

# VIRTUAL PROFESSIONAL

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## ABSTRACT

The flexible workforce is becoming the norm in business. A new breed of worker is emerging—the *virtual professional*. The exploration and identification of the virtual professional concept will provide an opportunity for business schools to better prepare business majors.

## INTRODUCTION

Herman (1999) states “...future employers will demand...a more flexible workforce” (para. 1). Organizations are moving toward the concept of the flexible workforce. One response to this change is the development of a new breed of worker—the *virtual professional*.

The virtual professional is a concept where one’s career is a blend of permanent, contingent, and/or contractual employment. For some, it will include elements of sole proprietorship and elements of entrepreneurialism. As the employment market continues to move away from permanent lifelong employment, there is a need to prepare existing and future workers for the world of the virtual professional.

Job change is a real phenomenon in the current workplace of the United States. In a recent longitudinal study of the work experiences of baby boomers, it was found that the average person had at least 11 jobs between the ages of 18 to 44. In addition, there is a current trend of baby boomers having “large numbers of short-duration jobs even at middle age” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010, para. 5).

In addition to the issue job change and job duration, there is a demand from employees to have flexible work options. Some of these options are (a) work less, (b) part-time work, (c) job sharing, (d) on-call, (e) temporary, (f) contract, (g) season work, and (h) work at home (Torpey, 2007).

Mattarelli and Tagliaventi (n.d.) found in their study of virtual work relationships that the virtual worker (has similar characteristics as the virtual professional) must be capable of dealing with language, culture, ethical, and work style differences in order to be successful. These capabilities require a blend of knowledge (in the past enhanced via formal education) and skills that are not possessed at an advanced level by most professionals.

There is an interesting mix between educational attainment and skills. While most would agree that decision-making and analytical skills are developed with higher levels of education attainment, there has been an upswing in the need for *premium skills* (Mitchell, 2005). On one hand, employers are using in-house resources to develop needed premium skills. On the other hand, with a more fluid workforce, it is sometimes less costly to find individuals with the needed skills and hire them for a short-duration. In a sense, individuals are becoming more responsible

for development of needed premium skills. This is where a market has been created for non-employer opportunities for development.

There are organizations that are meeting some of the career development needs of the virtual professional outside of the traditional business major. For instance, the American Society for Training and Development (2011) provide a wide range of certificate programs that would be at least partially beneficial to the virtual professional. These include area such as sales, presentation, and leadership. In addition, universities such as Nova Southeastern University (2011) provide certificate programs that would be of value to the virtual professional. Supercool School (2011) and Free Online Classes (2011) are examples of entities are providing platforms for low-barrier startups of training options for those who fit the virtual professional profile. Certified Virtual Professional (2011) is providing certification for virtual assistants. The company is attempting to provide credibility to the virtual world of individuals offering assistant services to companies. This is just one part of the broader scope included in the virtual professional concept.

### **THE ROLE OF BUSINESS SCHOOLS**

The business schools in institutions of higher education need to have a role in preparing students to become virtual professionals. The one challenge is that at this point, the skills of decision making and analysis are taught/developed in a generic format. While formal education does add value in terms of raising the level of educational attainment, specific content and knowledge are yet to be determined. While business schools can position themselves to provide premium skills, there is a lag time that works against this position. For instance, if learning how to develop applications (APP) for Apple products (iPhone, iPad, etc.) is a premium skill, how much lag time can be allowed before the premium skill is worthless? One challenge is that a premium skill usually has a short shelf life and if learned and not used, then it is no longer a premium skill that future employers will view as meaningful.

Will the concept of the virtual professional alter the nature of how students will participate in business schools? Just as the work experience will be different for the virtual professional, the educational experience will change as well. Business schools might develop into providing a basic core of content/knowledge courses with a menu of premium skills making up over half of the curriculum. The business schools may act as clearing houses connecting individuals who are currently using the premium skills in the workplace and will teach business schools students how to develop those skills in real time. The business schools will begin to mirror the work world of the virtual professional with a mix of permanent relationships and temporary relationships. While adjuncts have been used for decades and some business schools may call the individuals who teach premium skills adjuncts, even this role will be altered. The challenge will be to develop a system for certifying that individuals are qualified to teach/develop premium skills since this area will in constant flux.

### **FUTURE RESEARCH**

First, the total set of skill and competency requirements of the virtual professional must be explored and identified fully. Second, business schools need to provide opportunities for the

development of these skills and competencies in undergraduate business programs in order for students to be better prepared for the demands of the future workplace.

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