

Virtual help plays growing role in business

Employers see benefits in hiring online assistants

By **STEPHANIE PATRICK**
Staff Writer

GREATER METROPLEX — He's grappled with secretaries needing too many sick days, clerks requiring health benefits and temps who've proved unreliable.

So, with correspondence piling up and presentation books to be sent to prospective clients, Glen Merklen turned to the virtual world for assistance.

The president of Garland-based trucking company Sunbelt Express now outsources all his routine administrative needs, from letter writing to printing services, to virtual assistants — independent contractors who work from their homes and communicate with clients via e-mail, fax or telephone.

"I get all the work done without the hassles that come with managing an employee," said Merklen, whose company has 65 employees. "It was a decision we made several years ago, and it's worked out."

With the ongoing shortage of workers continuing despite the slowing economy, an increasing number of companies, large and small, are turning to virtual assistants.

Unheard of as little as five years ago, VAs offer services ranging from basic secretarial functions to specialized research. They work on an as-needed and long-term basis, typically handling a group of clients



WORKING THE WEB: Dory Wilson-Fouse, of Flower Mound, is one of a growing number of virtual assistants who network their specialties for an array of local and national clients.

who may be in other cities.

"We estimate there are between 2,500 and 3,500 virtual assistants working globally," said Christine Durst, chief operating officer of Staffcentrix L.L.C. in Woodstock, Conn., a Web-based exchange network for VAs. "We have about 1,200 members, 84% from the United States, and our membership has more than doubled in the last year."

VAs provide clients with skilled help for special projects without requiring benefits, perks and office space, said Anna Baron, who traded in her administrative duties at Deloitte & Touche to start her own company, The Virtual Secretary, in Allen. In addition to traditional secretarial

work, Baron specializes in Web design and desktop publishing.

Her roster of clients has included Deloitte & Touche, Johnson & Johnson in Fort Worth and Total Diversity Management Consultants in Portland, Ore.

Typically, VAs find clients through referrals, classified advertisements seeking help with temporary or part-time assignments or inquiries to Web networks such as Staffcentrix and the International Virtual Assistants Association.

Janet L. Jordan, owner of Your Virtual Assistant, began offering executive and administrative-support services from her home several years ago, but began calling herself a virtual assistant only recently. She

has several clients in the Metroplex, California and, at times, Australia and the Philippines.

She now offers training courses for virtual assistants.

"We aren't even competitors, because there's so much work available," Langford said.

That may change.

Only 5% of the VAs polled have been practicing more than five years and 19% have yet to launch their businesses, according to a just-released Staffcentrix survey.

Baron's own estimates are that her secretarial services cost clients \$13,000 a year for 10 hours a week, compared with \$54,114 for an in-house secretary receiving compensation and benefits. Baron's rate amounts to \$25 an hour, but her fees range from \$30 to \$35 an hour for desktop publishing and \$35 to \$50 an hour for Web-site design.

Baron is a member of Virtual Link, a newly formed network of Dallas-Fort Worth area VAs, whose membership includes another administrative assistant, a paralegal, a human-resources consultant and a sales-support specialist.

"We hope to have 10 to 15 more members in the next year, depending on how it grows," said fellow member Dory Wilson-Fouse, owner of HR Virtually in Flower Mound, a human-resources consulting and training company which has several national clients.

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