

# **Virtually There: Small Businesses Look Far Away for Help**

## **Answering Phones and Booking Trips Remotely**

By RODNEY SCHUSSLER

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When Chicago-based executive coach John Mitchell was planning a recent trip to Colorado, he did what many executives do: turned to his assistant for help with travel arrangements. But his assistant, Sue Kramer, wasn't sitting outside his office. She was miles away, in her home, sipping coffee.

Kramer is a "virtual assistant." She helps Mitchell with everything from research to coordinating meetings and screening clients. She has his credit cards and access to his e-mail and phones. Yet Kramer only sees her about twice a year.

"I needed an intermediate solution," Mitchell said. "My business was growing fast and I was doing too much administrative details and that was wasting my time. At the same time, I wasn't ready to commit to a full-time employee."

So he did what thousands of businesses are doing each year: hire a virtual assistant. A VA performs routine or specialized tasks remotely, using the phone and Internet to exchange data with clients. VAs can cost from \$35 to \$75 an hour, depending on the services performed.

The explosion of high-speed Internet set the stage for VAs. Though no one tracks virtual assistants, the International Virtual Assistant Association, a trade group, has seen its membership grow nearly 40 percent since 2004.

"This is a phenomenon," said Steven Gordon, a professor of information technology at Babson College in Waltham, Mass. "The advances we have seen in technology in the last five years are making this a very viable option and it is only going to keep growing."

Virtual assistants are especially appealing to small-business owners dealing with financial constraints. Beverly Williams, author of "The 30 Second Commute," says she sees more and more home-based businesses relying on VAs.

"A lot of these owners can't have people in their home. Some are women alone all day and the idea of allowing strangers in is not an option," Williams said. "Having a VA allows you to send work over the Internet or use the phone. It's a great tool for small businesses."

Williams advises her clients to use a virtual assistant because it allows them to shop for services they need and pay for only what they need. For example, she recommends using a professional phone service to create a professional image.

Onebox, one of many virtual phone services on the market, provides clients with a virtual secretary and answering service. Bobby Newman, general manager, says small businesses can pay \$1,000 or more for an automated phone system. He provides similar services for as little as \$50 a month.

Most virtual assistants specialize in one skill accounting, law, writing and work from home. Others work in networks that help match them to clients. Some start their own virtual assistant companies.

Five years ago, Candy Beauchamp, president of IVAA, had one accounting client and was making \$200 a month. Now she owns OffAssist in Austin, Texas, a virtual accounting firm, and has seven employees, most of which are outside of Texas.

She says more and more small- and big- business owners are growing out of their old-school notions of only working with people they can see. "I think over time there is less fear. More and more people know about VAs and are comfortable with the concept."

Nina Feldman, who pairs up virtual assistants and clients from her San Francisco office, has been working in the industry for more than 10 years. She says more skilled workers are being enticed by the virtual world.

"These are very skilled people, many of who came from the corporate world. They offer a very specialized service very different than a regular part-time employee," she said.

So what is the problem? Experts say there is still a lot of psychological resistance to VAs. Many business owners remain reluctant to hire a person they can not meet.

"We like to see and touch and supervise our employees," said Feldman. "It's a matter of educating. People don't know how far the technology has come, how easy it is."

There are benefits on both sides of the relationship. Business owners can save money and still get experienced, specialized workers.

"For me, it was hiring a seasoned person who only charges me for the time spent on my project," said executive coach Mitchell.

As opposed to temporary workers, Feldman says, VAs get invested in your business and stick with you for the long haul. She says temporary workers may cost half as much as a virtual employee, but you only pay a VA for work completed.

"There is not sitting around and waiting for a VA," she said.

Babson's Gordon says businesses using temporary or regular part-time help will pay less per hour but more per task. "It gives businesses an opportunity to get the best people for the job and pay them what they are worth."

And virtual assistants have the luxury of working from home and often setting their own hours.

"This job provides a lot of flexibility," said Lauren Hidden, a virtual ghostwriter. She has two young children and can manage her schedule to spend more time with them. "I can be my own boss."

Hidden rarely has to leave her house and has few problems managing the flow of information between her and clients. "I've had \$20 in my purse for two weeks and have had no reason to spend it."

Her experience is shared by most VAs. Kramer, a VA who works in the Chicago area, says the virtual world is free of the pressures of the corporate world.

"There was restructuring and layoffs to face," she said. "A VA does not face the same pressures. Plus I don't miss the commute."

Looking at the bigger picture, Gordon says VAs are good for the economy. "It's a good opportunity for people who might not be able to hold a full- or part-time job. A virtual assistant allows more people to do more work."

The bottom line from all those business owners who use VAs is universal: The help is affordable, flexible and professional and helps them grow their businesses and make more money.

"I guess the short answer is my VAs are time machines," said Brad Farris, a small-business adviser from Chicago. "I buy time for me to work with my clients by having them work for me. If I was doing all this work, I would never have time to see the number of clients that I am able to see and I wouldn't be able to achieve the income that I now can."

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