

They do it all without leaving the house

By: **ATHENA D. MERRITT** (Thu, Nov/06/2003)

For a growing segment of people, work means never having to set foot in an office or utter a single face-to-face hello to their employer.

Buried in the woods of Kentucky, a ranch in Oklahoma, and throughout the United States, are a new population of workers who refer to themselves as virtual assistants. They perform data entry, medical transcription, accounting, graphic art design, programming, writing and marketing for companies around the world. But they call their home their office.

The profession emerged about six to seven years ago and has grown to employ about 1,500 people, according to the International Association of Virtual Office Assistants, a certifying organization.

Companies that hire virtual assistants get the help they need without shelling out employment taxes, health benefits, or even so much as a computer, phone line, or a tiny cubicle to work in.

The virtual assistants who contract themselves out get the liberty of choosing the tasks they'll perform, the comfort of working from home and a nationwide pool of employers to draw from for their paychecks.

Sought-after payroll savings, outsourcing, corporate downsizing and the general acceptance of virtual assistants pushed the industry into peak demand within the last few years, said Fred Gandee, chief executive officer for IAVOA. Toss in a downturn in the economy and things got even better, said Angela Allen, president of the International Virtual Assistants Association.

"Since the economy has dipped, my business has soared. Quite a few of us are turning business away at this time," said Allen, who added that many employers who laid off employees to cut costs are now looking to virtual assistants to pick up the temporary workload.

Since 2000, the membership for IVAA, a nonprofit association founded in 1999 that certifies and promotes the use of virtual assistants, has soared more than 600 percent, said Allen. The exact number of working virtual assistants is difficult to discern, she said, because they are entrepreneurs and not all of them become certified.

"Most of the people I know who have been virtual assistants have a variety of professional experiences. We've usually been the glue in a small organization and we have a wide range of abilities," said Allen.

A lot of virtual assistants come from human resource, administrative, public relations, marketing and accounting background, said Allen. She said it's an attractive profession for highly skilled workers.

A large number are stay-at-home moms, laid-off workers and people looking to become their own boss, said Gandee.

Most will never set foot in the office of their employer, said Gandee and Allen.

Gandee and his wife have carved out livings as virtual assistants from a 360-acre ranch in Oklahoma, that is 40 miles from the nearest town. Their clients stretch across the East and West coasts, the Midwest and Canada, to the United Kingdom and Australia.

Allen, likewise, has made the bulk of her living off of clients that she doesn't share a town, state or zip code with.

"I live in the middle of nowhere and I can work with some of the most high-tech companies in the world, right here from in the woods in Kentucky," said Allen, who said she has clients she has served for years without ever meeting them face-to-face.

Among those clients is Philadelphia-based Harry Miller Corp., a multi-million dollar enterprise, which serves the steel, metalworking and paper industries.

"A lot of the support activities are being outsourced [by firms] so you can concentrate on your prime skill, which in our case is manufacturing," said Bruce Jones, general manager for the Harry Miller Corp., which began using Allen two years ago to set up and manage its Web site and e-mail services.

By using Allen, the firm saved an estimated 40 to 45 percent in benefits' costs, said Jones.

"The way the economy has gone in recent history, it's becoming more difficult for corporate America to be able to maintain full-time positions. When they cut their workforce they still have the work to be done and virtual assistants step up to fill those needs," said Allen.

The option of hiring different virtual assistants also affords companies the benefit of having the best person on the job to complete the task, said Allen.

"They have access to an array of skill sets that they may not be able to access in a single person," said Allen.

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