

How to Setup a Virtual Office

10 Tools to Get You Started



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Small Business Sense

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Introduction

As a small business owner, I know all too well the challenges one may face with trying to keep business operational costs at a minimum while maintaining a professional image. When I started my consulting business in 2009, I was in search of ways to keep the costs associated with running my business as minimal as possible.

To do this, I started doing some online research to find inexpensive products and tools that would allow me to work without geographical and physical limitations to provide services to my clients. Finding these tools ultimately led me to creating a “*Virtual Office*”.

Virtual offices are becoming widespread in use and are seen as a cost-effective alternative to running a business particularly for small businesses and other self-employed professionals all across the globe. This is due to their ability to help entrepreneurs conduct business from practically anywhere in the world and save money on operating expenses.

Whether you're a startup, a small business owner who works from home and does not have the resources necessary to rent office space, a work at home mom, a freelancer, a solopreneur, a business owner looking for ways to cut costs, or a business looking to open branch offices, setting up a virtual office may be an ideal solution for you. This Free Report presents a list of 10 tools that can be used to help you accomplish this task.

Best Regards,

Kimberly George

The Chic Geek

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Virtual Offices

Virtual offices have changed the face of the “Traditional office” by giving small and large businesses the opportunity to have the best of both worlds—the ability to work anywhere, anytime and the capacity to save tons of money on office expenses. Through the use of technology, virtual offices offer a more flexible means for operating a business and have transformed the way that business is done.

According to information drawn from businessforhome.org, **427 Billion** dollars are made every year with home-based businesses via the use of virtual offices. Check out these interesting facts about Virtual Offices:

VIRTUAL OFFICE FACTS

- ✓ The number of virtual offices grew in 2009 to 18.3% from 7.8% in 2008
- ✓ 44% of Home Based and Virtual Businesses are started for under \$5,000
- ✓ Virtual and Home Based Business Revenues > 427 billion!
- ✓ Virtual Offices can save you 50-70% less than a traditional office to operate

What is a Virtual Office?

According to Wikipedia, “a virtual office is a combination of off-site live communication and address services that allow users to reduce traditional office costs while maintaining business professionalism”. To be honest, this definition is a little too convoluted. In simpler terms, a virtual office uses a suite of communications tools, hardware and software applications to recreate a traditional office setting while projecting a professional, business image.

Technologies that Provide the Inner-workings of Virtual Offices

There are four main technologies that make virtual offices work: The Internet, VOIP, Unified Messaging and Cloud Computing Technology. Unless you've been living under a rock, I'm sure at some point in your life you've used or heard of at least one of these forms of technology.

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Technology that Makes the Virtual Office Work

The Internet

Let's face it. The Internet is one form of technology that most of us cannot live without. It's a part of our everyday lives. It's a resource that 85% or more of small business owners use to run their businesses. The Internet allows us to check our email, host our websites, shop online, pay our bills and most importantly use various tools to provide services to our clients. In case you're wondering, here is some interesting data about how the world spends it's time online.

INTERNET USAGE FACTS

- ✓ 55% of Americans use the Internet every day. Of those, 45% send or read email and 40% use search engines, but only 15% use social networks and only 5% play online games.
- ✓ Americans spend 60 hours a month online. If you were to put those hours back-to-back, you'd be surfing the web for a whole month. WHOA!
- ✓ Social media aside, the world spends 36% of its web time using email, engaging in commerce, performing searches. 42% of time is spent viewing content. (Yea, I am very guilty of this)
- ✓ In a single month, a web user visits 2,646 sites and logs on 57 times

This statistical data tells me that we spend a lot of time using the Internet, which is why surfing the web has pretty much become "Americas favorite past time".

The Internet that we know and use today was first brought online in 1969 as the Arpanet and only had a few connections. Fast forward to present day. Licklider's vision for a global network has come true, and I'm sure has exceeded his expectations because virtually 90% of technologies we use today run by the use of the Internet.

In addition to using the Internet to do tasks such as send email and host your website, the Internet is the foundation for the next three forms of technologies that provide the inner workings for Virtual Offices: VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol), Unified Messaging and Cloud Computing Technology.

VOIP – What Is It?



FIGURE 1: VOIP IMAGE

VOIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) is a technology that gives us the ability to use phone services over the Internet.

As a matter of fact, traditional phone lines are slowly being phased out as small, medium and large businesses are reaping the benefits of using VOIP systems.

The main benefits of using VOIP are the ability to make long distance phone calls, hold conference calls, use caller ID, call

forwarding and other features that traditional telephone companies normally you charge for are available for free. Isn't that AWESOME?

Unified Messaging Systems

Unified Messaging is a technology that works with VOIP Systems and is a feature that runs Virtual Office Phone systems. Unified Messaging combines the integration of email, instant messaging, fax, voicemail, video messaging, and text messaging technologies together for storage onto a single system.

For example, with traditional communications systems messages are delivered onto several types of storage systems such as Voicemail systems, Fax machines and email servers. Whereas with Unified Messaging Systems all of these different types of messages are stored in one place. This feature simplifies the user experience by giving

them one place to check for messages rather than checking multiple places to retrieve messages.

Ultimately, the premise behind creating Unified Messaging Systems was to have a place where all of the above technologies can be brought together onto one platform to make communication as seamless as possible.

Cloud Computing: The Revolution

Cloud Computing Technology is taking the world by storm. You may have heard cloud computing being referred to as “The Cloud”. This form of technology allows multiple servers to share resources that run various hardware and software applications over the “Internet” that can be accessed via web browsers.

In essence cloud computing features web-based software and hardware applications that run over the Internet. The main benefits of using services in “The Cloud” are:

CLOUD COMPUTING BENEFITS

- ✓ **Cloud services and applications are web-based and can be accessed anytime, anywhere, 24/7 as long as you have an Internet connection from a computer, Smartphone, or tablet device**
- ✓ **Cloud applications work with multiple Operating System platforms such as Windows, Linux and Macintosh computers**
- ✓ **Cloud applications and services are very inexpensive and allow you to pay as you go to use them**
- ✓ **In most cases, there is no need for you to install software or purchase hardware to use cloud services**

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10 Tools to Help You Setup a Virtual Office

Okay, so I think I've given you enough history lessons on the various technologies that provide the inner workings for Virtual Offices and have done enough techno babble to last you a while. Here is a list of 10 tools that can be used to help you get started with setting up a virtual office for your small business that can help you save money on operating expenses and give your business a professional look inexpensively.

1. Virtual Office Phone System

Investing in a virtual office phone system for my consulting business has been one of the best decisions I've ever made. After researching various Virtual Office Phone System products online, I decided to use [Ring Central](#) and could not be happier with the service.

Ring Central has been a key component for setting up my virtual office. At a starting rate of \$19.00 a month, you can use **ONE** main phone number, local or toll free to reach all of your staff members anywhere in the world – as depicted below.

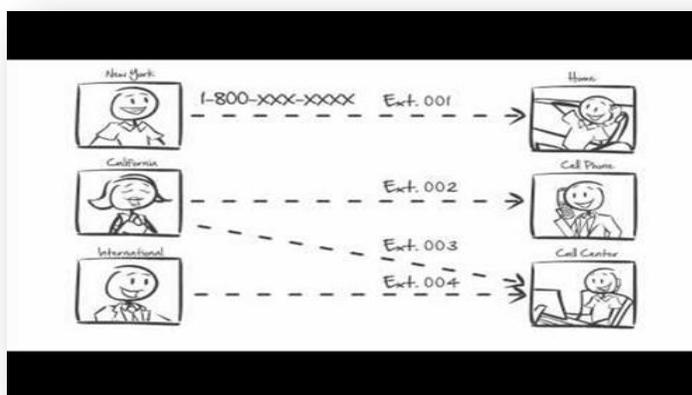


FIGURE 2: VIRTUAL OFFICE DEPICTION

Ring Central's Virtual Office Phone System includes features such as caller ID, call forwarding, voicemail, music-on-hold, conference calling, unlimited extensions, and three way calling. In addition to this, there is no need to purchase any hardware to use this system.

Virtual Office “Mobile Office” Smartphone Applications

Ring Central developed and released a free Mobile Office Application for Smart Phones including the Android, iPhone and Blackberry that is available on the market for download.

With this mobile office application, you can make and receive calls from your virtual office phone number using your cell phone—where the person you're calling will see your Ring Central phone number and not your cell phone number, listen to and manage your voicemail messages, show your Ringcentral.com extension's call logs, and use call forwarding. How cool is that? Below are snapshots of Ring Central's mobile application.

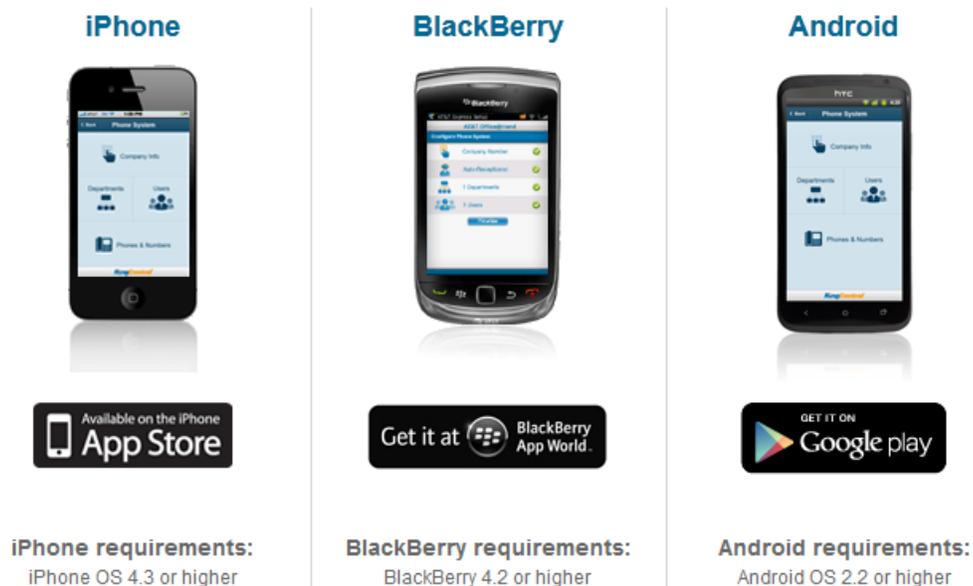


FIGURE 3: RINGCENTRAL.COM SMARTPHONE APPLICATION

Additionally, Ring Central offers an essential feature of any good virtual phone system that is called a *Virtual Phone Attendant*. With a virtual phone attendant, you can setup your virtual office phone system to play customized greetings where callers can choose from a menu of different options.

For example, take a look at the screen shot of a sample message Queue below for “The Orange Company”.

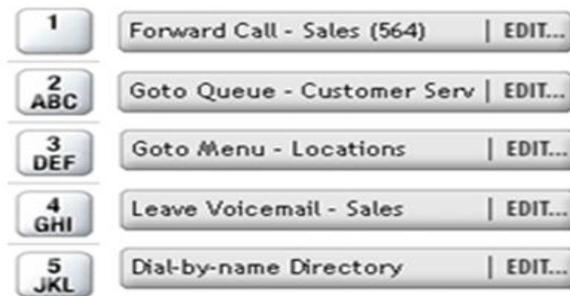


FIGURE 4: ORANGE COMPANY AUTO ATTENDANT QUEUE

Using this message queue, when a caller calls the Orange Company they might hear the following Virtual Phone Attendant Greeting:

“You’ve reached The Orange Company. Press 1 for sales, 2 for customer service, or press 4 to leave a voicemail for the sales department.”

When a caller presses 1 he will get transferred to the sales department. When he presses 2, he will get transferred to customer service and so on.

If you really want to enhance your virtual office phone systems greetings you can use a [professional voice recording service](#). With this service, your customers will receive professional pre-recorded phone greetings when they call your number.

To use this service, you simply make a selection from a list of voice samples provided by Phone.com that you want to use, write a script for your voicemail greetings and auto attendant messages, and then submit your script. Phone.com will then send you a price quote on the script that you submitted for your voice audio production project.

Using “The Orange Company” again as an example, here is an example of a script that could be used for this company’s auto attendant and voice mail greeting system:

“You’ve reached The Orange Company. Press 1 for sales, 2 for customer service, or press 4 to leave a voicemail for the sales department.”

When a caller presses 1 he will get transferred to the sales department. When he presses 2, he will get transferred to customer service and so on.

2. Business Domain Name

If you're running a small business, there's nothing more professional than changing your domain name from a gmail.com or yahoo.com extension to your company domain name. A domain name is a hostname that is used to identify your website on the Internet. Companies such as Netfirms.com and Godaddy.com offer affordable Internet domain registration for less than \$10.00 a year.

It is normally good practice to choose a domain name that references your business name, although some companies do not do this. For example, if your company's name is "We Make Cakes" a good business domain name would be www.wemakecakes.com.

It is also important to note that you can only register for a domain name that is available for use before you purchase one. For more tips and tricks on choosing a domain name for your business, you can visit the following website:

TIPS ON CHOOSING A BUSINESS DOMAIN NAME

<http://www.thesitewizard.com/archive/domainname.shtml>

Business Domain Extensions

Before you choose a domain name and register it, it is very important to educate yourself on the types of domain extensions that are used to identify businesses on the web. There are three domain extensions that are normally used. These extensions are as follows:

1. **.Com** – is the most popular and sought-after domain extension for domain names. If you are able to register your company's domain name with a ".Com" extension you're headed in the right direction. A ".Com" extension represents online commercial enterprises and is one that most people associate business websites.
2. **.Biz** – This is a domain extension that is usually used for small business websites. I would **only** recommend using this extension if a ".Com" extension is unavailable at the time you register for a domain name for your business.

3. **.Net** – Is another domain extension used by small businesses if the .Com extension is unavailable. .Net is an abbreviation for the term “Network”.

Business Email Address

After you have successfully registered your business domain name, you will need to do one of two things: Sign up for a [Hosted Email Solution](#) or a [Hosted Website Solution](#).

A Hosted Email Solution offers small business owners an affordable way to send and receive email from a professional email address with your company domain name.

Hosted email services will also allow you to integrate your email accounts with email clients like Microsoft Outlook, add and remove email accounts and mailboxes for your employees easily, allow you to access your email via the web, provide “Sync” capabilities with your mobile devices for access to your email while you are on the road traveling, and provide email archiving solutions for recovery.

The figure below gives you examples of professional email address formatting that you can use for setting up your email accounts:

PROFESSIONAL EMAIL ADDRESS FORMATS

[john@mycompany.com](#)

[john.doe@mycompany.com](#)

[jdoe@mycompany.com](#)

Alternatively, you can use [Web Hosting Services](#), which in today’s market is the best way to go. Web Hosting services enable you to create a website for your business-allowing it to become visible to the world. Additionally, some of the benefits of using web hosting services are that most of them include:

WEBSITE HOSTING PACKAGES INCLUDE

- ✓ **Unlimited Email Addresses**
- ✓ **SPAM Protection**
- ✓ **Email Forwarding**
- ✓ **Mobile Device Compatibility**
- ✓ **Free Domain Name Registration**



3. Online Billing and Invoicing Solution

Get paid on time while making your invoices stand out in style easily using online invoicing solutions [Blinksale](#) or [Invoiceable](#). With these invoicing tools, you can send invoices to your clients via email which will help you save money on postage. Blinksale offers unlimited invoicing for just \$15.00 a month.

Invoiceable offers the same features—only it's FREE to use. In addition to sending your clients invoices via email, both of these invoicing solutions are web-based and allow you to accept online credit card payments, create separate invoices for all of your clients, setup recurring billing, and send invoices as a PDF document so that your clients can print them out.

4. Online Backup and Recovery Solution

You never know when disaster will strike. When it does, you'll want to be ready for it. Having a backup and recovery system in place is crucial for any business—no matter what size they are.

The advantage of using online backup solutions vs. traditional backup services is that you will have access to your important documents and files anytime that you need them. [Carbonite](#) and [Crashplan](#) are two companies that offer very affordable online disaster recovery solutions that will help get you back up and running again in the event of a catastrophe.

5. Online Fax Solutions

Tired of tying up your phone line to send or receive faxes? If you are, then an online fax service is the perfect solution for you. Online fax services eliminate the need to purchase an expensive fax machine or run to a local store or copy center when you need to send faxes. These services allow you to send and receive faxes over the Internet as PDF files. Several companies that offer online fax services are [Ringcentral.com](#) and [Nextiva.com](#).

6. Online File Sharing and Document Management System

One of my personal favorite cloud services for small business is [Box.net](#). Box.net is a document management system that lets you store, manage and share your documents online anytime you need them via an Internet browser. This system definitely comes in handy for a small business owner needing quick access to documents even when they are away from their personal computer.

With Box.net, you can create different folders to store your documents in them, share files with your employees, team members or business colleagues, post comments regarding specific files you uploaded, and set permissions for specific files and folders that you may or may not want to share.

Some of the various types of files that you can upload and store on box.net are Microsoft office applications (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Access), PDF files, and Executable files and programs. Plus, when you sign up for an account with Box.net you will get 5GB of free storage space.

7. A Good Laptop Computer

I'm certain that you are aware that as a small business owner, having a laptop computer is very important. Quoted from an article featured on PCMag.com by Cisco Cheng:

"It's almost impossible to stay in business without a laptop, since the Web is such an essential part of communicating with your existing clients and potential customers and getting the word out through E-mail and social networks like Facebook and Twitter. All of these technologies make today's business happen."

I could not agree more with Cheng's quote. The four most important considerations for choosing a good laptop are Memory, Processor Speed, Hard Drive Size and Wireless Connectivity Capabilities. Here are the hardware specifications that I recommend when choosing a laptop computer:

Processor Type	Memory/RAM	Internal Hard Drive	Wireless Network Card Capabilities
Intel Duo Core Processor	At Least 4GB	At Least 500 GB	Wireless-N 802.11
Intel Core 3 Processor			Wireless-N 802.11n
Intel Core 5 Processor			WPA2-PSK Security
Intel Core 7 Processor			

8. All-In-One Printer, Copier and Scanner

Using an all-in one printer or multifunction device that features a printer, copier and scanner for your business will surely eliminate the need for purchasing these hardware devices separately. The feature I've grown to love most with using an All-in-One printer is the capability of being able to scan documents from the device, download it as a PDF and send it back using an online Fax Service. Isn't this a nice feature?

Some additional obvious benefits of using a multi-function printer include:

- ✓ You can have almost everything you need in one device since most multifunctional devices are equipped with copiers, scanners, or fax machines.
- ✓ They are very easy to maintain. Since all-in one printer's are standalone devices, there will be less equipment for you to take care of.
- ✓ You can save a lot of work space. Office equipment can tend to be bulky and take up a lot of space. Multifunction devices aid tremendously in this area.
- ✓ You can save money. It is more expensive for you to purchase several pieces of office equipment than to buy a multifunction printer. This becomes beneficial for your company, especially if you are trying to save on your expenses.

9. Online Project Collaboration and Web Conferencing Tools

Online collaboration and web conferencing tools allow you to work with your employees and clients in different locations across the world via one virtual location. With these tools, you can conduct live presentations, host online meetings, do sales presentations and conduct training right from your computer by sharing your computer screen with multiple users over the Internet.

Most web conferencing and project collaboration tools require you to download a desktop sharing application onto your computer to share your screen or send a special link through email to the participants of the meeting. After the participants have received a link to the meeting and have clicked on it, they will be able to join the web conference. Several free online collaboration and web conferencing tools available on the internet are [Anymeeting](#) and [Yugma](#).

[Google Apps](#) is an additional resource that offers free project collaboration and online messaging tools to small business owners. With Google apps, you can use your own customized business email addresses to send and receive email from Google's online email interface, receive 25GB worth of free online email storage, access to mobile email, an online calendar, and instant messaging.

10. Online Customer Relationship Management Systems (CRM)

I don't know about you, but I have a very hard time keeping track of my client's information and needed a tool that would allow me to do this easily. Luckily I stumbled upon an online software tool called a "Customer Relationship Management System". CRM systems like [Big Contacts](#) and [Salesforce](#) allow you to manage your customer's information, add inventory information, and track all of your sales leads, marketing campaigns, and more.

I will warn you that Customer Relationship Management systems can be a tad bit complex for beginners. Before choosing a CRM for your business, I urge you to make sure that the software vendor that you select has great customer service or online tutorials and other resources available that will give you a step by step guide on how to setup and use the software program.

Well, there you have it, a list of 10 tools that will help you get started with setting up a virtual office for your business. Technology has made this possible by changing the face of the traditional office setting to what now has become the "office on the go" or "virtual office" that allows you to work at home, on the road or any remote location. Armed with the tools discussed in this e-book, setting your business up to run virtually can be a breeze.

**So Go Ahead. Get started.
Why WAIT?**

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Resources

Auto Attendant and Voicemail Greeting Scripts

Source: <http://www.theonholdnetwork.com>

After Hours Auto Attendant Script

“Thank you for calling The Orange Company, where 'Oranges Are Our Only Business'. Our offices are presently closed. Our normal business hours are 9 am to 5 pm Eastern Time Monday through Friday, and 10 am to 4 pm on Saturday. We are closed Sundays and on observed legal holidays. Please visit us on the web at www.orange.com. You may leave a message for the party you called by dialing their extension now. For our company directory, press '5'. Otherwise, press '1' to leave a message in our general voice mailbox, and we will contact you as soon as we return to the office. Thank you for calling The Orange Company.”

Multi-Tiered Auto Attendants and Voicemail Greeting Scripts

Example 1

“You have reached The Orange Company's Sales department. For oranges' for the home, press '1'. For oranges for your business, press '2'. For bulk orange sales, press '3'. To locate an authorized orange dealer in your area, press '4'. To return to the previous menu, press '5.”

Example 2

“You have reached The Orange Company's Technical Support department. Technical support is also available on the web 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at www.orange.com/support. All of our technicians are currently assisting other callers.

Please stay on the line, and your call will be answered by the next available technician. If you prefer, you may press '1' to leave a message, and a technician will return your call as soon as possible. To return to the previous menu, press '5'."

Example 3

"Thank you for calling The Orange Company's Customer Service department. All of our customer service representatives are currently assisting other callers. Please leave your name, telephone number, and a brief message after the tone, and a representative will return your call as soon as possible. When you have finished, you may press 'pound' for further options."

Promotional, Holiday, and Extended Absence Auto Attendants and Voicemail Greeting Script

"Thank you for calling The Orange Company. Be sure to ask about our Annual Orange Clearance, going on now. For a limited time, all Oranges are 50% off. This is your chance to save big! If you know the extension of the person you wish to reach, you may dial it at any time. For sales, press '1'. For customer service, press '2'. For purchasing or accounting, press '3'. For technical support, press '4'. If you would like company information such as hours of operation and location, press '5'. Otherwise, press '0', or stay on the line, and a member of our staff will assist you shortly."

Company Directory Greeting Script

"You have reached the Orange Company's directory. To reach your party, you may enter their three-digit extension at any time. For Mary North, dial 112. For John South, dial 113. For Sally West, dial 114. For the Accounting department, dial 118 ... [add additional extensions here]. To reach an operator, press '0'. To repeat this message, press '5'. To return to the main menu, press '1'."