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Help virtually a click away

Virtual assistants make life easier for overworked business professionals

My Mary McIntosh

Special to the Telegraph-Journal

They can be lifesavers for overworked business professionals with too much work and too few staff to get the job done. And they're just a click of the mouse away.

Virtual assistants give busy entrepreneurs the help they need without the cost of hiring new staff. They are qualified professionals who work off-site, using phone, fax and email, and can handle everything from word processing and spread sheets to web design.

The Canadian Virtual Assistant Connection, a website to help assistants connect with each other and with clients, lists five assistants in New Brunswick. There are dozens listed in Ontario and British Columbia, and hundreds on other sites listed in the United States and Europe.

In 2004, Vivian Chiasson set up her own company after reading about virtual assistants on the website. Although the trend began as a cottage industry, Ms. Chiasson believes that this version of outsourcing will continue to grow.

"We're trying to make it grow," Ms. Chiasson says. "It's not that well known in New Brunswick, and right now it's not the first thing people think of, but we're trying to change that."

She says VAs are a better investment than hiring from a personnel service; they offer continuity and a willing attitude.

"With a temp service you're getting different people every time," says Ms. Chiasson. "But with a virtual assistant you get the same person every time so they get to know your clients and your business, the image you like to project and they want your business to grow. My client's business growth is very important to me; it will help grow mine, so I'm going to be thinking of ways to help them grow. I'm not just there for a job."

Fees for administrative support range from \$25 to \$50 an hour; many are on a monthly retainer. Ms. Chiasson says it's a cost-effective way to handle workload fluctuations.



(Kâté LeBlanc/Telegraph-Journal)

Vivian Chiasson works as a Virtual Assistant, meaning she can work from home and spend more time with her two girls.

"There's no equipment to purchase, no sick leave, no down time, and no payroll taxes," Ms. Chiasson says. "You have all of the benefits of having an experienced worker but you don't have to pay for medical, dental, and you don't have to pay for vacation leave. The hardest thing for a small business person is that they have to pay for somebody else to take holidays when they can barely take time off themselves."

In 1998, Janice Byer set up her web-based business in Caledon Village, Ont.; she is one of the founders of the CVAC website. Ms. Byer says when they established the site three years ago there were only three members; there are now 300.

"There are so many people out there that are really tired of the corporate life and tired of working for someone else," Ms. Byer says. "When you work for yourself, you're not only providing a service, there's also the feeling that you're accomplishing something, you're building your own business and making it successful, and that's something that people want to do."

Although some managers can't move past the idea of having an ever-ready assistant sitting outside their office, Ms. Byer says there are many benefits of working with a virtual employee.

"My specialty is small business website design," Ms. Byer says. "I design websites for people without breaking their budgets. They don't have to go to IT companies where they're going to charge \$300 an hour or \$10,000 for a website when you only need five pages. I specialize in providing a service, and frequently doing it within a restricted budget."

Clients don't pay for breaks and other personal time. They only pay when their virtual assistant is on the job. That flexibility suits Dianne Savoy of Saint John. After years of working 9 to 5 as an administrative assistant for someone else, she relishes the ability to set her own hours.

"I love the freedom," Savoy said. "I don't have to get up every morning and go and sit in an office all day long. I get up, I go to the gym, I go for a walk, and then I start my work. If I have to go to the grocery store during the day I can go, but I can also decide to work during the evening and take the next morning off."

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