Episode 09:

Scaling Beyond Yourself

The Professional Website Investor's Podcast

A transcript of this episode.

I'm your host Ryan Cowden, and this week we're joined by Ian Bond from www.ProfessionalWebsiteInvestors.com. In this episode of The Professional Web Investor Podcast, Ian and I discussed ways to scale your business by bringing outsourced workers onto your team. If you are running an online business, you should consider outsourcing some of the tasks to remote workers. And increasing supply of remote talent combined with advances in technology, have made outsourcing easier than ever. In addition to freeing up more of your time, outsourcing connects you with talented experts who can make improvements to your business, and help it grow beyond the amount of time you can devote to its needs. Today we're talking about what it takes to make this happen. This includes finding and hiring the right workers, sometimes called virtual assistants or VAs for short. This also includes the systems you will want to have in place to set you and your workers up for success.

On today's episode, you'll hear when it's time to consider scaling beyond yourself, which is right away. You'll also hear about what virtual assistants are and what they do. These can be outsourced experts who contribute content, or staff who help run the company on a day to day basis. Ian and I talk about the systems you should have in place for your virtual workers. This includes archiving a clear set of systems in one place as a reference, and requiring everyone to go through them thoroughly. And finally you'll hear about the best practices for finding and hiring the right people. Which websites should you be looking at, and what should you look for in your new hires. There's a lot of actionable advice in this episode, so grab something

to write with because you're going to want to take notes. As always, I'll be back on the other side to wrap up any loose ends. Without any further ado, here's my conversation with Ian Bond.

RYAN: All right. Ian, and how are you doing? It's been a few weeks. How's life?

IAN: Ryan, it's wonderful. We were closing out 2018 when this is recorded. It always takes time for these things to get published. But it is the season, it's wonderful. How are you?

RYAN: I'm doing great. Yeah. Holiday season was good, and it's exciting to start talking about what's coming up in the new year. So-

IAN: I will … I was just gonna say 2008 … I always love the fall because it's the run-up to the end the year, which is my favorite time because it makes me, I think to be better prepared for the beginning of the following year. It's just something I've been doing for a long time, that's why I like that. And if you're really well prepared, you can enjoy the holidays and get the rest and relaxation and all that. It just makes sense to end with a flourish.

RYAN: For sure.

IAN: Yeah.

RYAN: Yeah. Well, as we look forward to the new year, a lot of people are thinking about growth. And what's the best way to grow, and something that you talk a lot about is scaling beyond yourself. The goal is to grow beyond what you have time to do. You only have so many hours in a day, so it's … You got to scale up. Let's start at the beginning, when should people start thinking about scaling beyond what they can do?

IAN: I think Ryan, that I would stick my neck so far out as to say, that if you are listening to this and you're in your car, you're on a treadmill, you're in your bed, wherever you are, if you cannot think of a way, think of an idea that where you could utilize either outside expertise or subject matter expertise or additional help from other people, then you're probably not cut

out for entrepreneurship. I mean there are a billion ways to use the global outsourced workforce today, and they're exciting. Honestly I think it's at the point of conception and should be part of your planning from the beginning. And we'll unpack that as we go.

RYAN: Okay. And that's not even a time consideration, that's just purely an expertise thing, right?

IAN: Well, I think goes to the heart of entrepreneurship and the era that we live in here, people are available. Post introduction of the iPhone, everyone is walking around with the internet in their pocket, and the sum total of human knowledge. And you're able to access people that are incredibly talented all over the globe. In the past you could access people that are within a 20 or 30 mile radius of wherever you were, that's it. The world has changed and you're not doing that. And I did this before I was doing stuff online. I did this in prior incarnation of things I did.

I started to kind of dabble in using outsourced workers. And I would prepare stuff, send it to India and have it perfectly put together when I came in, when I awaken in the morning. And, yeah, I kind of beta tested it. I would suggest to people to think of things that they could do like, not just to get comfortable with the notion, but I think this is the era that we live in and you're under utilizing all of the resources out there. I mean, look, everyone listening to this, presumably, is a career professional, has worked a traditional job at some point in their life, and if you're going into some kind of a building every day, the leverage you have on yourself, going back to kind of the Robert Kiyosaki framework, is measured by kind of … Your leverage is kind of, what is it that you control?

And if you have a team of 10 working on, you now have a leverage factor of 10. If you have 10 in Kiyosaki's … In his interest, 10 real estate properties, that's another 10. And in order for you to harness what is available today, you have to figure out how to get leverage. And the easiest way to get leverage on your time is to employ experts to help you in whatever endeavor it is you decided to pursue.

RYAN: Okay, great. Just to give some people some ideas, what are some things that you might outsource? Just to-

IAN: Well … Yeah.

RYAN: Yeah.

IAN: Yeah, it depends what you're gonna do. I just mentioned, I kind of prep … I did presentations, strategy presentations and things that the client presentations, that were general. And quite frankly, I had a team that I used in India, originally, that it was really quite good and quite high level and didn't … I sent them on a project by project basis. I sent them stuff to put together. And after few iterations I could take a look at what they did and tweak it, and send it back, and it worked quite well. And doing this as a sole practitioner it's highly beneficial to do that.

Now in our e-commerce activities or even in with regards to the blog, the opportunity is to look at what the activity chain is that you're operating in. And figure out where you could use … What I would generally break down into outsourced experts, and kind of outsourced staff. And depending on what you're doing, you can use both experts, multiple experts and then there's staff that you literally, real literally treat like are full-time workforce. And we are meaningful as we are their full-time employers. Were meaningful to them and they were really meaningful to us, they allow us to operate. As you know we're nine times zones ahead of the East Coast, and the business must have run with them running the business while we sleep.

RYAN: Okay. Great. Well, one of the buzzwords when it comes to outsourcing is virtual assistance or VAs.

IAN: Yes.

RYAN: Could you kind of give us an introduction to what are virtual assistants?

IAN: Yeah. Okay. Virtual assistance means … And it doesn't have to be someone in the Philippines or India, it could be virtually in the town next

door. I guess it means that they're just not in the same place that you are. And there is a school of thought, and I won't criticize this, I won't disagree with it, it says if someone comes into your place of business and you provide them with, in the United States, all of the trainings of what employees get, you will get more allegiance and you will get people thinking about you 24/7.

I would tell you that I believe that based on the experience that we have, and the kind of our history of hiring the top decile of people available, that we get excellent people. And I don't think we suffer from any kind of a lack of allegiance or lack of creativity in terms of people investing in our future although they're not sitting in the room next to us, or in the desk outside in the hall, or something like that.

RYAN: Okay. Great. Because I think what some people when they hear virtual assistant, they just picture someone answering emails for them. And I think people have a really narrow definition of what a virtual assistant is. What are your … What's your idea of a virtual assistant? What kind of work do they do?

IAN: Well, they … Virtual assistant can do anything. They can and will do anything that you hire them for. And I think whether it is a virtual assistant and businesses that I manage now, I have 100 people in them. The people know what they do and what their responsibilities are when they come in. And that's the same … A lot of those people are virtual to me in my day job. But they come in knowing what they have to do, and we have a very elaborate system of processes and procedures, standard operating procedures, they are all archived and using SweetProcess, which is software dedicated to training. And filed under the relevant topics that they cover, that people use it that they can refer to. But everyone knows exactly what they're supposed to do, and they know how to do it. And if they can't remember, they have these resources available for them to go back and check.

And when we hire someone new, right now those people, and we haven't done this in a while, but those people are now … They were spending a week in our procedures, in SweetProcess, going through what each of the

different activities that they would have to perform in their job for us, and exactly how we like it performed. And we update these things all the time. Let me give you a good example. We employ an accounting software called Xero in our cloud based accounting system. And when we send a purchase order to one of our suppliers, Xero captures all of the relevant details, everything from the name of the customer, and the skew that we're ordering. And we just changed … We just tweaked the process and we just, this last week, alerted everyone there's one more step of the process now.

We're going to now … We're now gonna be capturing tracking numbers and the shipping quotes for tracking, so that it makes it easier for us to reconcile things when we kind of get stuff back from the bank. And that's a change. And just to take this one step further, we are a … I think of us as being very, very … We're a logistics business in a lot of ways, we're getting things from one place to another place. And anytime that you can break down someone's job into something that's understandable, where they know exactly what's required of them, the … Your ability to manage that process and to succeed is so much higher. It's … Think about it being on the other end of that, if you don't kind of know what the requirements are, you can't succeed.

We write templates for emails that our people use. Everything it to is scripted as far down as it's possibly can be scripted, and it's the backbone of what we do, to be honest with you. And so the word virtual is, it's someone I guess you can't see. It could be somebody in another building. I have people in another building from where my building. I also have people in different time zones. Okay. We … Our business is open 24 hours a day. And just if we based on the time zones of where the people are that we employ. And it's fairly amazing to me, because three years ago I never would have imagined that.

RYAN: Right. Well, it sounds like you have a really organized system. Would you say that you tried to put all these systems in place before you started hiring virtual assistants?

IAN: Actually we failed at our first virtual assistant, all right?

RYAN: Yes.

IAN: We hired a virtual … We had two stores, and this was 2015, and we had two stores and we hired a woman, girl in 2015. And she started coming up to speed on a really simple set of processes. And when we added the second store, which was easily doable for someone that should be working 40 hours a week, she pushed back and couldn't get it. We ultimately found out that she was cheating on us and working multiple jobs. And after my wife had explained everything that needed to be done and had spent … And we were probably too lenient and way to understanding of this girl's failings, because we hadn't really ever done this before. And once we kind of figured out that we've been snookered then my wife said, "I will not ever do that again where I spend this much time with someone."

Then at that point we committed to putting everything into SweetProcess. And then, as I just mentioned, this is the backbone of what we do. And the more granular that you can make things, the more step by step you can give someone directions, the better the result is gonna be for sure. And I would tell you that I think that going back to the origin of your question, the reality is that we knew when we did this that we would be doing business in the United States and then we would be asleep during the bulk of the day in the United States. And we knew that we were going to have to have some kind of a system in place. And, yes, we had to fail first in hiring someone and just hoping that they would get it right.

But ultimately we've put into place I think some very good hiring criteria and we've been lucky, we pay very well. And the reality is that now we have a very, very tight set of procedures that I share with people in forums and stuff like that, and try to help people out with.

RYAN: Great. I think people … Sometimes when I tell people about this podcast and how far away you and I are, that we do this, people have a hard time understanding how that's possible. I think there's still a lot of people who don't understand how good the technology is today. That this type of virtual work is not as hard as people think it's gonna be. Distance doesn't really matter anymore, does it?

IAN: No, I will. We're not going out for a beer after this, that's for sure.

RYAN: No, that's too bad actually.

IAN: It's morning where you're at and it's-

RYAN: Yes. It is. Yeah.

IAN: Look, it's amazing. It's like … It's amazing the amount of talent that you can get, and it's phenomenal the experts that you can speak to. And once you commit to doing it your eyes, your brain explodes, it's fantastic.

RYAN: Yeah. And it's a lot … I think it's just a lot easier than people expect it to be.

IAN: When you mean easier, you sitting in your den and me sitting in my den, and us having a high level of conversation, I can roll out of my bedroom, it's incredibly efficient. It's certainly … I have no distractions except the noise you ever hear, something going on here in the house. Yeah, no distractions. When I talk to people they know … And I don't have one of those red lights outside blinking saying that we're recording. But by and large it's an amazing ability that we have today.

RYAN: Right. You mentioned that first lesson of struggle I guess with, maybe did you hire or not hire the right person. And you mentioned a little bit earlier too that you kind of pay a little bit more …

IAN: Sure.

RYAN: For quality in terms of talent and character?

IAN: Yes.

RYAN: Is there any advice you could share for people? How do you hire the right person? What do you look for?

IAN: Well, I think after the first experience we kind of put on our thinking caps. And we kind of said, "What is it that we have that other people might want?" Right. And we literally asked … First thing we did … And we had used Upwork and we have used onlinejobs.ph, and we have employees from both of those. And this is just for our virtual assistance for customer service. This is not for, what I would call outsourced experts. Okay. This is for the employee or people that I consider to be our employees. These are full time employees for us. They just happen to be a not in the room next door or on the factory floor, we don't have a factory.

We decided to focus on what we could try to figure out to be the top tier of people. And funny enough, and for customer service people in the Philippines, there's a huge number of outsourced customer service people there. And we looked at people the that had experience working for J.P. Morgan, American Express, any of the big name American companies. And we figured if they had any prolonged period of time with those folks, that they probably came well trained. And that came with a expectation of compensation. When we asked them what it was about us that was attractive to them originally, first original answer was …

Well, I have an hour commute each day to the office or more in some cases, and it comes at a time of the day in the Philippines, which is at night. And if I could find the right situation, it would be great for me to stay here because if need be I'm close to my family, and it would be more productive for me. The thing that we found out after that, where we got the praise going back to just our last nugget of conversation, was unbeknownst to us, the AT&Ts and the J.P. Morgan Chase's and all these guys, all of their processes and procedures are in PDFs. And we do video with screen share. If this is what you're trying to do, just watch the clicks on the mouse, and it's fast and it's with my wife narrating it and she narrates it.

Sometimes when I'm in the room reading in our bedroom or her desk is, and painstakingly she does that. We use software called Asana, which is team and project management software, and everything is there. The Asana Board has multiple sections to cover everything from shipping logistics, to refunds, to any interactions on things, we have we call platinum orders, which are really big orders, where we're trying to provide a higher level of

service to people. And everything is there for someone, one of our people to see.

And lo and behold to us, we didn't know that, that was a big differentiator, where people said, "You guys make it easy. You you make me better. I don't have to read a PDF. I can actually watch a video and then 90 seconds now I've remembered it. Thank you." I would say look for people where you … Look, we were committed to paying. Well we're not trying to pay people two or three dollars an hour, that doesn't work. Okay. I think that can work. You can find someone who doesn't have the kind of experience that we have, and you can train them if you're up during those hours. RYAN: Okay.

IAN: And I think that's a wonder … And I know people that are doing that, and they're helping people that have no experience that … The old conundrum is how do you get the job, where it's by having good experience but you don't get the good experience unless you have the job. I know people that are doing that, and they're doing, they're helping people make them better. And we have a more junior assistant with someone who is a partner but he's an outsource expert, spends the bulk of his time with us and he is training someone. And my thing with him is, I want him to take another person and train another one. As I want him to keep training people, because he's great at it.

RYAN: Okay. Great.

IAN: He's in Mexico too, so-

RYAN: Is he really?

IAN: Yeah.

RYAN: Wow.

IAN: You'll chat in over … We'll chat over Slack or … Which is another piece of software that we use, or through the comments made on projects in Asana. And he's … And then there's another piece of software. He's someone who uses a software called Loom, where he records commentary

and suggestions of things for us to think about, me to think about particularly. Sometimes these things are 15 or 20 minutes long. And it's much easier for him to record that, than it is for him to write an email or something like that, which would take forever.

RYAN: Okay. Great.

IAN: We're doing all that stuff.

RYAN: Okay. Final question here, you mentioned Upwork, are there any other places that you recommend people to look for virtual help?

IAN: Yeah, I think for … In order to mention Upwork and then for the customer service folks in the Philippines, there's a service called onlinejobs.ph. You will get inundated with people from onlinejobs.ph for … In addition to Upwork, Freelancer.com for expert help. Those have been our go-to places so far. And then for expert help, word of mouth has also been something we've used. Expert help … But I think for raw talented people, for kind of customer service stuff, it's been those two sources, they're great.

RYAN: All right. Well that's all the time we have today. Thank you so much, Ian, that was really helpful.

IAN: Thank you, Ryan. It is a pleasure. As always, it was a pleasure, I look forward to speaking to you again.

RYAN: Okay. See you soon.

RYAN: All right, folks. There you have it. That wraps up my conversation with Ian Bond of The Professional Website Investor Podcast. He shared a ton of valuable insights and advice today on how to scale your business by outsourcing work to virtual employees. As always, we'll link up any tools or resources we discussed in the show notes at ProfessionalWebsiteInvestors.com. I hope you enjoyed our conversation and consider subscribing, sharing with a friend, or leaving us a review in your favorite podcast directory. Until next time, best of luck in all that you do,

and we'll look forward to seeing you on the next episode of The Professional Website Investor Podcast.