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### Virtual Assistance: Office Support, Anytime, Anywhere November 22, 1999

By Samuel Fromartz, MSNBC CONTRIBUTOR

WASHINGTON, Nov. 22 - The conventional image of a secretary is well well ingrained: a person who sits behind a desk outside the executive suite, answering phones, typing, filing and keeping the boss on schedule. But if that image is prevalent, it's also well behind the times, as work schedules and expectations change for executives and assistants as well.

NOW SECRETARIES are working in teams, running virtual offices spread across a number of states and hooking up with busy clients - don't call them bosses - by phone, e-mail and fax. In short, the secretary has entered the Internet Age.

Take the case of Work Smart, a small business-training and consulting firm run by Nancy Michaels. She works out of her home in Concord, Mass., and her seminars at Staples Inc. stores often take her out on the road two weeks a month. Her travel schedule makes it difficult to run her business, even with an assistant back home. Rather than add another secretary to fax material, make travel plans, write letters or update her schedule, Michaels depends on Carey Madding, who works out of her home office in Statesville, N.C. Madding offers her services through My Virtual Corp., a company she co-owns with a partner in Louisville, Ky. "Carey's responsive to my immediate needs," Michaels said. "When I need something done, she's the person I call."

Madding handles the tasks herself or contacts one of her 11 specialized freelance associates, most of whom are based in North Carolina and work out of their homes.

#### **BENEFITS FOR BOTH SIDES**

"We are like a project manager," Madding said. She farms out work - from spreadsheets and PowerPoint presentations to technical writing and logos - and then checks the results. Most of the work is handled by e-mail. "Lots of people I've worked with, I've never even met in person," she said.

The freelance associates get the benefit of working when they want to from their homes.

Kim Fox, for instance, teaches computer applications at Mitchell Community College in Statesville, and works for My Virtual Corp. five to

10 hours a week. She'd rather not have the trouble of finding her own clients.

"Carey takes in the work and then gives it out," Fox says. "But if I don't have time to do the work, I simply say I can't do it."

With the growth of small and home-based businesses, the need for assistants is growing also. But many of these businesses can't afford to take on staff full-time. The virtual assistant fills that need.

Michaels, for instance, says she spends about \$1,500 a month for the services of My Virtual Corp., much less than the cost of hiring a full-time assistant who might not have all the skills the firm provides.

"The field is growing by leaps and bounds with the increase in self-employment and home-based workers," said Lynette Smith, executive director of the Association of Business Support Services International in Yorba Linda, Calif.

#### **'WE BECOME THEIR OFFICE'**

My Virtual Corp. was started in August 1998 by Merrily Orsini, who lives in Louisville and who had previously built and sold an elder care company. Once she sold her company, Orsini no longer had a support staff and couldn't handle all her administrative work. So she contacted Madding, a former employee, and hired her to work as a virtual assistant. Realizing how ideal the arrangement was, the two founded the company to offer similar services to others. They now have about 25 clients. Orsini says her company offers more than the services of an assistant.

"We become their office," she said.

Although many virtual assistants work solo, My Virtual Corp. contracts the work out to its network of associates. The company charges clients about \$25 an hour and pays its associates about \$15 an hour.

The field has grown as secretaries or former assistants have gone out on their own and set up home-based businesses. There are also associations like ABSSI, with 800 members, and training programs like AssistU for people who want to set up their own operations.

Stacy Brice, president of AssistU in Cockeysville, Md., says a lot of people who take her phone-based course are refugees from big companies, stay-at-home moms, or single women. Many want a part-time home business.

About 200 people have been through her course, and Brice says their rates start at \$30 an hour.

What the experts stress, however, is that you can't just set up shop. Virtual assistants need to be skilled at what they do, but if they are, it can be rewarding.

Says Brice: "This industry's still in its infancy."

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