

# Entrepreneurs turning to virtual assistants

by DEREK SANKIY  
CanWest News Service

CALGARY — Entrepreneurs and small businesses are increasingly turning to a new breed of contract professionals as hectic schedules, tight deadlines, and competitive pressures mean there is less time to take care of important business details.

Virtual assistants, or "VAs," are gaining popularity as the trend — which originated in the U.K. and spread to the U.S. — is increasingly being recognized in Canada as an efficient way of handling daily tasks, says Debra Zelisko, who launched Contract Solutions in Calgary a year ago.

"There are smaller businesses that could really use that helping hand at certain times of the month or year and that's where we come into play," says Zelisko.

Whether it's administrative support such as typing letters, mail-outs, co-ordinating schedules, making travel reservations, or more specialized tasks such as Web-site design and

desktop publishing, Zelisko says VAs are gaining popularity partly because technology allows all aspects of business to be completed efficiently off-site.

She still meets with clients and does some on-site work, but like other VAs, she uses the Internet, mail, e-mail, fax, disks, hard-copy files, phone, and cellular technology to keep in constant touch with clients.

"I'm providing temporary assistance for short-term solutions," says Zelisko.

After working a nine-to-five job for 16 years as an administrative assistant in various roles, Zelisko ventured out on her own to find a better work/life balance.

"It's harder than any other job I've had to do, but so far it has been more rewarding than anything else I've done because it's my own sweat and blood that I put into it," she says.

She has relied heavily on referrals from clients and she networks with other VAs through a small business group in the city.

But it's not for everybody, she says, and don't expect to "put your feet up and get rich quick."

Equipment costs and first-year business expenses have to be taken into account and the only way to be successful is to deliver the goods on time and on budget.

"It's not a position where you're dormant for very long and your day varies each day — it's always something different," says Zelisko.

The concept is part of a larger move among companies to use contract professionals to limit costs by outsourcing some



CanWest photo

Debra Zelisko, owner of Contract Solutions, is part of the growing trend toward contracting out work.

work, but some experts say there is a fine line where it becomes more economical to hire in-house, full-time staff.

Gary Agnew, of the Canadian Career Partners in Calgary, says various business, industry and other economic factors have to be taken into consideration when choosing to contract out work, but adds the idea can be a great benefit for smaller firms.

"The whole idea is to complete the expertise that you don't have so you can concentrate on deliberating with the expertise that you do have," says Agnew.

Entrepreneurs working for other entrepreneurs can be an ideal scenario

because it takes a strong breed to put in the required effort and to work independently, he says.

Having a salaried person working from home on a regular basis has also become more common, but firms may run the risk of lowering productivity due to distractions and a lack of motivation, says Agnew.

Virtual assistants and other contract employees, though, must rely on the satisfaction of their clients for each project to make their own businesses successful.

Tana Woodward, a VA in Prince George, says it is often a partnering relationship because the virtual assistants can be involved in everything from tracking inventory and orders to creating filing systems and databases.

"Really, it's whatever the client wants and we try to adapt to their needs," says Woodward. Wages for VAs may seem relatively high at first, but firms must take into account the absence of employee benefits, office equipment and space, reduced insurance and tax costs, and other lowered expenses such as paid lunch hours.

"They're only paying for the hours we put into a project," she says.

Rates typically start between \$25 and \$35 per hour for basic administrative duties and increase depending on the specialized skills or tasks required. Other VAs work solely on a project basis for a pre-arranged amount of compensation.

Like Zelisko, Woodward works largely with small businesses and entrepreneurs, some government offices, financial planners, commercial real estate operations, and others.

"There's never a boring moment," says Zelisko. "That's what keeps it fresh and keeps your skills going."

## 'Virtual Assistant' Web resources:

[www.vasuccess.com](http://www.vasuccess.com)  
[www.canadiamva.net](http://www.canadiamva.net)  
[www.vavoc.com](http://www.vavoc.com)  
[www.vaa.org](http://www.vaa.org)  
[www.contractsolutions.ca](http://www.contractsolutions.ca)  
[www.virtualbusinessservices.ca](http://www.virtualbusinessservices.ca)

Reasons small businesses turn to virtual assistants:

- Independent contractors - no employee complications.
- Avoids employee-related taxes, insurance, benefits, perks.
- No extra office space required or equipment costs.
- Minimal or no training required.
- Pay only for "time on task," project-by-project basis.
- Current staff gets overloaded.
- Seasonal or periodic projects.
- Helps maintain schedules, take care of details.
- Frees up valuable time to concentrate on larger issues.