Feng Shui Office

Plus
Speed Reading Simplified
Hypertension: Facts You Need
The Importance of Making a Will
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Papers that make business sense
Welcome to this March issue of PA Enterprise. The way we work is changing rapidly. In fact, recent research suggests that one-quarter of all UK workers will be based at home by 2020. The rise of the virtual assistant (VA) reflects this trend. At the same time as demand for VAs is increasing so is the desire of many people to work at home – or at least work flexible hours.

The technology is now here to make these dreams possible. In so many industries one person at a computer can do what would have required many people with huge machines before. And, most importantly, communication technology is such that it doesn't matter where you are: you can still get the job done if you have access to a computer and the internet. Of course face-to-face meetings still have their place, and hopefully always will do, but technological change is meaning we can rethink our working practices. VAs are part of this change in thinking. Employers like VAs because they can be on hand simply when needed; the role offers the flexibility so desired these days, for both VA and employer. But these changes in working practices come with their own difficulties, as many a VA can attest. Our interview A Day in the Life of Pattie Mason takes a look at the work of one top VA. Pattie runs her own VA business, One Hour PA, and talks about the difficulties and joys of her job.

This month we also bring you two articles on important though difficult subjects: The Importance of Making a Will and Friendly Fired. However, tackling these subjects head-on is important, and that's what we always aim to do at DeskDemon. Friendly Fired explains how a support group can make all the difference to workers suffering redundancy. Regarding health, Hypertension: Facts You Need gives you the info you need to understand, combat and prevent high blood pressure.

In a lighter vein, Speed Reading Simplified talks us through the incredibly useful skill of speed reading and the various techniques involved. Feng Shui Office explains how improving the arrangement of space in your office can aid a number of areas in your life. And as lightening up and relaxing is so important to wellbeing our Pasta Salad and Pizza Party Menu is the perfect treat.

We hope you enjoy this packed issue of PA Enterprise.

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In this article you will learn several simple techniques to implement speed-reading secrets that will assist you in efficiently absorbing all that information out there.

The First Speed Reading Secret
Before we begin, here’s a concept that you must understand about speed reading: shaving just a fraction of a second off every page that your read will create a huge difference in your reading rate. Even if you were able to shave just one second off the time it takes you to read a page that would still be five minutes off a normal 300-page book!

So, it’s not always necessary to aim for the spectacular; just a little growth here and there will make a world of difference – even when it comes to something as basic as paging and pacing techniques.

The Speed Reading Hand Motion
When it comes to speed reading, learning to use your hands correctly and efficiently will require that you train yourself to accomplish the following three tasks:

- Use your hands to guide and pace your eye movements through the text
- Use your hands to force your eye to constantly scan through new information
- Use your hands to prevent your eyes from repeatedly reading the same words

Although it may seem uncomfortable at first, the ideal use of the hands of a right-handed person would be to use your left hand to pace your reading and your right hand to turn the pages. To begin reading, place your hand at the start of a line. Move your hand towards the right hand margin. Make sure to focus your eyes upon the text that your hand is pointing towards.

When you reach the end of the current line, move your...
hand to the start of the next line. Repeat this method to the end of the page. To make paging faster, make sure that your right hand is always positioned at the top right hand corner of the book.

Go ahead and practice this movement. You don’t need to worry about reading any of the text, just practice the hand motion and paging techniques for now. Make sure that you are able to rapidly move through the pages of your book. Believe it or not, you can reach the place where your reading speed explodes to the point that your paging and pacing hands will have a hard time just trying to keep up!

I will now show you how you can begin improving your comprehension of text so that when you begin reading at the higher speed you will actually have a better understanding of the text than you did at your lower reading speeds.

**The Second Speed Reading Secret**

Here’s something that you don’t hear everyday: you comprehend details better at higher speeds! The key to instantly increasing your comprehension of any book and any topic is to get familiar with the following universal publication tips:

- The first and last chapters of a book introduce and summarise its contents.
- The first and last paragraph in a chapter introduces and summarises the contents of that particular chapter.
- Some books (such as text books and even most translations of the Bible) contain topic and summary sentences within their structure with introduce and summarise its contents.
- The verbs and nouns of a sentence offer the most important information.
- Be aware and “sensitise” yourself (through practice) to the use of negative words. Negative words (such as “not”, “no” and “can’t”) can reverse the meanings of large groups of words, so keep a lookout for them.
- By the same token, you also need to keep an eye out for the conditional tense. Conditional tense words (such as “could”, “if” and “should”) can also affect or change the meanings of a large body of words.

So, by using these reading techniques you can trim your reading time down and improve your comprehension. Here are a few more tips on how you can use a book’s format to further increase your comprehension:

- Don’t skip reading the front and rear jackets of a book. These can really give anyone valuable insights into why the book was written and thus give you some insight into what you can expect.
- By the same token, always check out the book’s forward and introduction. Often, these overlooked segments can remove a lot of the confusion that arises when you have no idea about the author’s intended direction before you begin reading.
Always read the table of contents. It’s the author’s outline and will “prime your brain” to her or his writing style and thus improve your understanding of her or his book’s structure.

Don’t just let the words ramble on in your mind. Make an effort to “actively read” the book. This means that you should continuously be asking yourself questions about what you’ve just read. Attempt to summarise the information you’ve just read at frequent intervals. By doing this you will soon discover your current level of comprehension and recall.

Devour charts and diagrams. If your book contains these features, make sure that you stop and take time to actually understand the drawings and diagrams. Spending a few extra moments contemplating these features will ultimately increase your overall reading speed because you will have a clear visual representation of the information you’ve just read.

Make use of the glossary and index usually found at the end of most books.

The Third Speed Reading Secret

Skimming is the exciting part of any speed-reading programme. Although it doesn’t actually involve “reading” in the traditional sense of the word, it does allow you to experience the thrill of rapidly devouring vast amounts of information at blistering speeds. If you are able to, it is always best to “skim” any book before you read it (whether you will be reading it at high speed or normal speed).

When you are skimming, what you are really looking for is the format of the book you will be reading. It helps to give you visual clues to what you can expect and it allows you to compensate for some of those challenges. But what exactly is skimming? The process is nothing but the exercise of going through the entire book you plan to read (or speed read) at a rate of about two to three seconds per page, maximum!

When you skim, here are some of the details that you are looking for:

- Font and type sizes used;
- The presence or absence of chapters;
- The presence or absence of columns;
- The presence or absence of headings/subheadings;
- Parts of the book;
- Diagrams and pictures; and
- Any unusual or helpful features.

Armed with the information you acquire from skimming, you will be amazed at how dramatically it influences your reading speed – even without using some of the other speed reading technology out there.

The Fourth Speed Reading Secret

There are different techniques for different types of reading. Are you just reading for pleasure? Do you need to study? Are you reading to develop a new skill? Here is a quick reference guide to how you can get the most out of your reading experience by using a few simple guidelines:

- Pleasure reading: Do not skim or review the materials. Simply read at a comfortable rate.
- Hobby and special interest: Perform a short skim, and review. Spend the majority of the time reading.
- Studying: Spend about half the time reading and half the time skimming and reviewing materials. Do not over-read. Read once through a chapter at your best comprehension speed (highlight areas of confusion by placing a light pencil mark next to them – but do not stop at this point), then skim and review the materials. Lastly, return to the areas that require a more in-depth analysis and work through them.
- Maximum-potential reading: Spend 70 percent of your time reviewing materials, and 10 percent skimming. Only read 20 percent of the time. Use the reading skills that you’ve learnt during this e-mail course to locate key information. Place your emphasis on taking notes and studying.

If you follow all of the points and techniques raised in this article then you will find that your speed-reading skills go through the roof.

Carlo Cabrera has put together The 16-Minute Speed-Reading Audio Program, which offers hints and tips to help you double your reading speed. For details visit www.EZSpeedReading.com.
It is now time for DeskDemon’s 2007 Management Support Role Annual Survey. We are conducting this survey to find out how your job is changing and what is important to you now and what will be important to you in the future – especially in terms of support and training. To achieve this goal we need your comments, feedback and support.

It also gives us a chance to discover how successful we are at supporting you, and what we can work on to improve for you in the coming year. As a token of our thanks, there is an Olympus Digital Camera to be won along with twenty runner up prizes of £10 M&S Vouchers.

So, please take the time to fill out this survey either online or by downloading a PDF file of the survey and faxing it back to us.

Let us know what is happening in the administrative professional industry so we can benchmark and educate others from the information gathered from the people who actually do the job!
Feng shui (pronounced “fung schway”) evolved from the observation that people are profoundly affected – for better or worse – by their surroundings. Feng shui (literally, “wind and water”) is the ancient Chinese practice of placement and arrangement of space to achieve harmony with the surrounding environment.

That's not exactly black magic, is it? Feng shui is neither superstition, philosophy, religion nor new age. It is a practical area of knowledge and has been working effectively for about three thousand years. But don't take my word for it. Companies like AT&T, British Airways, Microsoft, Hewlett-Packard, Logitech, HSBC, The Wall Street Journal and Donald Trump have all applied feng shui to their businesses. When practiced correctly, feng shui is well known to improve wealth, business opportunities, health, relationships and careers. It can certainly improve your home office.

While the underlying theory is a bit complex, feng shui is basically straightforward and simple. A gigantic share of most workers' woes can be attributed directly to plain old clutter. Feng shui is the antidote to clutter, plus a lot of other things that may be hindering your productivity (or impeding the auspicious flow of your chi – whichever way you want to look at it).

Maybe your workspace is already ergonomically pretty good and a fairly efficient and pleasant place to work. But, even so, it would be better to optimise it for maximum productivity. Everyone has gone into a building or office where he or she automatically felt comfortable and relaxed – or the opposite. Those impressions and underlying feelings are real, not imagined. There is an explanation for them in the principles of feng shui.

Feng Shui and the Office
According to Suzy Spivey, “you may improve your productivity and career prospects as well as enhance your success, creativity and wealth. Specifically, you can use feng shui to determine where to set up your home office, the best placement of your desk, the use of colour in your office and incorporate ‘cures’ into your office to change the flow of blocked energy.”

Improving the arrangement of space in your office, using the principles of feng shui, can aid a number of areas in your life.
The basic application to your home office is how you arrange it and where you sit to work. The following, taken from Spivey and Angi Ma Wong, are recommended practices:

- Create as many different ways to enter the front door as possible.
- Paint or treat your porch and front door in colours that express success for you.
- Put a bowl of water on the front porch. This draws or magnetises people to your office.
- Every morning prepare a chair for your client(s) to sit in. If you do this, they will come!
- Have something to give your clients to take with them (promotional giveaways).
- Sit in the corner farthest from the entrance; have a “command” position.
- Business will symbolically come to you through the door; so don’t turn your back on it.
- Don’t sit in line with the door, as you will be in the path of negative energy.
- Place your desk diagonally across from the doorway for a clear line of vision.
- Don’t put the desk flat up against a window so that you face directly out.
- Don’t place your desk in the centre of the room – you will lose power and authority.
- Don’t sit looking straight out into a corridor, stairs, closets, storage, or toilets.
- Keep your back toward a corner or a wall (like a mountain) for support.
- Don’t put the desk so that your back is against a full wall of windows.
- Place an aquarium or table top fountain in the east, north, or southeast.
- Don’t have any mirrors in your office, as they can reflect negative energy.
- Treat your files with respect – they represent your past, present and future business.
- Keep equipment cords well hidden, eliminating clutter and allowing for the free flow of chi.
- Keep the area around your phone clean and well organised. Clean your phone regularly.
- Do not have clutter in the office – it’s important to keep desks tidy and clutter free.
Feng Shui and Colours

Feng shui also has a lot to say about colours. Different colours can make a dramatic difference in your office, affecting the impression it gives and your own state of mind. For example, yellow stimulates clarity of thought, creativity and mental activity – an excellent colour for a home office. Yellow also promotes discipline, which anyone in a home office needs, while blue-green can be soothing, yet creative – a good choice for writers.

The classic auspicious colours in feng shui are red and purple. These are excellent choices for the front porch and/or door. Aim for a good balance of light and dark colours, soft and hard surfaces, and smooth and rough textures in your choice of window treatments, furniture and flooring.

This has been a very superficial introduction to a very big topic but it should give you the basic idea of how feng shui can benefit your business.

Further Reading

You can learn much more from the below:

Websites

- Center for Applied Feng Shui Research (www.geomancy.net). The oldest and largest traditional feng shui site with numerous resources, including a free tutorial.
- Feng Shui Times (www.fengshuetimes.com). A very extensive site with a wide range of resources, including beginner, intermediate and advanced tutorials.
- Rising Dragon Feng Shui (www.rising-dragon.co.uk). Offers many informative articles as well as a free Feng Shui Essentials online tutorial.
- World of Feng Shui (www.wofs.com). The first online feng shui magazine, it has since grown into an extensive feng shui resource with a huge archive of content.

Articles


Dr Paul Nicholls is a regular fixture at www.eBizTutors.com where you can find many resources for the new or seasoned online entrepreneur: blogs, tutorials, programs and support as well as news and information on Asian ecommerce matters.
Hypertension is derived from two root words: Hyper, meaning high, and tension, meaning pressure. Hypertension simply means high blood pressure. Pressure is generated when the heart contracts and pumps blood through the body.

Evidence shows that stress and emotional tension do cause increase in blood pressure. High blood pressure is generally defined as a blood pressure exceeding 140/90 mmHg confirmed on multiple occasions. The top number (140) is called the systolic pressure, and it represents the pressure in the arteries as the heart contracts and pumps blood into circulation. The bottom number (90) is called diastolic pressure, and it represents the pressure in the blood vessels as the heart relaxes after contraction. These figures, measured in millimetres of Mercury (mmHg), reflect the highest and lowest pressures the heart and blood vessels are exposed to during circulation. The generally accepted normal value for blood pressure is 120/80 mmHg. Above this value but less than 140/90 mmHg is not considered to be hypertensive yet, but signals danger and so is called high normal.

An increase in the blood pressure (hypertension) increases the risk of developing heart (cardiac) diseases such as heart failure and heart attack, kidney diseases, vascular diseases like atherosclerosis (hardening and narrowing of blood vessels), eye damage and stroke (brain damage).

These complications, called end organ damage, arise as a result of long standing (chronic) hypertension. But victims of hypertension are not aware at an early stage that they have the problem, until these complications start appearing. This is because hypertension shows virtually no symptoms in the early stages. For this reason, it is generally referred to as the “Silent Killer”.

The damage caused by hypertension increases in severity as the blood pressure increases. Based on this hypertension can be classified as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Systolic (mmHg)</th>
<th>Diastolic (mmHg)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>Less than 130</td>
<td>Less than 85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Normal</td>
<td>130 – 139</td>
<td>85 – 89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mild Hypertension</td>
<td>140 – 159</td>
<td>90 – 99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate Hypertension</td>
<td>160 – 179</td>
<td>100 – 109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe Hypertension</td>
<td>180 – 209</td>
<td>110 – 119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Severe Hypertension</td>
<td>Greater than 210</td>
<td>Greater than 120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Learn the facts about high blood pressure – otherwise known as hypertension – and protect your health.
Borderline Hypertension

Borderline hypertension is defined as mildly elevated blood pressure that is found to be higher than 140/90 mmHg at some times and lower than that at other times.

Patients with borderline value need to have their blood pressure monitored more frequently. They also need to assess end organ damage to be aware of the significance of their hypertension.

It should, however, be emphasised that patients with borderline hypertension have a higher tendency to develop a more sustained hypertension as they get older. They stand a modest risk of having heart related diseases. A close monitoring of their blood pressure and lifestyles could be very useful in this regard.

White Coat Hypertension

A single elevated blood pressure reading in the doctor’s office could be misleading, because the elevation might only be temporary. Evidence over the years has shown that anxiety related to the stress of the examination and fear of the result often lead to blood pressure elevation noticed just in the doctor's office. In fact, it has been suggested that one out of every four persons thought to have mild hypertension actually may have normal blood pressure outside the physician's office.

This sort of elevated blood pressure is called “White Coat Hypertension”. Accordingly, monitoring of blood pressure at home, when in a more relaxed state of mind, can provide a more reliable estimate of the frequency and/or consistency of blood pressure changes.

What Causes Hypertension?

Blood pressure is determined by two major parameters: cardiac output (the volume of blood pumped by the heart) and the total peripheral resistance (the resistance of the blood vessels through which blood flows). Hypertension is therefore an end result of either increased force of pumping by the heart, constriction/narrowing of blood vessels causing increased resistance to blood flow, or both.

The Two Major Types

Using the cause of hypertension as a yardstick, two major types of hypertension can be described:

- **Essential hypertension**: This is also called primary or idiopathic hypertension and is by far the most prevalent type of hypertension. It accounts for over 90 percent of all hypertension cases. No clear cut cause(s) can be identified for this type of hypertension, hence the name idiopathic.
- **Secondary hypertension**: This accounts for less than ten percent of all cases. In this case, the hypertension is secondary to an existing abnormality in one or more systems or organs of the body. The most common causes are related to kidney and hormonal problems.

Since no clear-cut cause(s) can be adduced for the most common types of hypertension, as is the case with most non-communicable diseases, we therefore talk in terms of “risk factors” and not causes. These risk factors are actions and inactions that increase chances of getting a disease. Research over the years has shown that some factors are directly or indirectly related to the occurrence of hypertension. Some of the factors include:

**Heredity**

High blood pressure tends to run in some families and ethnicities. It is believed that some inherited traits predispose some people to hypertension. For example, high blood pressure tends to be more prevalent in black people than white people.

A family history of hypertension increases one's chances of high blood pressure. Regular monitoring of blood pressure becomes very vital.

**High Salt Intake**

High intake of sodium chloride (table salt) has being linked to high blood pressure. The condition develops mostly in societies or...
communities that have a fairly high intake of salt, exceeding 5.8 grams daily. In fact, salt intake may be a particularly important factor in relation to essential hypertension that is associated with advancing age, hereditary susceptibility, obesity and kidney failure. Research has shown that:

- Rise in blood pressure with age is directly related to increase levels of salt intake.
- People who consume little sodium chloride develop no high blood pressure. When they consume more, hypertension appears.
- Increased sodium is found in the blood vessels and blood of most hypertensives.

Cutting down on salt intake is therefore a reasonable step in preventing hypertension.

**Obesity**

A closer relationship exists between hypertension and obesity. In fact, it is believed that most hypertensives are more than 10% overweight. Fat accumulation in the trunk or abdomen is not only related to hypertension but also to diabetes and hyperlipidemia (excess fat in the body).

Obesity can contribute to hypertension in several ways. For one thing, obesity leads to a greater output of blood, because the heart has to pump more blood to supply the excess tissues. The increased cardiac output then can raise the blood pressure. For another thing, obese hypertensive individuals have a greater stiffness (resistance) in the peripheral arteries throughout the body. Finally, obesity may be associated with a tendency for the kidneys to retain salt in the body. Weight loss may help reverse problems related to obesity while also lowering blood pressure. It has been estimated that the blood pressure can be decreased by 0.32 mmHg for every 1 kg of weight loss.

The international standard for measuring weight and obesity is based on a value called the Body Mass Index (BMI). This value is derived by dividing the body weight (in kilograms) by the square of height (in metres). For adults, a BMI of less than 25 kg/m² is preferred. 25–29 kg/m² is considered overweight and above 30 kg/m² obese.

**Lack of Exercise**

Sedentary normal individuals have a 20%–50% higher risk of developing hypertension when compared to very active individuals. Exercise lowers both systolic and diastolic blood pressures. For example, dynamic exercises such as brisk walking or jogging, swimming or bicycle riding for 30–45 minutes daily or 3–5 times a week may lower blood pressure by as much as 5–15 mmHg.

Moreover, there appears to be a relationship between the amount of exercise and the degree to which blood pressure is lowered. Thus, to a point, the more you exercise the more you lower your blood pressure – provided you do not over strain yourself. Normally, a particular type of exercise is started and gradually built up to a satisfactory level over time. Regular exercise reduces blood pressure, burns out unnecessary fat and makes the body healthier.

**Alcohol and Smoking**

These two constitute the social factors most related to high blood pressure. People who drink alcohol excessively (over two drinks per day) have a one and half to two times increase in the frequency of hypertension. The association between alcohol and high blood pressure becomes particularly noticeable when the alcohol intake exceeds the above per day. Moreover, the connection is a dose related phenomenon. In other words, the more alcohol consumed, the stronger the chances of hypertension. This probably explains the prevalence of hypertension in populations where alcohol consumption is a habit.

Although smoking increases the risk of vascular complications (for example, heart diseases and stroke) in people who already have hypertension, it cannot be directly linked with the increase in the development of...
of hypertension. Nevertheless, smoking a cigarette can repeatedly produce an immediate, temporary rise in blood pressure of 5–10 mmHg, but a permanent increase cannot be established. However, it is known that some substances in cigarettes (such as nicotine) alters the composition of the blood and also affects the blood vessels.

Smoking and alcohol control are integral part of any effort towards the primary control of cardiovascular diseases in any population.

**Stress**
Although the role of stress and other emotional factors in hypertension is difficult to define, it is known that stress causes a rise in blood pressure and this could be sustained if the stress becomes chronic (prolonged).

**A Stitch in Time**
Since lifestyle components such as dietary patterns, obesity, physical activity, alcohol and smoking have been recognised as important risk factors, steps to reduce the occurrence of hypertension or to alleviate the condition should involve lifestyle modification.

Dietary modifications include restricting salt intake, cutting down or cutting out alcohol, reduced fat consumption and reducing weight, if overweight. The American Heart Association recommends a daily consumption of less than six grams of table salt for normal individuals, and less than four grams for hypertensives.

A regular exercise program, such as of brisk walking, jogging, swimming or cycling, for 30–45 minutes daily or 3–5 times a week could be very helpful.

To conclude, it is very important to remember that the only way to know if one’s blood pressure is on the high side is by taking your blood pressure frequently. Normally, your doctor would do that for you. But for a more consistent and reliable monitor of blood pressure, a self-operated blood pressure monitor is crucial. Being handily around, it allows you to follow up your blood pressure regularly and report an increase immediately.

Finally, always remember the World Health Organisation slogan, “Know your Blood Pressure; if it’s high have it treated.” A healthy heart adds years to your life. A stitch in time, as they say, saves nine.

Adefemi Kazeem is a graduate of human anatomy from a Nigerian University and wishes to specialise in public health. He can be contacted at yemupz@yahoo.com.
A Day in the Life of... Pattie Mason

Pattie Mason, Virtual Assistant and Entrepreneur, One Hour PA

Pattie runs a Virtual Assistant business in South West London. Although she says that running her own business is by no means an easy option, she absolutely adores every minute.

Tell us about a bit about your background.

I graduated from London University and worked as a marketing services researcher for EDS, a global technology services company. After a while I decided to head off to Spain, however, where I worked for a large UK tour operator in the Balearics. I also worked as a teacher of business English in Barcelona.

I returned to the UK in 1999 and spent the next few years in PA, administration management and marketing support roles for a succession of start-up companies. I really enjoyed the buzz of working in a small team. It was during this time that I became aware of the need that small businesses have for high end PA support.

How have you got to where you are today in your career?

I set up One Hour PA in 2004 to address this issue. The idea was to offer PA and admin support to small businesses and start ups on a pay as you go, ad hoc basis with most of the work done virtually. It was hard work building up my business, especially in the initial phase when money was tight and clients were sparse. However, I tried lots of different ways of marketing my services and after the initial 6 months my business started to gather momentum.

How has it changed over the last year?

I have a real interest in the challenges and issues of running a small business and enjoy being my own boss. As the business has developed over the last year or so, I have moved away from spending quite so much time on client work and instead have been concentrating on building my virtual assistant business. I am now able to subcontract a lot of the actual work. Apart from virtual subcontractors I also have a couple of part time people to help me out in the office 3 days a week.
What are the three most important skills you use at work?

Multi tasking, Communicating effectively, Marketing

What does a typical day look like for you?

I start work at 8am by responding to any client e-mails or new enquiries and checking on projects that I have subcontracted out to ensure they are on track. I also deal with any little bits and pieces that are outstanding from the previous day. I will then usually spend from around 9.30am to lunchtime working on client projects. The work I carry out for clients covers typical PA work, such as managing projects, organising events, research, etc. In addition to this client work, I also have to run the business itself, so I am the marketing, accounts, office management and sales departments. There’s plenty of variety. Although I always recommend virtual support, some clients feel that they aren’t quite ready for virtual working and really want someone on-site and in their office. Therefore, I also offer occasional on-site support to London-based businesses.

I am currently working on a few larger projects for some clients, one of which involves assisting with the logistical aspects of a graduate recruitment scheme, and another looks at ways to market training courses. Apart from these there are also plenty of smaller, ad hoc pieces of work which will come in during the day. These usually involve pretty straightforward tasks such as mail merges, jazzing up Powerpoint presentations or perhaps finding a suitable meeting venue for clients from out of town.

What is the biggest challenge you have faced and how did you tackle it?

When you work for yourself, you will probably find you work harder than you ever worked when somebody else was handing out the pay packet. Having said that, if you are prepared for a bit of slog, the rewards of working as a VA are massive. You get to work with all sorts of interesting people on varied projects, you learn all about the challenges of running your own business and best of all is that working for yourself is so motivating.

What are your career plans for the future?

I want to continue developing the business.
The Hub

Do you ever have a problem and need answers fast? Do you wish you could get objective advice from a peer? 
Ask on The Hub!

Join in the topics from your peers around the world. DeskDemon’s ‘The Hub’ is a forum board that allows you to network with your peers. Share your thoughts, experiences and advice with your peers worldwide. Post a question or a thought or simply join in and comment to help others.

Take a minute to visit ‘The Hub’ at DeskDemon

Pasta Salad and Pizza Party Menu

Make this party meal for when you want to have a really social night with friends. After a delicious pasta salad, enjoy the homemade pepperoni pizza – perfect for sharing in a group. To top it all off give your guests coffee jellies with cream – sure to help you all stay talking into the night!

Pasta Salad with Tomatoes and Broccoli

Serves 4

Ingredients:
- 450g/4 cups pasta shells
- 250g/2 cups broccoli florets
- 2 ripe tomatoes
- 45ml/3tbsp olive oil
- Salt and ground black pepper
- 1 small bunch of fresh dill

1. Bring a saucepan of water to the boil and cook the pasta according to the packet instructions. Drain well.
2. Boil the broccoli for several minutes until tender and drain well.
3. Chop the tomatoes. Heat the olive oil in a large saucepan and gently fry the tomatoes for less than 1 minute stirring continuously.
4. Add the pasta to the pan, then the broccoli. Stir carefully to mix and heat through. Season with salt and pepper.
5. Allow to cool down, then refrigerate for an hour. Drizzle with olive oil before serving and decorate with dill.

Did You Know?

Broccoli is good for your skin because it is loaded with chlorophyll, which helps keep carcinogens from binding to the DNA in your liver and other important body organs. Broccoli even contains an antioxidant known as sulforafan, which cleans out cancer cells from your body.
Pepperoni Pizza
Serves 4

Ingredients:

For the Base
- 30ml/2 tbsp olive oil
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 400g can chopped tomatoes
- 15ml/1 tbsp tomato purée
- Salt and ground black pepper

Preparation:
Sift the flour into a bowl, add the salt. Sprinkle over the yeast and make a well in the centre. Pour in 175ml/¾ cup warm water along with the olive oil. Mix to a soft dough. Knead the dough on a lightly floured surface for about 5-10 minutes, until smooth. Roll out to a 25cm round, press up the edges slightly and place on a greased baking sheet.

For the Base
- 275g/2 ½ cups plain white flour
- ½ tsp salt
- 5ml/1 tsp easy blend dried yeast
- 30ml/2 tbsp olive oil

For the Topping
- ½ green pepper, chopped
- ½ red pepper, chopped
- ½ yellow pepper, chopped
- 75g pepperoni sausage, thinly sliced
- 150g mozzarella cheese, thinly sliced
- 3 sun-dried tomatoes, chopped
- 8 pitted black olives, chopped
- ½ tsp dried oregano
- Olive oil, to drizzle

Preparation:
Spread over the tomato sauce and top with the peppers, pepperoni, mozzarella, sun-dried tomatoes and olives. Sprinkle over the oregano and drizzle with olive oil. Cover loosely and leave in a warm place for about 30 minutes. Meanwhile, preheat the oven to 220°C/Gas 7. Bake for 30 minutes. Serve hot.

Did You Know?
Olive trees can live for 1,500 years!
Coffee Jellies with Cream

Serves 4

Ingredients:

- 75g (¼ - ⅓ cup) caster sugar
- 450ml (1¼ cups) hot strong coffee
- 30-45ml (2 - 3 tbsp) dark rum or coffee liqueur
- 20ml (4 tsp) gelatine
- 150ml (⅔ cup) single cream (optional)

1. Place the caster sugar in a saucepan along with 75ml (5 tbsp) water and stir over a gentle heat until the sugar is fully dissolved. Turn up the heat to allow the syrup to boil steadily, without any stirring for about 4-5 minutes.

2. Stir the hot coffee and rum/coffee liqueur into the syrup, then sprinkle the gelatine on the top and stir the mixture until it is completely dissolved.

3. Carefully pour the coffee jelly mixture into four wetted 150ml (⅔ cup) moulds, allow to cool down and then refrigerate for several hours until set. Unmould the jellies onto four individual serving plates, pour the cream on top and serve at once.

TIP: Use a high-roasted Arabica bean for the coffee for maximum flavour
The Importance of Making a Will

By Benedict Roban

It’s not something that anyone likes to think about, but deciding what happens to your estate when you die is crucially important for ensuring that your loved ones are looked after when you’re gone and that your assets are distributed as you would have wished.

Many people think that wills are only necessary for people with a great deal of wealth, but this isn’t the case. There are certain laws governing how a person’s estate is divided if they die “intestate” (without a will), which might not be what you would expect or intend. For example, if you’re not married or in a civil partnership, even if you co-habit with your partner, your partner will not be entitled to inherit anything from you unless you specifically mention them in your will.

Even if you are married, without children, your spouse will not inherit your entire estate – other living relatives such as your parents and siblings will be entitled to a share. Also, if your circumstances change – for example if you get married, divorced or remarried or have children – this could make your estate more complicated to settle.

Another important point to bear in mind is that if you don’t have a will, you won’t have a named executor to carry out the administration of your estate and the responsibility will fall upon your beneficiaries, whom you may deem unsuitable to handle your affairs.

Making a will has other advantages too: planning your estate and who will inherit may help you to minimise the impact of the inheritance tax laws.

Making a Will
To make a will, you must be 18 years of age or older. You must be considered to be of sound mind and it should be written without pressure from any other party. A will must be recorded in writing, and it needs to be signed by yourself in the presence of two witnesses, who must also sign. Beneficiaries of the will and married partners of beneficiaries cannot act as witnesses. If they do, the will

Note: This article applies to residents of England, Wales and Northern Ireland and is provided for general information only. It does not constitute financial advice.
won’t be invalidated, but their inheritance will be.

The completed and signed will can be kept anywhere you want – at home, at your bank, at your solicitor’s office, at a Probate Sub-registry, a District Registry or the Family Division Registry of the High Court.

Solicitors
The big question for many people is whether it’s necessary to employ a solicitor to set up a will. The answer is no, but it is certainly recommended, particularly if your estate and personal circumstances are rather complex. It’s also easy to make seemingly simple mistakes that could end up having significant consequences. Common errors are not understanding what has to be done to make a will legally valid, changing the will without having it signed by witnesses, failing to make alterations in the event of a change in personal circumstances, forgetting about parts of your estate or not taking into account that the beneficiary might die before inheriting.

Solicitor charges for setting up a will can vary between solicitors and will also depend on how complex your estate is. If you’re a member of a trade union, your membership may entitle you to a free will-writing service or free legal advice. You can bring down costs by considering in advance what your assets are and to whom you would like to leave them – whether family, friends or charity. This will include property, possessions, bank accounts, insurance policies, pensions and shares. Also think about who you want to appoint as executor of your estate and who you want to look after your children should you die before they reach the age of 18.

You should certainly consider using a solicitor if you have complicated personal circumstances, for example if you live with someone who isn’t your spouse or civil partner, if you have a dependant who is unable to look after themselves, if you have a business or own property abroad, if you don’t live in the UK or aren’t a UK citizen, or if you have lots of family members who may make claims on your estate, such as ex-spouses or children from previous marriages.

If you don’t want to use a solicitor, it’s possible to purchase “DIY” will kits from many high street stationers and bookshops or online providers, which will provide basic guidance.

Amendments
Remember to make amendments your will any time you have a change in circumstances such as marriage, remarriage, divorce, civil partnership or the birth or adoption of children. You’ll need to be careful in how you amend your will to ensure that it remains valid.

It’s not possible to write alterations onto an existing will. Instead you must either write what’s known as a codicil or draw up a new will entirely. A codicil is like an addendum to your will. It doesn’t replace the original will, but makes alterations to one or more of the sections. Only the person who created the original will can make a codicil, and it must be signed and witnessed in the same way as the original will (although not necessarily by the same witnesses). It’s only suitable for making small and uncomplicated changes such as increasing or decreasing the amount of money left to a beneficiary, adding a new beneficiary or changing the executor.

You can add as many codicils as you want to your will, but if you have lots of amendments or complex changes it’s best to start afresh with a new will altogether. When you draw up your new will, you should insert a clause at the beginning to explain that this new will revokes all previous wills and codicils. Your old will is no longer valid after you do this (and have your new will signed and witnessed) and you should therefore destroy it. You must destroy it yourself too, or have it destroyed in your presence – otherwise it may still be considered valid.

Your will may be challenged if a person feels that it hasn’t left them with adequate provision or they don’t believe it to be valid – for example, if it hasn’t been drawn up in line with the legal requirements outline above.

Benedict Rohan works as a freelance finance writer, specialising in commercial mortgages, homeowner loans and remortgages. His website is www.mortgagenation.co.uk.
This article considers the idea of peer support for people experiencing compulsory or voluntary redundancy and includes a case study of a successful redundancy support group.

A redundancy support group is for colleagues who have been made redundant from an organisation at roughly the same time, although there is some fluidity in that some people may join and others leave over the lifespan of the group.

The difficulties people who have been made redundant are practical and emotional, and peer support helps individuals to overcome both. In terms of the practical, peers can support each other through the change with advice or ideas, and in terms of the emotional by helping people through the loneliness, loss of confidence or motivation and, in some cases, anger. Emotional departure does not always happen at the same time as physical departure and the time lag can be difficult to cope with, causing a sense of isolation and possibly strong feelings of rejection as well as a need for affiliation. Being able to maintain the connection with the company through other leavers can ease the transition.

Peer Pressure
Peer pressure helps individuals to move forward; it is quite common for people to lose their desire to get things done when there is nobody around to encourage them, or to rely on the outcome. At work we are often...
motivated by our desire not to let down colleagues or to appear unreliable. Peer support provides for this function.

The group can be made up of people in a range of ways. It may be open to any employees of an organisation who have been made redundant or are facing redundancy, people from a particular functional area within the company, or based on level of seniority. While some of the advantages of mutual understanding are lost if a group comprises people from different organisations, this situation still has the potential to foster a valuable experience for the members.

**Group Models**
The pros and cons of each model are:

**All Employees**
Advantages:
- Small, tight knit organisation

Disadvantages:
- People with different needs and issues may not be able to help each other well.

**Functional Groups**
Advantages:
- People know each other well; and
- People understand each other’s needs in terms of employment aspirations.

Disadvantages:
- May be competition for jobs, therefore some tension;
- May lack the creativity that cross functional interaction brings;
- May be a narrow skill set so some external help may be needed for some activities; and
- Different levels of employee may have little in common and senior people may be uncomfortable being as open with junior people.

**Seniority Groups**
Advantages:
- Common understanding of situation;
- Cross pollination of expertise; and
- Openness.

Disadvantages:
- Groups of junior people would benefit from the greater experience and contacts that may be derived from mixing with senior people. (In larger set ups there is the possibility for matrix peer groups or to extend the group if required.)

There is no limit to group size, although between six and ten appears to be optimal. Any fewer and the benefits of shared tasks are reduced, any more and it’s harder for everyone to meet at the same time.

Part of the purpose of peer support is for the individuals to feel free to talk openly about their feelings, and this may mean expressing anger about what has happened. I call this “bite-back”. Bite-back cannot happen easily if the initiative is seen as being started or supported by the organisation itself. It is therefore important that support groups are formed independently and employees join a group only if they want to. The only intervention the company might provide is some information about such groups as part of the overall support programme so that people can take them up if they want to.

There is no optimum time for groups to start; it may be best to wait until people have finished work or as soon as they

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have been given notice. For some people, a break before beginning the process is required and these people may not want to do anything about their career transition for some time. For others, emotional support may be required regardless of whether or not they are ready to start the job search.

Meetings will benefit from regularity in order to foster and maintain momentum. Once a fortnight appears to work well; this is enough time for individuals to make progress between meetings, yet not so far apart that the impetus is lost.

The meetings are a social occasion as well as for business. Make them relaxed and keep the agenda as loose as possible. The more “business” there is, the less opportunity there will be for personal support.

**Group Topics**

There is no model for how your group might be shaped, in terms of the topics it covers. Broadly, there are three main categories:

- **Job or career help:** This includes contacts for networking; suggestions and advice about CV or letters; looking out for possible opportunities for each other; helping each other to identify strengths and weaknesses; suggesting creative ideas for career change; and brainstorming specific agreed topics such as “How can we get experience of new work.”
- **Practical support:** This includes tax and financial planning issues; researching the best suppliers of equipment or supplies; and negotiating with the employer as a group.
- **Social and emotional support:** This includes doing fun things together, helping with travel/holiday arrangements; being a comfort when under stress; and instilling confidence or motivation when either are waning.
Again, there are no recommendations for best practice in terms of the location of meetings. It comes down to what is most practical for the majority of members. This might mean a regular fixed venue or moving around. It could be members’ homes, a restaurant or bar, or some other public space like a hotel or serviced office.

Case Study: The New Futures Group
The New Futures Group was originally formed in early 2005 by seven senior managers at InterContinental Hotels in London. All took voluntary redundancy or were made redundant as part of a large re-organisation programme.

The group was essentially social in nature, typically meeting over coffee or lunch. The initial value to the members was to retain a social network, gain and share practical support and maintain their connection with the company. The group worked successfully because they shared values and felt trusted and understood by each other. This fostered individual motivation and pressure to complete the tasks that members set for themselves. It also provided opportunities to do fun things together such as a rather unsuccessful car boot sale!

The most obvious benefit was that rather than each person looking after their own issues in isolation, there were six other people thinking about them. This also meant that people could use complementary skills for their mutual benefit.

The upshot was that each person had easy access to each other’s networks and networking activity grew very quickly for each member as a result. They also advised each other on CV design, application letters and interview technique. Those with IT skills trained the others where necessary.

Other examples of ways by which members of the New Futures Group supported each other were:
- Advice: Guidance on purchasing business tools and supplies that had previously been provided by the company – such as computers and broadband, mobile phones, cars and business cards.
- Financial matters: Recommendations for IFAs, insurance, medical cover, and sorting out pensions, tax and national insurance details as well as state benefits.
- Dealing with the company: The group members had common issues, such as what to do about their share options and how to obtain various papers and documents. Rather than each person dealing with the company on an individual basis, one person would take on the responsibility to handle the matters for everyone.
- Recommendation: Recommending recruiters and headhunters.

Conclusions
Peer group support is widely recognised as a valuable channel for personal and professional development. As well as the benefits of resource sharing, a trusting group that has no obvious leader provides an environment that can be empowering for the individual.

Members of the New Futures Group have been able to move through the career transition process with greater efficiency and vigour than many individuals would have managed alone.

While the ideal situation is for former colleagues to work together, it is possible to form a successful peer support group with people leaving different organisations. Much of the benefit is still available and in the absence of former colleagues to work with, it is recommended above working alone.

Nick Gendler is the founder of Workjoy, a career and outplacement consultancy. The website is www.workjoy.co.uk.

Jacqueline Moyse is currently growing a consultancy business specialising in internal brand development and employee engagement. Her e-mail address is jacqueline_moyse@hotmail.com.
At first glance, these two images appear to be identical. However, looks can be deceiving. There are actually 10 differences between the images. It is up to you to spot them and see how good your skills are on spotting things that are not the same. Good luck, have fun and always look out for different things around you.

**Did You Know**

1. No piece of paper can be folded more that seven times.
2. The first stethoscope was made from a role of paper in 1816.
3. Ruled paper was first made by a machine in England in 1770.
4. Paper was invented by the Chinese in 105 A.D.

**Solution:**
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Negativity can make life unappealing. However, the negative feelings can be fought and defeated, allowing you to recapture that joy of being alive. Find out ten strategies in this article.

   http://www.deskdemon.com/pages/uk/career/breaking-through-negativity

2. Retirement Options for Your Fax Machine
The day of the fax machine is slowly passing. But when should you retire your machine? If you do, then what procedures should you put in place instead without disrupting service?

   http://www.deskdemon.com/pages/uk/services/fax-alternatives

3. Pesto Power: Soup, Pasta and Brownie Menu
Pesto is really easy to make. Our recipe shows you how. As a starter, we bring you a leek and potato soup recipe and, to finish, a wonderful chocolate brownie recipe.

   http://www.deskdemon.com/pages/uk/lifestyle/pesto-power

4. Day in the Life of...Emily Robe
Emily Robe is a PA to the MD of Specialist Equipment at Ashtead Plant Hire Company Ltd. Despite dealing with five directors and 56 depots, Emily says her current job is the best ever.

   http://www.deskdemon.com/pages/uk/career/dayinlife/emilyrobe

5. How to Write and Format a Business Report
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