

10 Mistakes Voice Over Performers Make (And How To Avoid Them!)

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By David H. Lawrence XVII

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Intro

Hi! I'm David H. Lawrence XVII. I'll be your author and narrator for this VOHeroes eBook. As to why me, well ... I've been an on-camera actor and VO artist for most of my life, beginning in my teens.

I also teach award-winning voice over classes around the world. I love helping actors, on camera, on stage and on mike, make the most of their storytelling practice.

(Yes, I refer to this as a **practice**. Why let doctors and lawyers have all the fun?)

I often tell my clients and students that **my job is to defend the success of their careers**. That means not only identifying and steering them towards best practices, but also helping them avoid the pitfalls that can derail their efforts.

So, what I'd like you to do is have an open mind about what I'm about to tell you. It's not a bunch of academic classroom talk; I've spent decades both working in studios and watching others work in studios.

I've seen people do amazing things.

And I've seen them make horrendous mistakes.

I want you to have the best voice over practice you're able to achieve.

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And although I could spend a year with you in my curriculum giving you training on what to do right (and I can, actually, at <https://voheroes.com/learn/>), I thought I'd spend some time showing you:

- what the great voice over artists do when they approach the business,
- what mistakes they often make,
- and how you can avoid them.

I have a definition of success I'd like to share with you.

It comes in three steps:

1. Identify what **works**.
2. Identify what **doesn't work**.
3. Do **more** of what works, and **less** of what doesn't.

If you follow that plan, and really pay attention to the observable realities around you, you can't help but experience more success than someone who fumbles around, determined to do it their way, blissfully unaware of a better way.

You might find yourself saying, "Wow. I made that mistake. I guess it's too late to fix it."

Wrong.

It's never too late to improve on your processes and your product.

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I'm here to help you do just that. Both by guiding you towards world class, best of breed practices to use in your career, also also by alerting you to what mistakes to watch for.

I'll not only show you what the mistakes are, but true to the title of this eBook, I'll show you how to avoid them and correct any damage that might have happened. Watch for **The solution**: at the end of each section.

Let's get started—and let's create some real success for your VO practice.

Hope this helps.

David

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I wonder why they say that sort of thing on blank pages. Or even have intentionally blank pages. Which aren't really blank if they have that title.

It's usually that way in government documents. Which explains a lot.

At this very moment, I feel so much like that guy Chuck Lorre, that produces Big Bang Theory and a million other TV shows and writes funny stuff on his end credit single card. He even uses my font, American Typewriter.

OK.

On with the book.

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1. Getting Into Voice Over For The Wrong Reasons

There are plenty of ways people begin to think about getting into VO. Some of them are more useful than others. If any of these are the reasons you think you'd be good at VO, think again (there are probably much more useful reasons than these).

“People tell me I have a great voice.”

You probably do. If people are saying that, it's for a reason. But that isn't really necessary in the world of voice over. If you were to come to me and say, “People tell me I'm a great storyteller,” I'd be much happier for you.

A “great” voice doesn't equal voice over success—a great storytelling voice, no matter what the quality of greatness (however that's defined) is what matters.

And you can get lost in the idea that your great voice is your biggest asset. It's one of those assets, for sure, but it's just a part of your toolkit – there are other things that are far more important to your success.

See, people with not-so-great, but very real voices are in far higher demand than deep, announcer-like voices we all know from growing up and hearing them on radio and TV. Being able to connect with the listener or viewer with a real, accessible voice is what producers are willing to pay top dollar for.

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“I know I can be the next Disney Princess.”

That’s awesome. But your first job is not to study voice over, your first job is to become a celebrity. Then I can help you with your quest to become the next Disney Princess.

Disney rarely hires unknowns as their Princesses (or Princes). They hire people who have millions of Twitter followers, and who have 4 digit or less IMDB StarMeter numbers. They hire people who can put butts in the seats.

They hire stars. Celebrities.

You want to be a Disney Princess? Get famous first. But you don’t need that to become the next great voice over talent.

“My kids love the goofy voices I come up with.”

That’s great, but how is that useful?

I understand where that’s coming from, because, most likely, you grew up with Saturday morning cartoons, where voice talent like June Foray and Mel Blanc and other legendary animation actors created voices for squirrels, rabbits, heroes, villains and everything in between.

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But today's animated shows, with a few exceptions, are much more realistic in nature. They're not looking for "cartoonish" voices. For the most part, they're looking for real voices—voices that can tell great stories.

Sound familiar?

Watch the shows on Adult Swim, Animation Domination, Archer and other shows, and you'll hear very real voices, not over the top, goofy character voices, coming out of their mouths.

“I am a classically trained singer.”

That's great.

But it doesn't really matter one way or the other if you're a great singer.

There are plenty of singers who make terrible voice over artists (mostly because they insist on precision, where a more colloquial approach to copy is called for).

There are equally as many really horrible singers who find great success in voice over.

I know.

I'm one of them. Don't ask me to be on your karaoke team.

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To be honest, none of these reasons are actually bad, they just aren't necessary or useful to creating a successful, satisfying and profitable VO career. And there are some very useful things you need in order to do that.

The solution: to be successful as a VO talent, you have to want the work something fierce, present yourself as an actor, highlight your storytelling skills, and come to me wanting to hone your craft.

That's what I want—at least, for the reasons you want to take part in the **artistic** perspective of voice over.

There are two additional perspectives you need to be expert in...

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2. Failing To Master The Commerce Of Voice Over

I teach the voice over business from four perspectives:

1. The **art** of voice over: categories of VO work like commercials and animation.
2. The **commerce** of voice over: the business skills you need for working in VO.
3. The **science** of voice over: mastery of the tools, like mics and software.
4. The **mindset** of voice over: keeping your headspace sane in an insane business.

Number 1 is a no-brainer. Every VO teacher in the world teaches the art of voice over, with various degrees of competency.

But the second two? Equally as important, yet wholly ignored by most VO teachers.

And the last one? That's a real doozy that nobody seems to want to deal with.

I do.

But first, let's look at number 2.

I've spoken with over 5,000 actors about how this business of show business works, and many of them are ardent business-bashers. Sad.

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It may be that many actors are confused about whether or not money is useful (it is), but I really think many of them checked out when the whole “support yourself well” thing was presented to them.

Here are a few things I hear most often about the business side of things:

“I don’t care about the money.”

Start caring about it. Plain and simple.

You don’t have to become a miser, or a millionaire. But you do have to pay the rent, the car payment, and the credit card bills.

If you can’t do that, you’re in for sleepless nights, worry-filled days, and a lot of Top Ramen.

You don’t really want that, do you? Don’t wear the badge of “Struggling Artist” proudly.

I’m saying, be comfortable. Don’t live beyond your means. And make enough money to live without fear.

Care about the money enough to be financially safe.

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“If I get good at the business, my art will suffer.”

Sorry, but that’s just a cop out. And I hear it all the time.

That’s just a convenient excuse to keep the blinders on when it comes to being financially safe, to being fiscally responsible.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

If you’re not worried about money, because you’ve created a business that is successful and profitable, you aren’t going to be as anxious when you’re performing.

You’ll audition better if money isn’t constantly on your mind.

You’ll be free to enjoy your life as a performer if you’re not struggling.

The art you create, the stories you tell, and the pieces you help produce will be that much better if you’re not avoiding calls from bill collectors.

So, the exact opposite is true: if you get good at business, your art will benefit.

“I’ll just let my agent/manager/accountant take care of all that.”

In the 1980’s, Barry Manilow did just that.

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And his accountant quietly bled him dry.

Same thing happened to Billy Joel. Multi-millionaire one day, bankrupt the next, after his brother-in-law defrauded him of every drop of his fortune.

The same thing has happened, in various degrees of shock and horror, to Betsey Johnson, Allen Iverson, Burt Reynolds, Kelis, MC Hammer, Mike Tyson, Natalie Cole and many, many more.

Sure, your bank account has far fewer zeroes at the ends of the numbers than do theirs, but you still need to make sure you're in the black.

And it's ultimately your responsibility.

No matter who you have on your team, you are still the CEO of You, Inc. You still have to watch your back, shake the trees, help close deals, and stay in charge.

The solution: You simply have to understand how the business side of things works, while staying top notch at the performance end of things.

That's why they pay you the big bucks. And you really do want them to pay you the big bucks.

3. Failing To Master The Science of Voice Over

Review: here again is what you need to be great at:

1. The **art** of voice over: categories of VO work like commercials and animation.
2. The **commerce** of voice over: the business skills you need for working in VO.
3. The **science** of voice over: mastery of the tools, like mics and software.
4. The **mindset** of voice over: keeping your headspace sane in an insane business.

Having dealt with number 1 and 2, let's look at number 3.

People are cheap. And they are usually cheap at the worst times: when they really need to spend appropriately.

And people think that dabbling is all you need. That expertise and mastery isn't all that necessary.

And people wear digital ignorance like a beauty pageant sash: "Mr./Mrs./Miss I Suck At Technology."

Saying you're "computer illiterate" is like saying you live in LA and you don't know how to drive.

It's so not relevant. Look at the calendar. We're firmly in the 21st century and we need to take advantage of the tools we now have at our disposal.

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Or trust me, that other talent that you're competing with for that VO gig will.

Here's a list, not in any way a complete list, of the technology you need to master:

- The microphone you select for your home recording.
- The software you use to edit and master your sound.
- The websites where you can get auditions and work.
- The social media you need to use to promote yourself and your projects.
- The Internet and the computer you use to access it.
- The mobile devices that you are using in your daily life.

I know it's hard to believe, but nowadays, it's actually not that hard to get a good grip on the tech. I have thousands of clients, who come to me with all levels of technical expertise, and I show them just what they need to know to master the mic, the software and all the rest...and they thrive.

The solution: You need to master all of those items, plain and simple. The days of "Oh, I don't know how to use those things" is over. I'm not kidding.

And if that makes you frightened, I understand. And I can help. And I will.

4. Producing Your Demo Too Early In Your Journey

This is one of the biggest mistakes I see talent new to voice over make. They assume that the first step in creating a great VO career is creating a great demo.

They assume incorrectly.

The first step is to assess your storytelling skills. Honestly, and usually with the help of a coach, who can tell you where you are in your journey.

If you're ready, great.

But don't jump in with no training, thinking that if you create a demo, you'll be fine. You don't want to get into the studio, work like a mad man to create something usable, Frankenstein-ing together a demo from which you can't instantly re-create similar talent levels in the real world.

There's no sense in that. It makes you look bad when you can't do the same thing your demo claims you can do.

Work, seasoning, training, assessment, more training and competitive experience, and you and your producer will know when you're ready.

The solution: Don't jump to producing your demo before you're ready.

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5. Looking For An Agent Too Soon

This recent email I got from an actor named Jason is representative:

“Hey, David!

I’ve been here in LA for a couple of years, have a couple of co-star credits on my resume, and I’ve been thinking I might be able to make a few bucks doing videogames.

It’s not brain surgery, right?

But it looks like I need an agent. How do I get one? Can you recommend me to yours?”

Wow.

I don’t even know where to begin, other than a nice, “No, I can’t. I don’t know anything about your skills, but I do know you’ve made some assumptions that couldn’t be more dangerous. Let’s talk.”

When you go after an agent, you need to have seasoning and experience, and you need to be ready for the competitive slog that is professional VO.

You need to give them the **tools** they need to sell you.

You need a **portfolio of demos**—demos that are useful tools so that your agent can get you auditions and work. You need to know how to handle yourself in a studio, you need to know how to audition from home, you need to know how to

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perform dozens of categories of VO, be ready for last minute jobs, know how to adjust to the director's needs ... this isn't even close to what Jason was prepared for.

Here in LA, you usually need to be in the union (SAG-AFTRA) because that's where the high-paying (and commission-generating) jobs usually live.

And you need to **demonstrate to the agent that you're smart** about what you're doing. They need to know that you've carefully considered what you're doing, you've had some success on your own, and you're now ready for a sales manager.

That's what an agent is. A sales manager.

Not an item to be checked off on the list you've created in your head at the beginning of your voice over career.

The solution: Take your time. Learn how to look for the proper agent, the one who suits you, who will work with you, who will want to be your champion.

Or, you can be like Jason, and still be wondering why his "networking" with others to try to get an agent didn't and won't work.

6. Making Demos That Aren't Category-Specific

In the olden times (before the turn of the century), you had a commercial demo.

That was pretty much it. A minute or so of you, voicing commercials.

And the casting folks in other categories of work—narration, animation, etc.—just kind of made do, imagining what you might sound like in their non-commercial project.

And it was expensive. No one had home studios. Everyone had to go rent time at a studio (or work at a radio station) and hire an engineer, just to edit the new material together with snippets of stuff they'd actually been hired for, all done on razor-blade edited reel-to-reel tape.

That's why they called them reels for the longest time.

Then you had to pay to get them duplicated—hundreds of five-inch reels, white boxes, labels, envelopes, postage.

It was expensive.

And updating your reel meant doing all that over again, and throwing out what you had left of your last effort.

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The Internet changed casting entities' expectations.

Now, home studios are the norm.

Now, you can use Audacity to cobble together audio from your work, and you can find producers, like me, who can help you produce stuff you weren't actually hired for.

Now, you don't have to pay for duplication or mailing—you just peel off a digital copy, and you email it to whoever wants it.

And you leave all your demos posted on a myriad of sites.

And now, it's expected that you have a demo for each category in which you want work.

See, the people who hire you for video games aren't the people who hire you for audiobooks. And the people who hire you for IVR work aren't the people who hire you for commercials. The list goes on.

Creating a demo for each category lets the casting entity zero in on exactly the demo that shows them what you can do ... for them.

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Don't make an amalgamated demo. That won't work.

I've had some clients try to save money by putting together an uber-demo, filled with samples from every category of work.

Nothing labels you as an amateur as quickly as doing that.

(Well, maybe if you try to produce a less-than-competitive demo on your own. That will label you as an amateur in an instant.)

Putting together an amalgamated, or combo, demo, with commercials and audiobooks and animation, etc., means that somebody's going to have to wait to hear what they need to hear in their category.

The solution: Create a portfolio of demos. Commercial, documentary narration, animation and video games, IVR, various flavors of audiobooks, promos and trailers, and more. Some, you can do all on your own. Some you'll need a producer for. But...it's what the industry requires, and what your agent will need to sell you.

7. Producing Your Own Production-Rich Demos

This is a big one.

And it's one I completely get: you're an artist, right? Why shouldn't you create your own demo? It's what you do, right?

Wrong.

You're a storyteller. Not a producer.

You wouldn't step behind the camera and shoot your own footage when a DP or cinematographer would make you look a million times better, would you?

Unless you have a lot of experience with multi-track recording in multiple categories of voice over work, and know the mixing and editing strategies for all of those categories (commercials are mixed much differently than are documentaries, just as an example), don't even think about it.

Trust me, if you have any multi-track training at all, you'll have a pretty good idea if you can actually mix your own stuff for your demo.

But you probably don't.

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If you don't have any audio engineering, production, editing and mastering training, you're simply not experienced enough to put together a competitive demo.

And you don't want to make the mistake of saving some money, but producing a less than effective demo.

It's not about your talent – you need that too. It's about knowing how to showcase your talent in a way that is attractive and compelling to the people who will want to hire you.

The solution: Let a producer, someone like me, who's been producing commercials, audiobooks, documentaries, animated shorts and audiobooks for decades, save you time and heartache.

And let us produce a competitive series of demos for you.

8. Writing Your Own Demo Copy

More on the do-it-yourself demo thing.

Lots of artists think they can't use copy that's aired on radio or TV, that was written professionally by world class copywriters, in their demos.

You can, and you should.

Some artists think they should write their own copy because, I don't know, it will be in their authentic voice.

You can't, and you shouldn't.

No, really. You may be a budding VO artist, but unless you've written best-of-breed, award-winning copy for big agencies, and understand how that copy works with a production environment, your writing will come off as amateurish, boring and anything but authentic.

Your producer should pick commercial copy that fits your brand.

You can read sections of literary masterpieces and best sellers for audiobook demos.

The list goes on.

You think you can write copy that well? You have that kind of experience?

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OK. Go for it.

But pause for a moment, and think about all those friends back home who think acting is easy, and show business is easy, and auditions are easy, and that you've got it made.

The solution: Use copy that someone who's really skilled has written, not your own.

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9. Spending Too Much On Recording Equipment

This one's short and sweet.

When you buy your first microphone, set up your home equipment, decide what audio recording and editing software you're going to use, be very careful not to overspend.

You can create a great recording environment for as little as \$200.

You heard me right. US\$200.00.

There are tons of VO talent who have sunk thousands of dollars into their mics, their pre-amps, their expensive recording and editing software, their pop filters and the like.

And those very same performers hate that people getting into the business today can get set up and running, with professional sound, for so little.

And they have no problem telling you what you need to buy. And how crappy USB microphones are.

But ask yourself this: before you even know if you're going to love this business, make a run at being a pro, or maybe waste a bunch of money on gear you don't even need, do you really want to drop that kind of coin when you can get great gear that will serve you for years, for a couple of hundred bucks?

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You want to know a secret? I did. And it was a **huge** mistake.

But today, I've vastly simplified things: the equipment I recommend for that \$200 is **exactly the same equipment I use every day in my own studio.**

Yep, I eat my own dog food.

I use a \$150-or-so AudioTechnica AT-2020 USB Plus microphone (my \$3400 Neumann is in its mahogany case in my storage locker), a \$12 microphone stand, and \$10 set of Sony earbuds. And so do most of my clients, from beginners to seasoned Pros.

And I audition for, book and perform for clients various categories of VO work every week, and have narrated nearly 200 books, just with that gear.

You don't have to overspend. Period.

The solution: Buy the AT-2020 USB Plus microphone, an inexpensive desk stand, and a pair of awesome, but low-cost earbuds.

You can find all the details on what I use here (you don't need everything, just the mic, the stand and the earbuds – the rest is all my other resources):

<https://voheroes.com/my-gear/>

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10. Not Understanding the Agent-Client Relationship

I've witnessed a lot of voice over talent ruin their chances at getting an agent.

I've witnessed a lot of voice over talent ruin the relationship with the agent they finally manage to land.

And it's because they treat their agents as parents, as teachers, or as gurus...

...when they should be treating them as partners and sales managers.

That's what they are.

Agents are inspired by money. They want to make money on a roster of performers who can generate bookings.

Agents are hard-pressed to stay in business. And they don't like being babysitters.

Don't waste their time with unnecessary phone calls.

Don't ask if they put you up for something.

Don't say that they "don't get you out enough."

Don't do that stuff.

They love it when you continue to shake the trees.

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They love it when you're prepared for auditions.

They love it when you surprise them with a commission check for a job they had little or nothing to do with you getting.

They love it when you act like a normal human being in an audition, not an entitled brat.

The solution: Do that team-building, supportive, pulling-in-the-same-direction stuff. Act like you're running a professional practice, and count on them as your professional sales rep.

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11. Letting Your Mindset Lead You Away From Success

I know I only said this was a list of 10 Mistakes Voice Over Performers Make. But I'm big into bonuses.

I purposely left this one until the end because I wanted to make sure you read/heard everything else before I tackled this one.

It's hard to keep your mind straight when it comes to performing arts. It just is. It's a world that is filled with rejection, a world that doesn't have clear feedback loops, and a world that is often totally capricious and arbitrary in its decision-making.

And that can drive you mad.

But...you can keep a sane and focused approach front and center, and overcome the totally human tendency to give up, cave in and declare defeat.

The solution: Simply understand the limiting beliefs you have regarding your life and your career that stop your progress, then re-frame them and replace them with enabling beliefs that move you forward toward success.

Wow, really David? That's all I need to do?

I know. It sounds like I'm minimizing this mindset work, but I'm simply stating the goal.

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How you get there is a different matter.

I spend a lot of time answering questions about performance, gear, the business and so forth.

But I spend a lot more time helping my clients understand what's caused their rule sets to be created, choose to change those rule sets so they can move forward and live their life with rules that support them and allow them to reach the goals they want.

I do this by helping them remember what has happened in their lives that created their belief system, and then we look at ways to change direction if that belief system isn't serving them.

Everyone's different, but everyone needs help. If you decide to study VO with me, your mindset is part of what we'll explore.

But no matter who you get as your coach/teacher, be sure they work with you to help you get your head straight in a kind, supportive and constructive manner. Don't let anyone browbeat you, or insult you, or belittle you. It's your life – and you need to be safe when being advised.

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Thank You.

I sure hope this all helps.

I want to thank you for spending some time with me, discussing 10 of the mistakes voice over performers make. My goal was not to offend you, especially if you've made any of these mistakes. I've made at least 10 of them myself – but I looked at it as a learning experience.

Rather, my goal was to illustrate the counterintuitive nature of some of the reasons we get into this business, and to illustrate the best practices available for avoiding the wasted time created when pursuing VO for those reasons.

How Else Can I Help You?

How else can I help you? I teach a full curriculum of award-winning classes, and I'd love to teach you.

You can start with an absolutely free Getting Started in Voice Over class:

<https://voheroes.com/start>

The whole curriculum is here:

<https://voheroes.com/learn/>

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You take all of those online, and you can become one of my Pro members, and get that full curriculum in voice over with monthly instruction, live, in-person on-mic workouts, special benefits, discounts and instant access to me, whenever you like:

<https://voheroes.com/pro/>

I hope you will take this advice I've given you, ask me for more when you need it at david@voheroes.com, and create a fantastic life for yourself in the world of voice over.

Again, I hope this helps.

David

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Who Is This Guy?



After a 30+ year career in radio, David H. Lawrence XVII moved to television, and has been seen on ABC's epic series LOST, CBS' legendary CSI and military thriller The Unit and on The Mentalist, NBC's spy comedy Chuck, Good Luck Charlie and ANT Farm on Disney, Touch and The Finder on FOX, and is best known as the creepy evil puppet master Eric Doyle on NBC's smash hit Heroes.

His film career includes on-camera and VO work on Straight Outta Compton, Cars 3, Men in Black III, Pizza Man, The Changeling, The Hulk, Iron Man, Percy Jackson, Unstoppable, Too Big to Fail, A Special Relationship and countless others.

Lawrence helps actors around the world create their own voiceover careers with his award winning VOHeroes (formerly VO2GoGo) voice consultancy, and was BACK STAGE's Readers' Choice for Favorite VO Teacher and Favorite VO Demo Producer for four years in a row. He also teaches voicework workshops at various studios globally.

Lawrence has voiced over 180 audiobooks, and teaches specialized courses in audiobook production, with a concentration on ACX and Audible work. His ACX

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Master Class students have produced over 3500 books to date in the Audible marketplace.

Lawrence created the 5-star rated industry standard Rehearsal[®] Pro app for the iPhone, iPad and iPod Touch, allowing actors and VO talent to have a digital rehearsal studio right in their pocket.

On radio, the Emmy-award winning and Clio-nominated Lawrence hosted The David Lawrence Show, Online Tonight, and anchored The Net Music Countdown, heard on over 300 radio stations and both XM and Sirius Satellite Radio. Lawrence is widely considered to be the very first podcaster, having delivered daily RealAudio and MP3 "podcasts" via email from early 1994.

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