***'I GET TO DO WHAT
I love'***

Katey Lawson left a traditional DCP life behind to become her own boss, working from home to be every dental practice's fairy godmother.

A virtual reality

At the tender age of 26, dental nurse and practice manager Katey Lawson realised her dream to have her own business when she launched The Dental VA. 'VA' stands for Virtual Assistant and The Dental VA is the equivalent of a personal assistant working in the dental sector 'virtually', ie remotely, from a home office. Katey's company provides UK dental practices with practical support to meet their practice management needs, aid in the smooth running of their practices, and an extra pair of hands for the practice manager or practice principal.

Down to business

Katey showed an early interest in the world of dentistry: 'I have ALWAYS loved going to the dentist. Mum made us go every six months and I loved going to see our lady dentist who spoils us with stickers and always let us ask questions about the equipment (particularly me).'

Katey, who has a beautiful set of teeth, has never had any treatment carried out on them beyond a fissure sealant or two, but says that she 'always wondered what all of the numbers were that the dentist used to call out while I was in the chair'. Her opportunity to find out came while she was working in an entirely different industry, the world of finance.

'My Mum is a bookkeeper and Dad has his own business so there was always accountancy talk in our house when I was growing up,' says Katey. 'So, I decided to get a foot in the door after a few administration jobs.' At the age of 16 Katey took an advanced college course in Business Studies and decided to head straight out into the world of work. Administrative positions led to a role at a huge homecare provider doing credit control administration, from where she moved into the accounts department of a large corporate computer company.

'The company offered me the AAT qualification to become an accountant,' explains Katey, 'but then I found a dental nursing role and the rest is history!'

As soon as Katey qualified as a dental nurse she was asked to become the practice manager at the dental practice where she was employed. She had already taken on a lot of the duties of a practice manager and ran the reception desk while other team members were on holiday. She learnt everything about practice management on the job with help from the British Dental Association (BDA), CODE (The Confederation of Dental Employers Ltd), her principals and through research.

Katey admits that being practice manager was hard at first as she was still young: 'Luckily, it was a fairly new practice so the team was still building. As the practice grew I was able to be involved in and eventually controlled the recruitment – so the new employees and associates knew me solely as the PM as opposed to dental nurse.'

Katey still enjoyed the clinical side of dental nursing and says that she 'used to jump in on the interesting cases and nursed mostly for implants and apicectomies as these were my favourite treatments to assist with'.

'THIS IS THE ONLY TELEPHONE ANSWERING SERVICE DEDICATED TO DENTISTRY WITH REGISTERED DENTAL NURSES WHO HAVE A COMBINED 23 YEARS' EXPERIENCE IN DENTAL NURSING, RECEPTION AND MANAGEMENT.'

'I've always wanted my own business,' says Katey, now 28, who lives in Potters Bar, Hertfordshire. 'In 2010 I was contacted by a practice principal who was about to go through their CQC inspection process and there wasn't enough time or team members to help with the admin side of the practice management. We had a few meetings and then eventually got a plan together and I stayed working with her in my spare time for over a year on CQC admin and various other things.' The principal mentioned that a dentist friend of hers also needed help with their practice. Katey spoke to a few of her dental colleagues about the trouble that practices face and it was then that the idea of The Dental Virtual Assistant was born.

Ready to launch

The official launch of The Dental VA, whose slogan is 'for all your dental practice needs', was held at the Nordic bar in London in October 2012, attended by many of Katey's friends and clients. 'I am very lucky to be very good friends with a fantastic bunch of inspiring dental friends,' says Katey. 'It was lovely that everyone made such an effort to attend. It was really humbling.'

The services offered by The Dental VA's are **Virtual Practice Manager**, **Virtual Treatment Coordinator** and **Virtual Dental Reception**. **Virtual Practice Manager** meets practices' compliance needs, whether it is for CQC, HTM 01-05, Denplan Excel Accreditation, BDA Good Practice or becoming an Investors in People practice. It provides help with marketing, finance, administration, audits and reporting, meeting agendas, HR and staff management, websites, setting up a new practice, suppliers, mystery calls/visits, and patient templates for Software of Excellence's EXACT.

Virtual Treatment Coordinator handles anything to do with patients: initial calls to new patients; treatment plan presentations or written estimates; being first contact if a patient needs to address any concerns about treatments; financial arrangements; recalls, follow ups, feedback calls, referrals and debt collection.

Virtual Dental Reception involves Katey or one of her team remotely logging into a practice's dental software (EXACT or Carestream R4) and answering their calls as if they were in the practice. The Dental VA can cover a practice's receptionist while the practice is closed, the receptionist is out for lunch, during training or meetings or even when the receptionist is just particularly busy.

Katey points out: 'This is the only telephone answering service dedicated to dentistry with registered dental nurses who have a combined 23 years' experience between them in dental nursing, reception and management.'

The Dental VA is now a team of three: Katey, Sasha and Natasha. Katey specialises in EXACT, heads the Compliance Support Service and manages social media for clients. Sasha has worked as a dental nurse and receptionist for over six years and according to The Dental VA website, 'is a fantastic people person and has great communication with nervous patients'. Sasha also works part-time as a dental receptionist in a North London practice. Natasha (pictured top right) has worked as a dental nurse and a treatment

coordinator, has achieved UMD Professional's Diploma in Practice Management, and is a self-confessed 'paperwork geek'.

'We get to know you and your practice beforehand and act as a member of your team,' says Katey of The Dental VA approach. 'We have a vested interest in the success of your business as we want to be used again and again!'

A typical day

Since the company came into being, social media and good old word-of-mouth have been used to make the dental industry aware of The Dental VA. 'We have done no other marketing ... yet!' says Katey.

Client enquiries have grown by the day, which is why Katey brought in Sasha and Natasha to help manage the workload.

Katey's day to day life is of course very

different now to that of a dental nurse working in a practice. She talks us through what it is like to be in charge of The Dental VA:

'Monday is normally a client day, so either I have a full day booked in a practice or I'll be working from my office. I try to start the day with a run, but I'm not too disciplined with it so if I don't run I normally just get ready, make a cuppa and porridge, turn on the computer, check emails/reply to any before I start at 8.30am. The week varies, which I love. Sometimes I'm in practices all week and other times I'm working from home.'

Although her role has changed, Katey is still very much involved in dental practice life. 'I still get to work in my clients' practices

which is really exciting because I get to see where they work, meet their teams and sometimes patients too.

'At first it was isolating as I wanted to work fully from home and it was just me on my own. But now, I've decided that while I can, I want to get out as much as I can and it has been a blessing having Sasha and Natasha on board to share ideas. They have been a great support for me.'

Katey went on lots of business courses when she first started up as well as networking events, and although she felt 'totally out of her comfort zone' at first, she soon got into the swing of things after a few. 'I'm lucky that my Dad has his own company too,' she adds, 'so he was my mentor.'

Maintaining a good work/life balance can be a challenge for anyone considering starting their own business or indeed, becoming self-employed (see our article on limited companies on page 44). Katey says that this was hard for her to begin with and that she was a slave to her emails: 'As soon as I received a client enquiry I found it hard to resist and instantly reply, even if that was at 10pm! Now, I have structured hours and have Sasha looking after the days and times when I'm not available.'

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An upward slope

Katey certainly makes the most of her 'down' time – which can entail snowboarding down slopes, learning Spanish (she plans to become fluent) or practising yoga. 'I have a beautiful group of friends both here in the UK and in Spain that have been very patient while I've been working on the business so I try to see them as much as I can. We normally book a girlie day at a spa or cook for each other. I don't get to see my Spanish friends that often but I speak to them a lot on the phone or through Facebook. I also love to do yoga and occasionally meditate when I get stressed. I am taking up snowboarding so I guess this will be taking up a lot of my spare time in the future.'

Recently Katey, who says the three things she couldn't live without are her iPhone, her car and lip balm, made a '2013 Things to do list' and has already booked in going to an opera, visiting Snowdonia and snowboarding.

Katey's future plans for The Dental VA are firmly under wraps, but although she is of course busy running and working in the business, she would like to complete her Oral Health Educator certificate. 'I didn't get a chance to do it after my nursing qualification as the practice management took precedence but it is something I'd like to do.'

Katey has no regrets about her ambitious career path, and says 'I smile everyday because I get to do what I love: providing a top quality service the way I want, and helping people and their businesses. I am privileged to work with some truly outstanding individuals who want to make the dental world a better place'. Feedback from clients has been extremely positive and Katey has found that: 'Everyone

I am able to educate about the business loves the idea and someone even said that they wished they'd thought of the idea!'

When asked if she would recommend starting a company to other dental care professionals, Katey responds: 'Yes, yes, yes! If you have lots of passion for an idea that you think will benefit others then do it! If you don't try it, you'll always wonder "what if?" and possibly live to regret it. It's hard graft but worth all the effort.'

*The Dental VA offers a range of packages and rates for their services for dental practices. Visit www.thedentalva.co.uk, email katey@thedentalva.co.uk or call 07850 378 621 to discuss your needs. **Exclusive offer for Vital readers: Pre-pay for seven hours' worth of any of the virtual services and get an additional hour at no extra charge!***

With thanks to Neel Dentistry in Welwyn, where the photoshoot for this cover story was conducted. www.neeldentistry.co.uk

Interview by Kate Maynard

COVER STARS: WHERE ARE YOU NOW?

To celebrate *Vital's* 10th anniversary this year, we would like to ask all past *Vital* cover stars to contact us and let us know what you have been up to. We plan to run a *Where are they now?* style article later this year.

Please email the Editor, Kate Maynard, on vitaleditorial@nature.com.