

Virtual Assistants give entrepreneurs real help

Pat Curry - BankRate.com

David Goldsmith spends his days on the phone and on the road. As president of Customer Edge, he works out of his home in New Mexico and travels the country, leading seminars and acting as a consultant for companies that want to improve customer service.

Like many busy business owners, Goldsmith has an assistant to set appointments, order conference supplies, make his travel arrangements, send out brochures, handle the books and put together his daily newsletter.

Actually, he has three -- one to handle day-to-day matters, one to focus on conferences and one who works on the newsletter. Goldsmith doesn't have the space -- or desire -- to have employees working in his home. His "staff members" work from their own homes in three different states. They are part of a fledgling industry: virtual assistants.

It's a business filled with cutting-edge terms. Virtual assistants design their services for business owners called neo-SOHO's and "netpreneurs," Internet-savvy entrepreneurs working from small office/home office settings. Virtual assistants have adapted traditional skills to a virtual marketplace.

Never meeting the boss

They recruit their clients and bid on jobs via e-mail, phone, fax and overnight shipping. They may never meet many of their clients. They have their own associations, certification programs and even a virtual university, AssistU. Run by former virtual assistant Stacy Brice, AssistU is a 19-week boot camp that only accepts about half of its applicants. Only those who make the grade graduate and earn recommendations from the online school.

"By the time they finish, they have more than 300 hours of class time, client-simulated experiences and study," Brice says. "I'm the pretend client, and I'm a tough cookie."

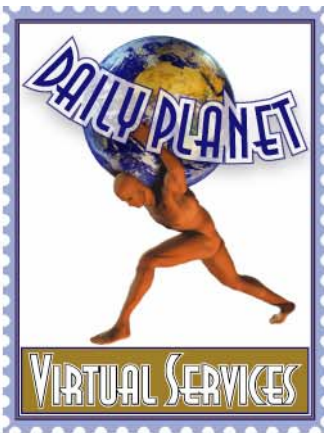
Chris Durst, a pioneer in a business that didn't get going until 1995, is a partner in StaffCentrix, a virtual assistant referral business. She helped set up the International Virtual Assistants Association, which has a certification program.

"As a small business owner, one of the reasons many of us go off on our own is that we work best on our own," she says. "If you hire an employee, they bring a whole host of issues -- taxes, insurance, sexual harassment -- and you have to make a commitment to a certain number of hours or days a week. A temp still needs to come to your location and share your space. With a virtual assistant, you don't have to get extra equipment and you don't have to train them. When you say to a VA, 'Watch the bottom line,' who better to understand that than another business owner? VAs aim to please because their business depends on it."

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Skills from outside the area

For Bob Farrar, an attorney in Rome, Ga., virtual assistants offered an opportunity to obtain high-quality skills that were not readily available outside an urban center. Farrar has a part-time, in-office secretary who greets clients and does most of his dictation and correspondence work. But he uses a virtual assistant in Atlanta to handle office and case management and a virtual assistant in Orlando, Fla., to keep his books. A virtual paralegal works part-time -- but solely for Farrar -- from her home in South Carolina.

He loves having the support without what he called the distraction of having that many people on-site. "I like to practice law. I don't like to manage an office," Farrar says.

He also appreciates how his virtual assistants feel about their business and what they contribute. "They're genuinely interested in how you're doing. They're not showing up 9 to 5 to get a paycheck," he says. "These are people who are bringing fresh ideas they're learning from people in other states. For someone in a town like Rome, it's an incredible resource."

Asking for help

Many virtual assistants grow their businesses from referrals. But a small business owner without connections can fill out a request form on the Web site. Provide details about the business and the kinds of services needed, such as online research or transcription, and you'll get a list of virtual assistants who meet your criteria.

You can also check the membership lists of the [Global Association of Virtual Assistants](#) or the [International Virtual Assistants Association](#).

Many virtual assistants will offer an hour or two of service for free so the business owner can try the situation on for size. Prices will vary by service, but plan to pay \$20 to \$40 an hour. While some small business owners may save money by switching to virtual assistants, most who hire them never had employees to begin with. The savings come from being able to concentrate efforts on building the business instead of balancing the checkbook and typing envelopes.

"I never thought about figuring out what it costs me vs. hiring someone," Goldsmith says. "I can do administration, but it would take me a whole day. I earn \$100 to \$200 an hour. It's stupid for me to do things that someone who gets \$30 to \$35 an hour can do better."

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