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## Enter the Stay-at-Home Steno

*Technology Could Make It Lonely at the Water Cooler*

September 29, 2002 | GINNY CHIEN

The phrase "virtual assistant" may suggest a digitized sci-fi entity living in your computer that never needs a coffee break. But meet Jenny Riley of Orange County, a very real "VA" who uses email, video conferencing and other online tools to handle administrative responsibilities for Kern County-based boss Eric Mack. Rather than replace his client services manager of five years when she moved to Minnesota in 1997 and then to Orange County a year ago, Mack set her up with a home office. "It would've been really hard to replace the rapport we'd developed," he says. "Buying the equipment just made more sense."

Mack installed an arsenal of techie gadgets at his productivity enhancement company to keep the virtual workplace buzzing. A "digital whiteboard" on his wall instantly beams scribbled notes to Riley's computer screen. And paper filing is so last century. Mack prefers a "digital sender," which scans documents for Riley to organize electronically. But the core of their relationship is Lotus Notes, a software information program that gives the duo, who meet about once a year, access to each other's work.

With kids to care for, both appreciate the flexibility of running on their own schedule. Riley can fold laundry while on hold and Mack can take the tykes to Disneyland on a weekday. "In the beginning we talked about how we missed wasting 20 minutes at the front counter chatting with the receptionist," Riley says. "But we've found that if we leave our [video conference] cameras on, it's truly like being in the office together."

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Virtual assistants are a flourishing cottage industry complete with trade associations, training programs and professional certificates from organizations such as AssistU ([www.assistu.com](http://www.assistu.com)) and the nonprofit International Virtual Assistants Assn. IVAA membership has grown an average of more than 200% in each of the last three years, says vice president Angela Allen. "As businesses become more secure with working remotely and technology advances, we only expect that number to grow."

Though she and Mack are now in the same state again, Riley continues to telecommute. "I'd have to drive two hours in traffic to get to Eric's place," she says. "Who needs that hassle?" The setup has proven cost effective in savings on gas money and office rent, and both parties say working from home has increased their efficiency. Just call it a virtual windfall.

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