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The client could be anywhere

Virtual assistants can help ventures operating around the globe

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PHILIP JALSEVAC
RECORD STAFF

Felicity Bullen of Waterloo gets a phone call at home several times a day from a stock market analyst named Harry Schiller in the San Francisco Bay area.

He isn't calling to help her play the market, however.

Schiller phones to have Bullen update his daily bulletin, which she then e-mails to his subscribers, mostly in the United States.

"I send it back to him by e-mail and he telephones me again and makes changes and I send it out under his e-mail address," Bullen explains.

That's just one example of the type of work done by "virtual assistants" like Bullen. They're linked to the world by cyberspace and go into business to do work for several clients -- many of whom they never meet in person.

INTERNATIONAL LINKS

Marlene Hamilton is another so-called "VA" with international connections. She used to work from her home in the Perth County hamlet Gads Hill, but now has a tiny office in nearby Stratford.

"I have a new client and they take



Virtual assistant Felicity Bullen of Waterloo operates a business called Administrative Outsourcing from her home. One of her clients is a California-based stock market analyst who hires Bullen to administer and distribute his e-mail bulletins to investors across North America.



Marlene Hamilton is a virtual assistant. She operates H&H Business Services of Stratford.

virtual to the extreme," Hamilton says, describing a New York-based company that is installing a new type of banking transaction machine for cruise ships.

"They have an office in New York and another in California. Program development is done by a company in India.

"The machine itself is being put together in the Dominican Republic. They needed Spanish translation done and they have someone in Argentina doing that.

"I work for the president of the company in pulling this all together and I'm in Canada. This is just a perfect example of where this can go. It's as if we're all together in an office building."

In this case, Hamilton is providing administrative support for her client, doing things like checking transportation rates and forwarding step-by-step setup instructions for the recipient of a demonstration kiosk.

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Hamilton, 49, previously worked for about 12 years as a teacher of computer software programs and office administration at the Kitchener, Cambridge and Stratford campuses of Conestoga College.

She has also worked as executive assistant to a vice-president of the former Confederation Life insurance company in Toronto and as office manager for a Cambridge oral surgery practice.

She established her company, H&H Business Services (www.handh.ca) in May 2001, after doing some research into ways she could work from home.

SUBMIT PROPOSALS

"By accident, I came across the IVAA (International Virtual Assistants Association) and I thought, 'Wow, they've got something here.' "

Among other things, the U.S.-based association invites entrepreneurs and companies to post a "request for a proposal" on its Web site, outlining the services they require.

Members of the association then submit proposals in response, outlining their background, experience, expertise, equipment and references.

That's how Hamilton made her first contact with the president of the New York company involved in banking machines.

"Our first meeting was instant messaging and our second was a phone call," she says.

"And, that way, he could judge my computer skills and my telephone manner and he already had a list of my qualifications with a resume and references."

Another of her clients was a Toronto law firm that wanted somebody to compile the confidential findings of brain-storming sessions involving groups of its lawyers and the firm's support staff.

"They were doing team-building and that type of thing and they didn't want someone in-house doing it."

The law firm used a courier service to send Hamilton the large sheets of "flip board" paper that had been used to write down comments and issues in point form.

"I typed it up for them and put it into a readable format."

Other H&H clients include human resources specialists and a psychotherapist.

For them, Hamilton will handle such tasks as preparing Power Point presentations, writing reports and looking after desktop publishing.

SOFTWARE SALES

Hamilton has an Australian client who sells shareware software.

He was looking for someone to process his American sales, she says.

Hamilton phoned him up and persuaded him to allow her to set up a post office box in Stratford on his behalf for Canadian sales.

Customers can order software directly over the Internet, or mail their orders to Stratford, where Hamilton picks them up and forwards them by fax to Australia.

"That way, he has a Canadian presence, without ever stepping foot in the country," she says.

Hamilton is a certified master instructor of such software programs as Microsoft Word, Excel, Power Point and Access and says she uses about 25 programs in all for her business.

She admits she started her business with some trepidation.

"You have days when you say, 'I don't have anything to do. Oh no!'

"But eventually, as you become more established, the work becomes more consistent . . . It was at least six to nine months before I started to think, 'OK. I can do this. This will work.' "

Her annual revenues in the first year were "in the \$50,000 range."

With her growing clientele, she says "it's now going to go over \$100,000."

And she now plans to hire her own virtual assistant to help out.

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Felicity Bullen, 54, set up her business -- it's called Administrative Outsourcing -- just last January in her Waterloo home.

Previously, she had worked for 20 years as an executive assistant to senior executives at several high-tech companies -- mostly presidents, vice-presidents and chief executive officers.

MORE VARIETY

"I really wanted more control over what I was doing and over my time and just really wanted

to have more variety of having the challenge of doing things for different clients."

Bullen was able to make use of some of her corporate contacts as "a bit of a cushion" in .

In more than one case, women who had been a boss to Bullen went on to start their own businesses, then contacted Bullen to have her become their virtual assistant.

One was a vice-president at Ingram Micro who started an online shopping company.

Another was Linda Gregorio, a former vice-president at Waterloo Maple and PrinterOn who now has her own business as a "personal corporate coach."

Bullen has a unique relationship with Gregorio.

"I have used her as my coach. We're clients of each other. She's the one who urged me to start my own business."

Bullen admits that going into business for herself required a big leap of faith.

"I've always had a regular salary and the benefits and so on.

"But it just seemed the right time and it has worked out well."

She landed her job with Schiller, the California stock market analyst, through the International Virtual Assistants Association

And she found additional clients by joining and attending meetings of a Cambridge chapter of Business Network International, a privately run networking group that helps members turn up business leads for one another.

WORD OF MOUTH

Bullen also has a Web site for Administrative Outsourcing (www.yourva.ca), but she says that so far about 80 per cent of her business has come about because of word-of-mouth referrals.

She now has "about a dozen" clients.

For them, she handles a wide variety of tasks, everything from organizing workshops and making travel arrangements to scheduling appointments, maintaining a database of customers, bookkeeping, Web site monitoring, research and mailing.

Both she and Hamilton say they charge their clients either a flat rate for a particular project or by an hourly rate of \$15 to \$30 -- depending on the demands of the work involved

Bullen says she's projecting annual revenues of about \$35,000 in her first year, working part-time roughly 25 hours a week.

"That really was all I was planning," she says.

"But my aim would be to end up with 20 to 25 clients working 30 to 35 hours a week at the time of my choosing."

The Waterloo woman knew she would initially take "a significant pay cut" from the salary she received while working as a senior executive assistant for larger corporations.

But she says she's happy running her own business and sees a bright future for virtual assistants who have the right sort of skills and savvy.

Bullen recalls a comment made by Stacy Brice, president of AssistU (www.assistu.com) and an expert in the field of virtual assistants:

"I believe that by 2005, the question won't be, 'What is a VA,' " Brice said, " 'but rather, 'Who is your VA?' " "

pjalsevac@therecord.com

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225 Fairway Road South,
Kitchener, Ontario, Canada, N2G 4E5
519-894-2231

