



TOOLBOX

Bye, Gal Friday! Hello, Virtual Secretary

Finding and keeping good administrative help *By Joanne Y. Cleaver*

Too bad Bibiana Escobar can't be cloned. A January 1998 graduate of the well-known Katherine Gibbs School in Montclair, N.J., she stepped right into an administrative-assistant position with

PaineWebber in Weehawken, N.J. She's learning how to read the stock ticker and has taken in-house classes in time management, desktop publishing, and word processing, the better to deliver

SOLUTIONS

SOLUTIONS

exactly what her boss, a divisional vice president, wants. Escobar expects to advance quickly at PaineWebber.

"I get to see every aspect of a project that comes in and out. The possibilities for growth are definitely there," she says.

Most financial services companies would give their eyeteeth to have a steady stream of bright, able Bibiana Escobars coming through their doors to fill their support-staff ranks.

Although administrative help is relatively inexpensive, managers are realizing that to keep good support staffers, they have to pay more, offer professional-development opportunities and flexible work schedules, and make sure staffers see a future for themselves at the company.

It's hard enough just finding good support staffers. Old-standby techniques, such as word of mouth and classified advertising, can yield results. Many firms are recruiting students at community colleges and career-training schools well before the traditional, pre-graduation spring rush. Escobar was recruited at Katherine Gibbs while still in the midst of her training.

Untraditional methods of finding people, however, are becoming more commonplace. Midlife workers, while usually not as concerned with upward mobility as twentysomethings, are concerned with higher salary and benefit expectations. These workers often have the discretion and diplomatic skills needed in a financial services firm, says Kathy Benicoff, director of placement for the Allentown Business School in Allentown, Pa.

But once you find the administrative help you need, how do you keep it? It's easy, but self-defeating, to overlook the importance of giving your support staff positive feedback, says Wayne H. Outlaw, president of staffing consultancy with The Outlaw Group in Mount Pleasant, S.C., and author of *Smart*

Staffing (Upstart Publishing, 1998).

Brokers and firm owners, motivated by compensation, too often assume that throwing money at workers will buy loyalty. To be sure, wages should be competitive in the market—ranging from \$14 to \$25 or more an hour in larger cities.

Still, no amount of cash can persuade someone who's unhappy to stick with the job, Outlaw says. He adds that departing workers often cite a better salary as a face-saving excuse for leaving.

Paul Beard, a consulting psychologist and an associate professor at Fordham University in New York, last year surveyed hundreds of support staffers at major financial services firms to find out why they stick with their jobs. He found that employees like to be a part of the decision-making process, whether it involves helping figure out how projects should be tackled or setting realistic deadlines. He concurs with Outlaw's observation that money alone won't do it.

"Give the office manager or sales assistant some choice in how the work gets done. Maximize their sense of self-determination. Be sure that deadlines are explained and are purposeful and aren't just controlling techniques. Let them participate in setting goals," Beard says.

Ultra-competitive business owners and brokers shouldn't undermine staffers' opportunities to savor their accomplishments, he says. "The last thing you should say to someone who's done a great job and has earned a bonus is, 'And there's even more in it for you next year if you do better.' Save next year's goals for another conversation," Beard adds.

Dennis Martino, a Clearwater, Fla., registered representative who

has spent so much time figuring out the nuances of running his office that he authored a book called *The Art of Contact Management—Staying in Touch* (self-published, 1999), says giving staffers as much autonomy on the job as possible helps minimize turnover.

"People get burned out on that job because they're always reacting. We try to put them in a position where they're proactive," he says.

Martino's two full-time employees and one part-time employee set their own hours. An office schedule is posted weekly, and everyone simply marks down their own commitments, in the office and outside.

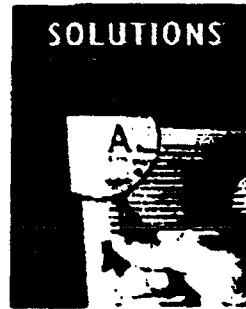
Martino also asks his employees what they believe their salaries should be, and unless they're dramatically out of line with the market, he pays them what

they'd like to receive. In addition, bonuses are structured to reinforce the value of customer retention not new sales, he says.

Some secretaries don't even have to be in the office to be effective. Allowing secretaries to work from home and offering them flexible schedules are attractive benefits, especially for time-pressed mothers. Sherry Huff has taken that even further by establishing a "virtual secretary" service called *Gal Fridays Office Services* in Akron, Ohio.

Newsletters, reports, travel arrangements, and other projects are easily farmed out to an outsourcer such as her company, Huff says. Rates range from \$20 to \$35 an hour, depending on the complexity of the job.

Once the working relationship is established, the work usually flows back and forth electronically without a hitch, she says. "Once we start using e-mail and fax, I hardly ever see them," she adds. ☺



A "VIRTUAL SECRETARY" SERVICE ENABLES NEWSLETTERS, REPORTS, AND TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS TO BE FARMED OUT