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It's all too much? Virtual assistants can lighten the load

A discouraged corporate executive told me that he metaphorically throws one ball into the air and 12 of his subordinates try to catch it.

By comparison, entrepreneurs routinely try to catch a dozen balls all at once.

If that sounds too familiar, a virtual assistant may help field a few balls and free you up to catch the ones that can increase profits and grow your company.

"Many home-based entrepreneurs and sole proprietors, in particular, start their businesses and plan on doing it all," Joanne Lain says. "It all can become quite overwhelming."

Lain is the founder of Bradenton-based JoLain Virtual Assistant Services, which performs a wide array of tasks for executives and business owners who would rather concentrate on activities that add to the bottom line.

Although she has a few specialties, such as event planning and document creation, her skills and offerings cover an extensive menu. Additionally, she's connected with network of virtual assistants with other specialties.

"If (Joanne Lain) ever gets a real estate agent that needs a VA, she would pass her on to me and I would also refer work to her," Suzanne Hawken said.

Hawken, also a Bradenton-based virtual assistant, is focused on helping real estate agents increase their listings and guiding sales to settlement.

"I am a certified real estate support specialist through the International Virtual Assistant Association," she said.

The IVAA is one of several trade associations that offer professional designations to its members.

So if you're looking for someone with paralegal or Web designing experience, for example, the designation tells you they've at least met the minimum requirements to become certified in that competency.

Virtual assistants are contracted on an as-needed basis, but it's different from hiring through a temporary employment agency.

"You need to provide space and equipment for a temp from an agency and you'll usually get a different temp each time," Lain says. "Valuable time is wasted training and retraining each

temp and educating them about your business and operating procedures."

Lain says that virtual assistant relationships are "ongoing and collaborative" and they work as a team with "shared goals and expectations."

Her clients even use her as a "sounding board" for their ideas. Virtual assistants learn what your business is about so that when you call them for a project, much of the work is intuitive, which saves time and money. They also get to know your clients, maintain databases and become skilled in your software programs.

"I provide transaction coordination after (real estate agents) have a contract in place through a program called 'SettlementRoom,'" Hawken said.

The software is used to manage listings and facilitate multiple real estate transactions through the closing phase. She also uses a variety of esoteric Web sites to direct out-of-town prospective buyers to her clients' listings.

VAs are independent contractors, not employees. Therefore, you pay them only for the hours they work and don't deduct payroll tax or provide insurance.

To learn more about the VA industry online and find one with the skills you need, go to www.iva.org. You can also see Web sites for Lain and Hawken at www.jolain.com and www.vawork.com, respectively.

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