

Bloomberg Businessweek

Magazine

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Office Help from Afar

September 14, 2003

Val Williams' executive-coaching business grew so fast when she started it four years ago that she quickly fell behind in billing. She got rid of the backlog by getting help from someone she still works with but has never met in person -- a virtual assistant (VA) who lives in Michigan and communicates with Williams' Edison (N.J.) office by e-mail, fax, and telephone. The VA, referred to Williams by a business associate, took over "invoicing, collections, personal errands such as sending flowers to my mother, and getting train tickets," Williams says. As a result, she is "now free to do the activities that only I can do -- coaching, delivering a seminar, or marketing."

Williams is one of thousands of business owners who are turning over administrative tasks to virtual assistants. These helpers are self-employed, home-based workers -- usually women -- who do anything from word processing and bookkeeping to market research and meeting-planning for clients who live far away or travel frequently.

Using a remote helper has a number of advantages over having someone working down the hall. "I can hire someone who's extremely professional, but I don't have all the expenses [such as health insurance and maintaining office space] associated with a full-time assistant," says Miguel Berger, president of TechValley Homes Real Estate in Loudonville, N.Y. Berger, who travels often, uses time in the air to create work lists he can e-mail to two virtual assistants -- one in Albany, who handles his accounting, and one in Dunnville, Ky., who designs marketing materials. He's looking for a third VA to manage his database.

VAs charge anywhere from \$25 to \$75 an hour, depending on their skills and the complexity of the tasks they do. Most give clients the option of paying a monthly retainer or an hourly rate.

Who hires these folks? Typically, "people in the coaching industry, writers and authors, real estate professionals, all sorts of consultants -- especially people who are working solo from home," says Stacy Brice, the Cockeysville (Md.)-based president of AssistU, an organization that offers training courses for virtual assistants. Often, clients' businesses are growing faster than they can manage alone.

Karen Duester, who owns a food-consulting firm in Del Mar, Calif., says she was overworked and gave up vacations for years because she didn't want to hire someone to work in her home or move the business to a separate office. She learned about VAs at a women's networking meeting in 1999 and soon hired Christine Barnes in San Diego to take on jobs such as responding to voicemail, sorting e-mail, and maintaining a newsletter mailing list of 1,600 names. Barnes is so much a part of Duester's business that at noon and 5 p.m. every day, she sends Duester an electronic to-do list. Now that she has help, Duester says she takes quarterly vacations, many to accompany her microbiologist husband to international meetings.

VAs come from a wide range of backgrounds. Angela Allen, president of International Virtual Assistants Assn. (IVAA) and one of Berger's VAs, worked in marketing, advertising, journalism, and human resources. Jill Chongva of Berwick, N.S., was a medical secretary and also worked in a camera shop, and Janet Winter of Cumming, Ga., had been a math teacher, school financial-aid director, and a travel agent. "A VA should be able to handle anything for you," says Brice. "If you need to buy a condo in Hong Kong, she should be able to figure out how to help you to do it." Among the assignments that Winter has completed for clients, she says, was creating an inventory system for an aromatherapist who bought fragrant essential oils in large bottles but sold them by the drop.

To find a VA, you can start with an Internet search for "virtual assistant," which will turn up Web sites of individuals and organizations. There's no universal certification, though credentials from a VA group that trains or certifies members offer some assurance that the person has passed an ethics or skills test.

PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS

Exams sponsored by the IVAA (table, above) lead to three types of certification: one in business ethics (\$25 for members, \$50 for nonmembers), one on skills and issues related to real estate (\$25 or \$50), and one for members only based on proficiency in word processing, spreadsheets, and other administrative skills (\$100). Brice's AssistU offers a Certified Professional Virtual Assistant (CPVA) and Certified Master Virtual Assistant (CMVA). To become a CPVA, a student must complete 20 weeks of classes by conference call and pass an exam based on performance in simulated experiences with clients (\$2,295 for group classes; \$3,195 for a one-on-one trainer). The CMVA designation, for an additional \$250, requires proof of 1,500 hours of work as a VA and documentation that clients find the assistant's work to be effective.

Staffcentrix, which functions as a referral agency for military spouses who are VAs, doesn't test those on its list on specific skills. But it offers a free 15-hour training course on some military bases. That training focuses on customer service, ethics, and practical knowledge necessary to start and operate a business.

Even if you choose a VA who has completed some type of training or received certification from a trade group, before making a commitment, you should test out the relationship by working on a short-term project together (table, left). Even if you don't see the person in the office every day, you still have to know that your work styles are compatible. By Ellen Hoffman

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