



'Virtual' assistants take on chores

By Silvia E. King-Cohen, Tuesday, April 15, 2008

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MELVILLE, N.Y. -- As president of the Long Island chapter of the Society for Human Resource Management, Doug Silverman doesn't have an office, nor does he have a secretary, a fax machine, a computer or even a drinking fountain.

Even so, he's still able to send out mass mailings, coordinate monthly dinner parties, update lists and keep his nearly 1,200 members up to speed on what's going on, despite having a full-time job that has nothing to do with the organization. He acknowledges it would be impossible without Linda Selden, his "virtual" personal assistant.

"She does the work of three or four people," Silverman said. "What does she do? What doesn't she do? Administrative, updating our Web site and member lists, mailings, coordinating our monthly dinner meetings."

If you always wanted a personal assistant but either didn't have the bucks or the chutzpah to get one, finally here's someone you can afford to boss around -- a virtual personal assistant.

A virtual assistant, whether hired for personal, small business or corporate office use, is someone you'll probably never meet face-to-face. For as little as \$7 per hour, they're usually hired to perform tasks that can be carried out from a remote location using the phone, fax or computer.

Planning a destination wedding and need to research hotels in a hurry? You can get a virtual concierge to book rooms, map travel plans, find vendors and tell you the best place to get a spa treatment, to boot. They'll even do all that for your guests, too, if you'd like -- after all, it's your dime.

Hate paying bills? Get a virtual bookkeeper, and turn that time-killer over to him or her. If you're preparing to move and need to know the primo preschools in your new neighbourhood for your prodigy, a virtual assistant can do that, too.

"Virtual assistants are the wave of the future for personal use and for businesses," Selden says. She lives in Greenlawn and is the incoming president of the International Virtual Assistants Association, which has more than 1,000 members worldwide. "It eliminates the expense of an employee for the business or individual. It also offers flexibility for the entrepreneur/virtual assistant."

Not surprisingly, most virtual assistants live in other countries and work for companies that specialize in outsourcing.

Suvindh Marwaha, sales director for Tasks EveryDay, which is based in India, says his company charges \$6.98 per hour for a basic assistant who has earned a bachelor's degree. If you want someone "smarter" (someone with an advanced degree, Marwaha explains), it'll cost you \$14 per hour.

According to Marwaha, about 40 percent of Tasks EveryDay's clients are seeking help with their personal to-do lists. Among the more common requests: Ordering supplies, groceries, online shopping, comparing prices and planning vacations.

"A virtual assistant could research electricians in your area, then set up the appointment and tell you when to be home," Marwaha says. If the client wants a call from the virtual assistant when the electrician's a half-hour away, that can be done, too.

"Our biggest request from personal clients is for a job search," he said. "We can redo your resume, research the type of job you want, set up the interview and just tell you when to show up."

In the United States, Selden says, virtual personal assistants more often are freelance entrepreneurs who charge \$45 to \$75 per hour for their expertise. The association's Web site lists more than 20 categories of specialization, including real estate, concierge, bookkeeping and accounting, administrative, editing and proofreading, Web page design, legal and paralegal services.

Selden says that business is brisk enough that she has two in-house staffers -- and her own virtual bookkeeper, Web designer and general assistant -- that manage the needs of her nine clients. Trust, she says, is paramount.

"I have three clients where I'm a signer on their bank account," says Selden, who has been in business since 1999. "You have to be comfortable with the person with whom you're having this relationship. Ethics are so important."

TIPS FOR HIRING AN ASSISTANT

Do:

- Ask for an estimate.
- Set parameters for your budget, if necessary.

Expect to pay a deposit upfront, and full payment before the project is delivered (unless you have an established relationship).

- Be flexible and listen to recommendations about how things can be done.
- Expect to pay expenses -- filing, entry fees, etc. -- if you pay by the hour.
- Request a written contract before the work begins.
- Ask for references.
- Sign a confidentiality agreement.

Don't:

- Give out personal financial information, other than payment information or details pertinent to the task.
- Continually change the terms of the agreement, especially if you're paying by the hour.
- Accept miscellaneous expenses without an explanation (these should be written into the contract).
- Assume every virtual assistant specializes in everything. Ask about his or her specialty. If it's not what you need, find someone who does it.