



New Helpers Are Online And Off-Site

Introducing Virtual Assistants



If the futurists are right, and the traditional company is dying, the techno-savvy virtual assistant may be another nail in its coffin.



Help is at the end of a phone line. (ABCNEWS.com)

By Mary Campbell
Special to ABCNEWS.com

Move over, Della Street; a virtual assistant is on the case.

An office-manager-in-a-modem, the virtual assistant is a home-based worker who uses electronic technology to do almost everything onsite assistants can do, from balancing the books to answering the phone, sometimes in several languages. But since they're contract workers, not employees, they can save small and midsize businesses time, money, and red tape.

The May issue of *Changing Times* calls this sprouting vocation "a New Economy career" that combines "technology and the skill set of a secretary." The description is valid but incomplete. Some VAs also do Web site development, marketing, risk management, desktop publishing, and more.

Hidden From View

An on-line advertisement touts one VA's capabilities — word processing, desktop publishing, spreadsheets, Web page design, and fluency in Spanish—and her software—Adobe Acrobat, Pagemaker, MS Excel, MS Outlook, and iPublish. (Surprisingly, this VA could not be reached for

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comment: her e-mail address was invalid.)

VAs seem to love the work and enjoy the many advantages cited by other home-based workers. The money is good, too: most VAs make \$25 to \$50 an hour. Another benefit, one that reflects poorly on the American workplace, is seldom touted. A woman we will call “Sandy” confided that her age, obesity, and phlebitis made it hard to find work, and to get there once she did. Now a sought-after VA, she has steady work she enjoys for the first time in her life. “I’m not rich,” she says happily, “but I’m definitely prosperous.”



No Hanky-Panky

Clients enjoy the freedom from some of the headaches—and costs—that go along with being a boss. A solo entrepreneur can retain privacy and dispense with payroll taxes, workers’ comp, insurance, and other benefits. VAs don’t take up space or require onsite desks, computers, phones, copiers, or separate bathrooms. They’re paid only for the time they work, and unless there’s a binding contract, they can be dismissed at any time.

A VA might do things bosses are leery of asking their secretaries to do: posting reminders of birthdays and anniversaries, selecting gifts, and arranging for delivery.

Things Get Done

As a VA, working out of her home in Maryland, Stacy Brice charges \$50 an hour but discounts that rate with a \$525 monthly retainer, according to the winter issue of *Home Business News*. Her half-dozen or so clients include Cheryl Richardson, a Newburyport, Mass., business coach, who sought out a VA because she wanted neither another desk nor another person in her home office. Another client, David Goldsmith, has Brice book speaking engagements and recruit Japanese clients for him. He lives in Florida, she doesn’t, but it’s not a problem. “I just give her a list of things I need done, and they get done,” Goldsmith told *Inc.* magazine.

Both Charles Grantham, president of the Institute for the Study of Distributed Work, and Debra Stratton, publisher of *The Secretary*, call the VA phenomenon “fast growing,” though no one is sure how many VAs there are. GAVA lists 27 in its geographical directory.

For some this new profession is the answer to prayer, but others wonder if it dodges workplace-quality issues, sidesteps discrimination, and keeps the disabled from venturing out. For Sandy, at least, there’s no problem. Far from reclusive, and busy with family, friends, and church, she has congenial clients who “are much more than just voices on the phone.■

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