

The Business Journal of Jacksonville - February 28, 2005

<http://jacksonville.bizjournals.com/jacksonville/stories/2005/02/28/smallb1.html>

JACKSONVILLE Business Journal

ENTERPRISE

From the February 25, 2005 print edition

Virtual assistants

Contractors add to businesses' productivity from anywhere in the world

Dolly Penland

Correspondent

When Alan Brymer decided to get married last year and move to Provo, Utah, so his wife could attend Brigham Young University, he faced a big problem -- how to keep his real estate investment company in Fredericksburg, Va., in operation. Even 10 years ago, Brymer might have considered selling his business. Instead, he hired a virtual assistant.

Technology has matured enough for business to be conducted smoothly and seamlessly via the Internet, e-mail, phone, fax and instant messenger, providing a market for virtual workers who can lend a helping hand without ever physically meeting their employers. Virtual assistants can handle almost any conceivable task for clients, from administrative services to bookkeeping, or from creative writing to Web design.

Brymer's virtual assistant, Lori Morris, is an independent contractor for Wisconsin-based Team Double-Click Inc. who lives in Hilliard.

"If they need someone to answer the phone, rather than just use voice mail, you can have a live body, or you can use a virtual assistant for marketing, telemarketing or sales," Morris said. "We cater to their needs and we also try to be proactive and see a need before it arises."

When Brymer was shopping around for virtual help, he was surprised at the many services provided by virtual workers. "It blew my mind," said Brymer, president of Gladstone Enterprise Inc. "Team Double-Click helps people in every business, but what I like is that they cater to the real estate industry."

Virtual assistants can also take care of routine personal tasks such as setting doctor's appointments or making travel arrangements, and can even handle more unusual assignments. "I assisted with [Brymer's] marriage in Utah," Morris said. "I coordinated all the paperwork and blood tests for him. Now I know how to get married in Utah."

Virtual assistants charge anywhere from \$25 an hour to \$100 an hour for their services. "For our clients, it depends on what they want done," said Gayle Buske, president of Team Double-Click. "We start at \$25 an hour and it goes up from there. For example, graphic design is \$35 an hour, while Web design is handled on a quote basis.

"However, clients don't pay any set-up or registration fees, and we have several small clients. We have one who uses a virtual assistant to answer phones, and we bill just 15 minutes a week, so obviously there's no minimum."

More and more small businesses are turning to virtual assistants as a way to save on staffing costs. "They're accessing a specialized talent pool and can expect to pay for the services received," said Jodi Diehl, owner of CentralFloridaVA.com in Altamonte Springs and president of the International Virtual Assistants Association,

a nonprofit industry organization. "But they don't have the unemployment taxes, holiday pay, sick leave, workers' compensation, Social Security or Medicare when working with independent contractors."

Besides avoiding the associated costs of a full-time worker, employers pay only for actual work done. In some cases, "it is not going to take an eight-hour day to get the project done, just three or four," said Jolita Barry, owner of Admin Aweigh in Palm Coast. If employees are full time, "they're just making use of the hours."

As with hiring any service, business owners should get references from associates and work on a temporary basis or one-time project first to ensure compatibility with the virtual assistant. Brymer checked out two other virtual firms before hiring Morris. He also got references.

"I was turned on to Team Double-Click by another investor who was using their services and was very happy with them," Brymer said.

For many small businesses with no or few employees and an owner wearing all the hats, having a virtual assistant take over mundane tasks allows them to concentrate on more important business.

"Setting appointments, things like that, a virtual assistant can take that over so the business person can do the things they need to do: sell, or attend meetings, run the company," Barry said.

Brymer certainly appreciates not being bogged down in minutiae. "It has given me my life back," he said.

"Before, I was working 10 to 11 hours a day, doing everything myself. I tried to hire neighborhood kids or friends but they just weren't as reliable. I can say to Lori, 'Can you mail 100 letters this week' or 'call these people for me?', and she does it on time, every time. Now I only work about four or five hours a day."

jacksonville@bizjournals.com | 396-3502

© 2005 American City Business Journals Inc.

All contents of this site © American City Business Journals Inc. All rights reserved.