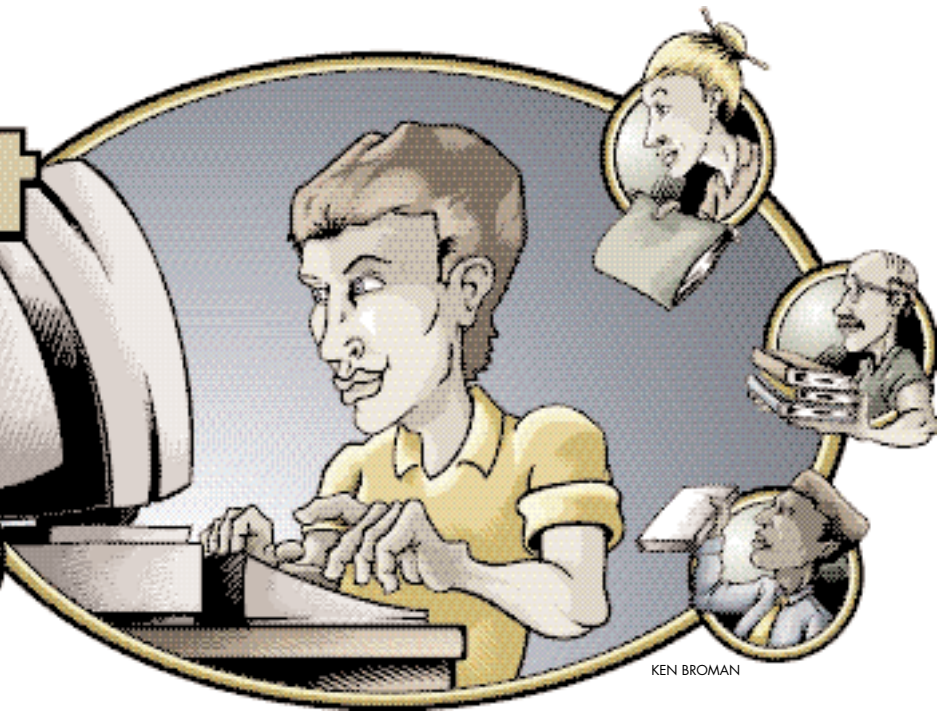


Right hand for hire



By Stephanie Ponder

Home-based professionals help other businesses succeed

In the late 1990s, Bridget Postlethwaite was laid off at work. Her children were young, and she felt the constraints of finding a job on the British Isle of Alderney, where she lives.

She began doing typing from home for people, and someone suggested that she call herself a “virtual assistant” (VA). Within three weeks, with only two clients, she was featured in a newspaper article about VAs.

Postlethwaite, who now has 15 regular clients, started the International Association of Virtual Assistants (IAVA) in 1997 with two other VAs. The association’s Web site offers support for VAs and helps match them with clients.

VIRTUAL REALITY

To understand what VAs are, it is important to understand what they are not. Virtual assistants are not employed by anyone, but are self-employed. Although exact definitions vary, almost everyone agrees on certain characteristics of VAs. They are home-based entrepreneurs and professionals who provide administrative and other support services to create partnerships with clients.

“They are business owners who partner with their clients as equals in their relationship,” says Stacy Brice, president of the U.S.-based AssistU, a service organization that trains VAs, and a Costco member. “And what’s most important is that the relationship serves both people—not just the client.”

Virtual assistants are the only ones in charge of when they work—even if they want to pad around in pajamas when working. In the summertime, Postlethwaite wakes up around 6 a.m. and cycles around the island; in

the winter she uses that time to get an extra hour of sleep.

Once she’s ready to start her workday, Postlethwaite checks her e-mail to see if any assignments came in overnight. Then she works on outstanding projects until it’s time to go to the post office before the mail is sent out for the day at 11:30 a.m. Her husband comes home for lunch, and she gets back to work between 2 and 2:30 p.m. She

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then works until 5:30 p.m.—or until everything is completed.

MASTERS OF MANY SKILLS

Don’t be fooled by the relaxed image of someone working in pajamas or taking a two-hour afternoon break to tend to gardening and other personal chores. VAs are skilled professionals who simply enjoy the freedom of setting their own schedules.

With a few basic office tools, such as a computer, fax and printer, VAs can handle almost any assignment. A sampling of the services they provide includes making

appointments, sending and receiving phone calls or faxes, planning parties, making travel arrangements, proofreading, providing desktop publishing, and creating and maintaining databases.

Some VAs, who have additional training, offer specialized skills such as marketing, advertising, quality control and safety consulting.

Brice used to say that the only thing a VA couldn’t do was something like filing. Then a client began boxing up her papers and shipping them to Brice, who would file them in hanging folders and ship them back.

“Now what I say is that I don’t think there’s anything a VA can’t do, if the client and VA think creatively and are willing to do what it takes to make it happen,” says Brice.

Some of Postlethwaite’s current assignments include typing reports, working on a Web page for a man in prison and assisting a stockbroker.

“If you are into international business, you can call your VA at any time, because they don’t just do a 9-to-5 day,” says Postlethwaite. As if to punctuate that statement, Postlethwaite says she is going to be up until 10 or 11 p.m. that night waiting for her stockbroker client, who is working in the United States.

PARTNERS IN SUCCESS

If you are a small-business owner, VAs can be particularly helpful. They are ideal if you need additional help but don’t have space. They are also a convenient way to get additional help without worrying about employee insurance or holiday pay.

But VAs aren’t for all small-business people. If you aren’t online or if you need a lot of

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last-minute work done, a VA may not be the best choice for you.

According to the IAVA Web site, you should consider using a VA if:

- You want a more professional image, but lack experience in administrative skills.
- You create more ideas than you have time to implement.
- You travel and need a contact person who can represent your business in a professional manner while you're away.

Postlethwaite has worked with freelance consultant John Hiddleston for three years. Some of her first assignments were to update his curriculum vitae and prepare letters of application offering his services. As their business partnership has grown, Postlethwaite has become more involved with Hiddleston's work with donor agencies, such as the World Bank and European Commission, on development aid projects, primarily in Third World countries.

Because much of Hiddleston's work is done abroad and he is often on the move, a conventional office assistant isn't an option.

"I need someone who can provide me with a 'home office,' fixed contact address and good communications," explains Hiddleston.

Another believer is Ginnie Baillie, who has a coaching business and is also a director of a group coaching business.

"I decided to get a VA because the time I was spending on administrative [work] was cutting into the time I could be spending doing the things I am better at and am more interested in," says Baillie.

For Baillie, a VA is ideal because her workload fluctuates and she doesn't want the pressure of keeping a full-time employee busy every day. Her VA sends out information packs to new and potential clients, and handles invoices, letters, typing and database records.

"It frees up time for you to be more creative," says Baillie of virtual assistants. "It's an investment in your own success." ■

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CONNECTING

If you're interesting in forming a partnership with or becoming a virtual assistant, contact the International Association of Virtual Assistants at www.iava.org.uk or AsisStU at www.assistu.com.