roles, I had a colleague on Mastermind who was looking for some similar support. I agreed to outsource Claire to him on a temporary basis, on the understanding that I would want her back once the vaccine programme was implemented. Having worked with Claire, he was really impressed with her and commented on how well trained she was. It was then that I recognised there was a gap in the market for a plug-and-play offering for VA services.

I had recruited Claire via an agency and was involved in the interviewing process. The agency did not have any responsibilities outside of the recruitment process, and so I was responsible for defining and implementing a training programme for any education and systems familiarisation required for us to work together.



Developing my VA business

When I first started my business, I followed the “Fiverr” model, whereby I had a team of trained VAs providing a range of outputs for clients. The business growth became organic when I started to provide trained VAs and tailored services having identified that this was what clients wanted.

I progressed by engaging Claire to assist with the recruitment of other VAs to grow the business and set up a reporting and operational management structure to support this. This allowed Claire to be promoted, giving her a growth path, which helped to keep her motivated and committed to TVAPC.

Over the last three years my business model has evolved, mainly based on my learnings and greater understanding of clients’ needs. I decided to bring more of me and my consultancy services into the business to provide a unique proposition. As part of my service offering, I now spend a lot of time talking to clients explaining to them how to delegate and effectively manage their VA. This isn’t something that is a natural skill to everyone, particularly for those who have not come from a background where staff/employee management, understanding KPIs and undertaking performance reviews are a crucial part of their skill base. I also work with small established businesses who want to grow, but require some support to be more efficient. This may include some initial consulting so I can understand the pinch points in the business that can be improved by using systems, processes and automation.

Our client base is varied. Clients may need support with numerous or specific elements of their business, such as bookkeeping, general support. We also have other clients at the opposite end of the spectrum who have multiple businesses and are looking to systemise processes across the whole group with our support. We end up becoming an extension of our client’s business as we get to know them.

I’m also starting to see growth in non-property businesses looking for VA support as they understand the benefits.

“My business model focuses on creating and growing a business relationship with a client, not just providing a transactional-based service.”

This isn’t to say that there isn’t a place for the transactional model, which is more suited for business owners who already have experience in dealing with VAs.

Learning to manage a VA

Prior to recruiting Claire, I had I heard many stories from other people in the industry about ‘disappearing VAs’, which is quite a common problem mainly due to the way they have been trained or managed, or both. Many overseas VAs generally look to maximise the number of clients they can work for by utilising different time zones across the world. If not properly supported by you, they may favour their other clients and disappear!

While my main challenge was having an employee on the other side of the world that needed to be managed, my second was realising the amount of time it takes to train a VA while ensuring that the nuances of language and literal understanding are taken into consideration.

“The biggest mistake is thinking that a VA can do everything!”

I needed to be really organised to get into a pattern of shift working as the Philippines are eight hours ahead of the UK. My approach was to set instructions by the end of the UK working day and by the time I had woken up the following day, I would have information to review from Claire who had been working whilst the UK was sleeping – this worked well for activities that didn’t need to be done in UK real time, such as lead generation.

As my VA business moved forward and grew, one of the key issues that became obvious was clients that I had onboarded who had undertaken some DIY recruitment without any experience. This leads to frustrations on both sides for numerous reasons; VAs’ experience, not knowing what to delegate, etc, all lead to poor success levels.

The biggest mistake is thinking that a VA can do everything! Social

media, lead generation, book-keeping, digital marketing, report production, and so on. I often come across a situation where a client will have a list of about 20 activities that they want the VA to take on, but has neglected to implement any key performance indicators (KPIs) or provide clear instructions. The client then becomes frustrated when the VA hasn’t delivered on everything. In this scenario, there is a significant risk that the VA will disappear. Moreover, some clients concentrate on ‘tasks’ rather than looking at the business as a whole to see where a VA could add

the most value to remove some of the “noise” and create efficiencies.

Another key element is having an effective VA training plan and an on-going management

approach (ie, workflows, communication systems) for the VA to successfully solve problems without the client’s continuous involvement and guidance. Some clients don’t really think this through and therefore don’t have a considered plan on what they specifically want the VA to do. It can often be a bit of a knee-jerk reaction – “I need a VA to help me and my business!” – but engaging a VA should be based around the 80/20 rule. Having around 20% of your workload being done by your VA should take 80% of your pressure away.

It’s vital to ensure that your VA is happy and motivated, otherwise they won’t stay and all the effort you have put into building the relationship will be wasted. Not to mention the costs you may have incurred during this process! Ultimately, you want your VA to grow and become an integral part of the business.

Taking a comprehensive approach

I've consolidated my consultancy, property investment skills and experience, which I utilise to help clients to shape and identify where the opportunities are for creating efficiencies in their business. We then train the VA in the client's systems. We also have technical expertise and can provide support from a pool of VAs which the client can tap into for short-term project support as required.

The initial on-boarding process for a client is to review their business and gain an understand of their challenges to be able to identify the main areas of focus for the VA and potentially areas of systemisation. Systems training is provided for their VA and a regular review takes place to understand the performance of the VA and how it's working for both parties.

I refer to this process as an eco-system of support. Consultancy from myself to gain a holistic view of the business, working with the client on issues that can be improved, including systems, and finally providing VA support accordingly. We will train the VA on client specific systems as required also ensuring backup knowledge is in place within TVAPC.

Relationships and great customer satisfaction is an important KPI within my business. The ongoing review process I have with clients enables them to tweak and adapt as things move forward because working with any resources, not just VAs, is not going to be without its challenges.



CASE STUDY 1

From Research to Success in Rent-to-Rent

We are working with an overseas investor who has a UK property business. The client wanted to get into the rent-to-rent market (Rooms Coventry) which was new to them.

We provided research and consultancy support to identify the best areas helping them to secure leads which led to the client securing profitable rent-to-rent deals. Through our lead generation service, including a social media campaign, we connected them with landlords who would

benefit from this strategy.

The client is now well on their way to achieving their target of six operating rent-to-rent units in one year and has stated that: "we would not be as advanced as we are with the amount of leads generated by the VA – it has kept the pipeline full and is consistent."

We are also now in discussion with the client about other ventures using our consultancy support services.

What to consider when hiring a VA

Over the past six months I have been running webinars and I enjoy imparting knowledge to attendees. When I first started out, there was nowhere to go to get after sales VA support, particularly around the nuances of differences in culture. This is an intrinsic part of our consultancy approach that we offer to clients, as we aim to provide a high level of emotional intelligence about working with overseas VAs.

If you're taking a DIY approach to recruiting a VA, you need to be mindful of the process that you will need to go through and the time it will take not only for the recruitment but also for the onboarding and ongoing management. I very often receive enquiries where the potential client is just purely focused on cost and paying the minimum amount possible without considering the challenges involved or the value that a VA can provide. If you are looking for a turnkey service then self-recruiting an untrained VA is not for you.

CASE STUDY 2

We partnered with a Quantity Surveyor, James Consulting Services Ltd who wanted to systemise his business, providing VA support from day one to ensure streamlined operations.

Impressed with the results after working with us for 18 months, he recently referred us to one of his clients, a construction company wanting to systemise their business. Our expertise in optimising workflows and providing reliable VA admin has positioned us as trusted partner to their business.



The key areas for consideration when working with overseas VAs are:

1 **Language and communication:** (both written and oral).

Differences in accents, pronunciation, and cultural expressions can sometimes lead to misunderstandings. If you're using a VA to make outbound calls for you it's a subtle consideration that is often overlooked.

2 **Time zone differences:**

For property management or SA business support, you need to think about any out-of-hours requirements and possible weekend activities where you may need additional support.

3 **Legal and regulatory compliance:**

You need to ensure the VA is educated on relevant laws and regulations, data protection policies, and confidentiality agreements. This is particularly important if you want your VA to work with your mortgage broker or solicitor, and/or to ensure that third parties are not in breach of their own compliance when working with an overseas VA.

4 **Understanding UK property market dynamics:**

Overseas VAs may not be familiar with the intricacies of the dynamics, regulations, terminology and market trends (as they may have previously worked for real estate clients based in the US) and therefore may require training on the UK laws and market.

5 **UK data protection regulations:**

It is essential to ensure that overseas VAs are well-informed about these regulations and adhere to them when handling sensitive client information.

Looking forward

I'm at the point now where I need to look at how I systemise and automate my business so that I can leverage for continuous growth and expansion. I'm reviewing my UK capacity in addition to identifying resources from other countries. As a business owner I'm also constantly focusing on my mindset and tenacity which is key to any business. I'm a big fan of journalling and taking a reflective approach in reviewing the business. It's so easy to get caught up in the day-to-day elements of the business without reviewing it objectively. I have also learned to step out of the property industry from time-to-time to network in other business areas for inspiration and perspective. I continuously work on my own self-development and manage my time by utilising 90-minute work packages to focus on specific activities. I also use one of these for self-love and nurturing as required to help me to focus on achieving my goal of a laptop lifestyle business. In fact, I'm heading to the Philippines in August in a business development capacity, as part of the on-going recruitment activity.

I really enjoy and am passionate about supporting people and helping them and their businesses grow, so sometimes it's hard for me to stand back from my clients and my team. I'm trying to grow a business that creates a win-win for everyone. For me it's about giving back and helping people and as I grow, I want to create a charity overseas helping women who have been trafficked to get their lives back on track, providing them opportunities to work in the VA business. I'm also juggling teenage children and facing the impending empty nest syndrome which is going to require a period of adjustment! I enjoy yoga and meditation and have an interest in the principles of the Law of Attraction and synchronicity. When I started my property training, I had no idea that it would lead me to creating a VA business that I absolutely love!

Through The VA Property Company, Justine offers help and support with VA recruitment, systemisation, automation and short term projects. For a free 30-minute consultation on how to create efficiencies in your business, please get in touch.

I'm happy to chat if you are considering getting a VA and want some guidance.



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