



VIRTUAL HELPERS

Thanks to technology, your office assistant can be thousands of miles away. Tap into this trend—and unload your workload or launch a new business.

BY JOANNE CLEAVER

AS A CORPORATE market research exec, Meryl Moritz had an entire support staff who'd trail behind her filing, billing, recording, organizing, calling, and executing. But when she launched her own consultancy, Meryl Moritz Resources, this New York entrepreneur was forced to make do with a staff of seven. Then, when Moritz downsized and switched careers (to career and personal coach), she had to make a major adjustment: run an operation all by herself.

It wasn't long before Moritz realized she needed help—and quick. Still, she enjoyed the fact that she didn't have the monthly overhead of a full-time staff. Nor did Moritz want to worry about managing someone else. And she couldn't quite figure out what responsibilities to relinquish to a secretary. "You can't delegate the whole coaching relationship," Moritz points out. But with 123 accounts to maintain, Moritz needed a fast remedy. Then a colleague suggested she call "The Document Doctor"—that is, Lora Davidek, a virtual assistant based thousands of miles away in Westminster, CO.

At first, Moritz was skeptical: "I never realized you could have an executive assistant whom you've never met. And I had to have one who never missed the mark."

Turns out, Davidek wasn't missing the mark for Moritz's colleague: This virtual assistant was cranking out top-quality research and invoices for his business and sending them to

clients nationally and internationally. So a year ago, Moritz huddled with Davidek about helping to publish three newsletters and worked out a payment plan of \$20 per hour. Davidek has been running Moritz's back-office operations ever since. "When I was a marketing consultant, I had overhead of \$19,000 a month. Now," says Moritz, referring to her virtual assistant, "when I push a button on my computer, my work's out of my lap and onto hers."

SIGHT UNSEEN

The idea of having an assistant who's not beside you to answer phone calls, type up memos, and format reports frightens many executives. But face it: You're often so busy in strategy sessions and on sales calls that someone has to make sure the office keeps chugging along. And in this tight labor market finding talented assistants is a full-time job in itself.

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Fortunately, technology has eliminated the geographical limitations of work and expanded your pool of resources. Until a few years ago, it was reasonable to assume that your assistant had to be a Johnny-on-the-spot. But electronic communications, remote-access software and services, the Internet, and the proliferation of 24-hour quick-print shops have changed that. Armed with fax machines, PCs, printers, and on-line connections, more and more virtual assistants are setting up shop to lighten the load of busy executives—no matter where they work. And these high-tech helpers are finding they can do their jobs better without all the face-to-face interaction (and interruptions). Says Moritz of Davidek, "I've never even seen her picture."

THE OUTSOURCED OFFICE WORKER

Although entrepreneurs who can't afford and often don't want full-time staffers are obvious prospects for cyber-secretaries, corporate workers also need assistants who are standing by to handle work overflow—such as coordinating long-distance communiqués from off-site salespeople and relieving overburdened staffers of special projects.

Virtual assistant Sherry Huff, founder of Gal Fridays Office Services in Akron, OH, initially thought she'd target small construction subcontractors who run their offices from their pickup trucks. Instead, she found her biggest clients are stressed salespeople in large corporations. Several keep her on retainer to quickly handle the transcription of focus-group tapes—a project Huff divides with her own two subcontractors.

Obviously, rates for virtual assistants vary. If you're interested in offering such services, expect to charge anywhere from \$20 to \$50 an hour. Alternatively, you can ask clients for a monthly retainer for a certain number of guaranteed hours. To find out more about becoming a virtual assistant, log on to www.assistu.com or www.gava.org.

The key to servicing far-flung execs is to hit the ground running, advises Davidek. With more than 12 years of experience as a legal secretary, she was already adept in most office functions when she struck out on her own three years ago. In fact, Davidek appreciates a client who clearly outlines the purpose of a project, its key steps, and the deadline, and then leaves her alone to tackle it.

"She's unflappable—and I tried to flap her," says Moritz. "The first time we went through the newsletters, we did four iterations before I was satisfied. I want 100 percent customer satisfaction. And she's OK with that."

To help build her own business, Moritz

keeps pushing more responsibilities to her virtual assistant. After Davidek successfully engineered a series of teleconferenced classes Moritz taught, Moritz handed her the job of overseeing a consulting project that involves colleagues from coast to coast. Although Moritz and Davidek don't spend as much time on personal chitchat as they would if they shared an office, the women make sure they thoroughly understand their objectives for tasks. More important, Moritz wants Davidek to feel challenged by the projects she accepts.

Such nuances are vital for managers of virtual assistants, but they're hard to keep in mind when your secretary is thousands of miles away. "There's no body language to pick up. You don't see the person coming into the office. You don't hear their tone of voice as they talk to clients," cautions Moritz. But through experience, Moritz has discovered the more explicit she is in her e-mail messages and phone conversations, the less Davidek has to figure out on her own. As a result, Davidek can better anticipate Moritz's unspoken needs. Who could ask for more from an assistant—on-site or off? *ef*

Business writer JOANNE CLEAVER, who works from her home in Illinois, says any assistant she hires must be virtual. She's too embarrassed to let someone see the drifts of paper in her office.

REMOTE MANAGEMENT RULES

Developing rapport with a virtual assistant is more complicated than handing her a laptop and banishing her to her kitchen table. Here are three rules to make the heard-but-not-seen relationship work:

1 **Inquire about office hours.** Be sure your virtual assistant includes in her contract office hours as well as her availability during off hours. If you ask her to work outside the normal business day—say, to filter and relay calls and e-mail messages when you're away at a conference—pick up her pager or cell-phone expenses. In addition, expect to pay a retainer for the time she's "on call."

2 **Set up a communications schedule.** Ask your VA for explicit rules for calling her at home. You never know when you'll have emergencies, rush jobs, or feel the need to drop by unexpectedly to confer on a project. Some assistants have initiated "by appointment only" policies to prevent intrusions on their personal time.

3 **Define responsibilities,** suggests Wayne Outlaw, president of Outlaw Group, a Mount Pleasant, SC, employment consultancy. That's particularly important when you're dealing with sensitive corporate information, such as financial statements or customer databases. You may even ask that your assistant sign a confidentiality agreement before giving her access to files.

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