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with Barbara Best

Transcript: Getting the Help You Need with #RemoteWorking (interview)

- Barbara:** The benefit of listening to me is to find alternative solutions for operational staffing. Hi, I'm Barbara Best. I'm an expert in the field of remote administrative support. I've asked my friend Kerri Quirt, of KQ Consulting, to interview me so that you have a better listening experience. Kerri knows how to draw a conversation out of me that is much more entertaining than me reading a page of content. Kerri, take it away. Ask me anything.
- Kerri:** Thank you so much, Barb. So glad to be here with you. Okay, so you said that you specialize in remote support. Tell me, tell our listeners, why it's important for them to pay attention to this podcast and how they're going to benefit.
- Barbara:** It's important to pay attention, because humans have evolved into a remote workspace in various contexts. Now, to put that in context, 100 years ago we were punching time clocks in manufacturing and counting how many pieces we produced.
- Kerri:** Right.
- Barbara:** 100 years later, we still have a nine to five mentality, more or less. And we've also evolved into an information age and information culture. And technology has allowed us to work various times and various places doing different things. So, the nine to five limitations, I guess you could say, is being blurred. And the other reason too, with technology, because of technology, we're no longer having to have bums in chairs all the time. So that brings a whole trust issue into play. And yes, it's just constantly evolving. Humans are evolving into a remote workspace and I wanted to discuss and explore what that is, what it means, what it really means day to day for people in various contexts, whether it be entrepreneurship, nonprofits, associations. I want to help people to understand what remote support is, what it can be, what it is not, and how it can help them in their context.
- Kerri:** That makes sense. Okay, so how do you fit with your expertise? What makes you an expert in this field?
- Barbara:** Lots of experience.
- Kerri:** Okay, tell me your experience.
- Barbara:** I've been doing what I do. I own a remote support agency. I've been doing it for 16 years. I get to work out of my home office. I'm on my second dog. And we have a lot of fun together, he and I, we hang out. And for me, it's about certainly earning a decent living of course, but it's also about me and my life balance. And to me, that means a lot, to focus on my health, that's why I left corporate in the first place. I was totally fried. And so now health is first and foremost for me. And I found a way to manage all of

that, to make a decent living on my terms, and doing that for 16 years that makes you an expert in your field.

Kerri: Yeah, no question, and you said you have an agency. So, you have a collection of staff that works with you.

Barbara: Yes, we have currently a team of 10 at the moment. Each person is an expert in their field, whatever it happens to be. Operations, bookkeeping, investment accounting, whatever it is. They provide services under my company. They are also contractors. And we help each other actually because, in most cases, they don't want to be an employee. They don't want to work 40 hours a week. They have other interests, they want to keep their skills current, and they want to make some money. But they in turn also want to do that on their terms. So, we help each other. I help them by providing employment, they help me and my company by providing the services that clients are after.

Kerri: Now, when we were speaking the other day, you mentioned to me about an invisible wall of non-trust. Yes, and I'm wondering how this podcast series that you've developed, that you're starting it with, how is that going to help people who are baffled by that invisible wall of non-trust?

Barbara: I'm going to explore by interviewing other entrepreneurs. Sorry, associations, nonprofits. I want to explore their take on that invisible wall of non-trust that crops up in remote relationships. It comes from a context where humans, and this probably stems from 100 years ago, when we were in manufacturing, managers would say, "Well, if I can't see you working that means you're not working".

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: Well, I think we've evolved in the last hundred years to be a lot more than that. But yet, that invisible wall of non-trust still comes up because we're doing more and more remote work. So I want to help people understand what it is, why it is, how to work with it, how to manage it, and let's be frank, some people don't trust other people.

Kerri: True. That's just the way it is.

Barbara: True, but it is possible to have support services done remotely at a fraction of the cost of regular staffing.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: It does take a bit of finesse. But yes, it's possible and it works very, very well.

Kerri: Okay. Now I'm wondering, actually I'm not wondering, I'm certain because I know you, and I know this kind of business based on what you and I've talked about the trust issue. Where people, you know, like you said, if they can't see you working, then they don't believe you're working. That comes back to the age-old thing that people are just starting to actually say out loud now, that relationships are everything.

Barbara: Absolutely.

Kerri: Do you find that there's more of a, I don't want to say skill set, but is it more of a finesse, I think is the right word, when it comes to building relationships, because that's the trust building with remote support. Do you find that that's more of a significant piece of success compared to, and I'm thinking of the corporate, when you mentioned the corporate world?

Barbara: Yes.

Kerri: People who have been employers and employees, there's not always trust there. In this scenario, if you're bringing somebody in from outside, it's that it's very, very important that they build the trust. So yes, that's a really big piece.

Barbara: I would say even more so, because humans are hardwired to interact face to face. We are hardwired that way.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: If we're working in a remote environment, we have to work at that relationship, building that trust building a little bit more than normal, than if we were working face to face, even if we were in a face to face environment. Like you just said Kerri, if we're working in the same office, it doesn't mean we trust each other.

Kerri: No.

Barbara: Not even close, right? So, if you take that office away from the equation, right, you still have relationships, but there is no face to face. So that changes the dynamic, and we have to work out a little bit more there. There are techniques to use in the online world. Video conferencing, video coffee breaks, you know, different other things that people do, to still continuously build those relationships in virtual teams. So absolutely, it's possible, but we have to work at it a little bit harder.

Kerri: Right. Yes. Okay. So, based on that same information with the extended effort that's required, what kind of roadblocks have people thrown at you? To say, "Well, I don't know. Because I want to" again, you know, "I want to see you in the little box beside me, make sure that you're working". What kind of things do they throw at you that say, "Oh, well, maybe not"?

Barbara: Yes. You'd be surprised at what I've heard in 16 years. Believe me. A couple of interesting ones come to mind. One is the iconic entrepreneur, who has grown their business or started their business out of an idea.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: They have given birth to this business, it's their baby. They don't want anyone to interfere with it. They want to do everything themselves. But if they do that, they're going to stagnate because they need to be out building their business, meeting new people, potential clients, doing networking, all that stuff. They do not need to be in the office doing the paperwork.

Kerri: True.

Barbara: It's a waste of time, and it's a waste of money. If they want to grow their business and do what they love, they really do have to delegate. I can't say as much as possible; I would say delegate what is reasonable, what is right for them to grow their business, but still have time to keep an eye on things. But they do have to develop that trust.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: Sometimes they can't, or they don't want to build a trust with a resource enough to say here, can you do my bookkeeping every month, or whatever it is.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: Some entrepreneurs can't, or won't, do it. I can't make them do it. It's really up to them. And there again, that goes back to building a trust relationship.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: So, you know, it takes two to make delegating work.

Kerri: True enough. Yes. Okay, so what else besides that, because I bet you there's more.

Barbara: Oh yes, there's times too many for this podcast.

Kerri: Okay.

Barbara: The other one that comes to mind, that happens more often than I would like, is the discovery that your potential client is a micromanager. Oh, I know groan, groan. Yes, it happens quite often. And it has happened also that the remote support resource is also a micromanager. I'm sure they'll be getting on famously, off they go doing their thing. But for most of us, and me in particular, I can't deal with micromanagers. It's just not where my headspace is.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: It's a relationship to me. It's not us and them. Micromanagers, it's all about them. I don't work that way.

Kerri: Okay, no.

Barbara: But that's just me. Another one that is, I think on my top five favorites, is the entrepreneur that will say, "Well, if this costs this much, I may as well do it myself".

Kerri: Yes.

Barbara: Yes, well, that happens more often than I'd like to think, or you probably know about.

Kerri: Yes.

Barbara: And the thing with that is, they don't understand that two things happen by saying that. They're taking time away from something else that may be more important. They're also losing revenue when they say that. So, I'll give you an example Kerri. If you go out at \$300 an hour say, and you're doing your office bookkeeping, you're in the office doing bookkeeping for half a day.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: That means that is \$1200 of lost revenue by not doing client work.

Kerri: Oh, true enough.

Barbara: It's four hours of time that could be spent at a high value networking event, attracting potential clients.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: So, there's that context. And when I explain that, some people go "Oh, yeah, I never thought of that". The thing is, the other side of that is if the task had been delegated to someone who lives for numbers, they could probably do it in half the time, at a fraction of the cost.

Kerri: Yes.

Barbara: So really, if you're in your office Kerri, doing bookkeeping for half a day, it's just a loss to do that. It really is. And it would be draining because you don't really like doing bookkeeping.

Kerri: Yes.

Barbara: Most people don't, most people don't. There are occasional people who live for numbers and they can blast off a half day's work in like an hour.

Kerri: Yes.

Barbara: And so therefore it would cost you less in the long run anyway, and you can write it off against your business.

Kerri: So brilliant.

Barbara: To me, that would be a winning thing to do.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: I'm just saying some people don't see it that way.

Kerri: It makes a lot of sense though. It really does. Because when you explain it that way, now that obviously is one of your strategies. Do you have other strategies that you can present to people so that they can move past these roadblocks?

Barbara: Yes, for sure. I like to sit people down if the prospective client wants to know more. I prefer to sit down with them one on one, whether it's in person or on a video call or whatever it is.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: And I do the math for them. I ask for their charge-out rate. I ask them how much time was spent on bookkeeping last month, you know, just as a general example.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: And I work out the numbers, and I tell them how much it would cost for us to do the same thing. And then we sit down and talk about it, what it really means for them. Does this address their pain points? Most of the time, yes. Not always. Sometimes the letting go trumps the cost. Sometimes it happens. People are like that.

Kerri: Yes.

Barbara: I can only do what I can do, right?

Kerri: True enough.

Barbara: And by extension of that example, I also try to work to build their trust. Because when meet them initially, they don't know me from Eve. I could be anybody. So, I do different things. I try different things to earn their trust, perhaps get them to talk to one of my team members or an existing client if they're open to doing so.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: And building to work that trust, that yes. What you need us to do is certainly viable.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: Here's what it's going to cost you, compared to what you would charge out as a client rate, you know, and hopefully, it'll progress from there.

Kerri: Okay. Question about something you have coined, a term called pure work.

Barbara: Pure work.

Kerri: Tell me about that. Because I remember that fits in with the same category of a position when you're talking to a potential client.

Barbara: Yes, absolutely. It is, and it leads perfectly to what I was just talking about, pure work. When I say pure work, I mean clients only pay for the work that is performed. They don't pay for lunch hours, they don't pay for coffee breaks, as they would with an employee.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: Only paying for the services that we provide. So, our evaluation, and this is an interesting dynamic as well, the evaluation of our work is based solely on the work that's performed. If you had that same kind of scenario in an office setting, are you evaluated on just the work? Or are you also evaluated on how often you come to work on time?

Kerri: Yes.

Barbara: How many coffee breaks do you take during the day? Are you late for lunch? All these different things, but in a remote support setting that doesn't come into play. It really is about the services provided and the work done.

Kerri: And that's a big difference.

Barbara: It is. It really is. It's a more true comparison, I think. And it's not skewed. And it's kind of funny, too, because we're moving into remote support, and that whole information kind of culture. So, the evaluations are different now, than they were in corporate office.

Kerri: Yes, true enough.

Barbara: All right. So yes, that's an interesting way of looking at it for sure. And it does give us a bit of an edge, because we can compare apples to apples by doing that.

Kerri: Yes.

Barbara: Saying you're paying for this as an employee, or if you have employees, you're paying for all this extra stuff.

Kerri: Yes.

Barbara: So, the remote support in your contract. You're paying for just that.

Kerri: Yes. Alright. So far, they're getting somebody that specializes in just that.

Barbara: Yes. And because they love what they do, they'll do it in half the time.

Kerri: Yes. And likely a lot better than somebody that's brought in to say, you know, if they're in an admin position, but we want you to build PowerPoints, and maybe PowerPoints aren't their strong suit, but it's part of the job.

Kerri: Yes, yes. I know, that makes total sense.

Barbara: And sometimes too, and I'm sure it's not just with admin people, sometimes they just get a job because they need a job.

Kerri: Yes.

Barbara: And you know that that's the reality. And they may like it, they may not like it.

Kerri: No, no, that's true enough.

Barbara: Yes. Well, and it makes a difference when you have happy people. When people are happy doing the work that they're doing, all the way around everybody benefits, everybody benefits the most out of somebody that's grumbly and, you know, not enjoying the tasks that they've been given. It just makes so much more sense. And there again Kerri, being a remote support provider, right, isn't for everyone.

Kerri: No.

Barbara: You know people, some people, they need to go somewhere to work every day. They just need to do that.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: It took me about six months to get used to the idea of working from home, because I'd always gone out to work, since I was 16.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: And working from home, once I got the hang of the idea, I thrive in my environment, and I'm so productive. It's peace and quiet. I'm not good with ambiguity and watercooler chats, and all that stuff, gossip, whatever. I don't do good with that at all. And so, for someone who's thinking about working remotely, it's not for everyone you know. You see a lot of this stuff on social media, you know, it's the way to work. It's this, it's so much freedom, it's that, it's the other thing. Yes, it can be.

Kerri: But if you're wired that way...

Barbara: If you're wired that way. It's not for everybody.

Kerri: Right, now that makes sense. Now, with all these wonderful examples you've just given me, can you give me a case study that can help our listeners see a transformative experience for one of your clients? Because I mean, for me, it's all about, you know, the opportunity that you're providing everybody right now is, you know, your expertise in the area and how they can benefit in their own business. And I'm not sure if we talked about it, but you said that you specialize in micro and small business.

Barbara: Yes, Yes, that's correct.

Kerri: Okay. And that's perfect. So, if somebody like that is listening, what kind of transformational experience can you relay for one of your clients so they can, they can actually go "oh, really, that happened?"

Barbara: Yes, I can. There's a very good example, one of my favorites. It's because it's such a short turnaround. It's less than two years.

Kerri: Oh, wow.

Barbara: The client came on with us in July 2018, I believe it was.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: And their previous support provider left to have a baby or something, whatever it was. They had to find a new resource for their back office support. And they approached us through networking and business contacts and so on. And they told us right up front, that they're having a bit of financial difficulties and they're operating in the red. And they'll be able to pay us most of the time kind of thing, and I was kind of thinking, oh, really? And they were so passionate about what they do and their *métier*. Why they're doing what they're doing. And I thought, okay, well, I'll take you on. Sure. Okay. So that was 2018, I believe it was right. They were going from operating in the red to now, because they've continued their back office support, us providing those services remotely. Their board and committee members have now been able to focus on membership, recruitment and retention, building relationships, doing different things. And over the course of a year and a half, essentially, they now have money coming in from their AGM and conferences. They have upgraded their website. So, member renewals are automated.

Kerri: Oh wow.

Barbara: Their AGM has a sponsorship program in the five figures. So, for me, I'm extremely proud of what they've done. And it is because they recognize the value of delegating their back office operations. So, in other words, board and committee members aren't bogged down with, you know, doing all the paperwork and new member kits and all that stuff.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: They're off doing their thing. They're on social media, they're talking to people. They're doing program development events, all that stuff, to bring in membership revenue, and it's working. And it works very well. So, it's, yes, totally very rewarding and it actually does work for sure.

Kerri: Well, and that's a perfect case study, because like you said, a year and a half turnaround time. Yes, crazy. I mean, most people wouldn't even think that was possible.

Barbara: It's possible.

Kerri: Especially with something as simple as delegating the back office. I mean, it sounds simple. And yet, when you go into the detail that you've gone into when we chatted, there's a lot involved in it. But by doing that extra work and handing it off to you, they've just grown. That's wonderful, though.

Barbara: Yes.

Kerri: My goodness, you should be proud.

Barbara: I am very proud. I am very proud of them as well. And my team, of course, who's supported them every day. They're all wonderful people to work with. And they make working with them very easy. But let me say it's a very broad stroke to say, "oh, they went from operating in the red to operating in the black" and five figures and so on. That's fine to say that in summary, but yes, there are a lot of components that happen every day in order to make that happen.

Kerri: Right. Well, but again, let's take this look at your expertise, knowing from the time that you've been in business to see what steps have to be taken to make that possible.

Barbara: Yes, and it's not a set it and forget it kind of thing.

Kerri: No.

Barbara: You do have to provide the remote support resource with what you want done, the infrastructure, the reporting, the who's who in the zoo, the schedules and all that stuff.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: And once the onboarding is finished, the transition is, you know, pretty much underway.

Kerri: Right.

Barbara: They let us go and we do our thing. And we check in with them. And we, you know, we report, we hit deadlines, you know, but yes, they do check in with us weekly. And we ask the question, what's coming up? What's this? What's that?

Kerri: Tell everybody.

Barbara: How can we improve? Is there anything we missed, you know, that kind of thing? And that keeps everyone you know, on the playing field and working seamlessly.

Kerri: That's again relationships that you're just absolutely building.

Barbara: Yes. And it's about trust as well. They trust us to do our job every day. And we trust them to, you know, work with us and let us know what's going on, what's happening, what's not happening, you know, and we just get them. We get stuff done.

Kerri: Congratulations!

Barbara: Thank you.

Kerri: That's pretty awesome.

Barbara: It is fun. It has been fun, for sure. For sure.

Kerri: Right on. Okay, so I have one last question, and then I'm going to hand the mic back to you. For people who are listening, what would be the first actionable step that you'd like them to take to make the best use of the information that you're sharing in this podcast and upcoming episodes? What would you like them to do?

Barbara: Oh, for sure. First and foremost, please, please do leave me comments or feedback on this platform, whatever it happens to be, YouTube, SoundCloud, whatever.

Kerri: Okay.

Barbara: Wherever you happen to land this podcast, please let me know. And also please do give me ideas. I'm looking for subject items, what I can interview people about.

Kerry: Right.

Barbara: Let me know your questions, your concerns, your ideas for future podcasts and how I can help you solve your problem.

Kerri: Wonderful.

Barbara: And you can also drop me a line as well. Barbara@virtualworks.ca.

Kerri: Okay.

Barbara: You can also visit our website www.virtualworks.ca.

Kerri: Okay.

Barbara: And then we're only on LinkedIn or sorry, I should say we're exclusively on LinkedIn, www.linkedin.com/in/virtualworks.

Kerri: Marvelous. And you mentioned once before, when we were chatting, that you might be looking for people to interview, is that right?

Barbara: Yes, that's correct. In fact, if this kind of podcast fodder is appealing to you, and you might be interested in doing a future podcast with me, please do drop me a line, again at my email address Barbara@virtualworks.ca

Kerri: Marvelous. Okay. Thank you for inviting me in today. I'm going to give it back to you now. Okay.

Barbara: Thanks, Kerri. In closing, I'd like to thank you so much for listening. I hope this information was helpful, and I look forward to providing you with more insights very soon.

I'm Barbara Best CEO of Virtual Works Inc.

There's a couple of action steps you can do:

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