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Virtual assistants gain popularity

Doresa Banning
SPECIAL TO THE RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL
8/19/2002 10:15 pm

Liz DePalmer, owner of Reno-based Business Elf, has clients she's never met face to face, most of which are located out of state.

"Everything that I do is through e-mail," the 32-year-old said. "Virtually everything is online. I've even done chat sessions with one of my clients as opposed to doing a phone conversation."

She offers business writing, desktop publishing, document scanning, file conversion, editing/proofreading, graphic design, graphic scanning, spreadsheets, Internet research, real-estate agent support, resume writing, Web site design and hosting, and word processing.

Raquel Nilson, owner of Lake Tahoe-based Executive Assistance International, has mostly overseas clients. Eighty percent of communication with them is via the Internet.

Her skills are similar to DePalmer's but also include accounting, database management, database design/ programming, desktop publishing, interpreting, import/export support, Internet commerce, mailing services, marketing/advertising, market research, multimedia presentation, nonprofit



Marilyn Newton/RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL
Liz DePalmer's office is the dining room table in her south Reno home. DePalmer, 32, conducts the vast majority of her work over the Internet.

For more information:

- AT A GLANCE**
- What:** Business Elf
 - Owner:** Liz DePalmer
 - Phone:** (877) 808-3334
 - What:** Executive Assistance International
 - Owner:** Raquel Nilson
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support services, office management, programming, public relations systems management and technical writing/editing.

DePalmer and Nilson are two of a new breed of administrative assistant — virtual assistants — independent entrepreneurs who offer business support services in a virtual environment.

Virtual assistants work off-site, use their own equipment and software, and provide services to home-, Web- or storefront-based small businesses, executives and individuals.

Virtual assistants began to appear around 1995 because of a combination of factors, including Internet growth, corporate downsizing, the evolution of telecommuting relationships and increased virtual services in general, according to the International Virtual Assistants Association.

“What gave the industry a shove is that it’s more acceptable to work at home now,” said Terri Romine, IVAA president and virtual assistant.

The main advantage to using virtual assistants is the cost savings to the employer, Romine said.

“There’s a lot of savings to be had with the employer not having to pay benefits and employment taxes,” she said. “The virtual assistant is only paid for the actual time spent.”

DePalmer charges \$30 an hour. Nilson charges by the hour or by the project, the cost depending upon the type of work performed.

Most virtual assistants have a broad skill set, Romine said. They try to be a partner to their clients.

“The virtual assistant is very interested in their clients’ success,” she said. “If their client is not successful, they don’t have a client.”

Romine said she anticipates the virtual assistant industry will continue growing.

“It is not a trend,” she said. “I believe it is very much here to stay.”

In fact, since 2000 the IVAA has grown from 60 members to more than 500.

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“Again, it’s people learning more about it,” Romine said. “There are just so many people who want to work at home and not rely on a company to employ them.”

The career of a virtual assistant is not without its challenges. DePalmer said she struggles with landing new clients and finding the time to market her business. Nilson, on the other hand, said adjusting to working with clients in different time zones has been difficult, particularly when she’s had to work in the middle of night and during the day.

Nevertheless, both said they find being a virtual assistant rewarding. DePalmer said she’s thrilled with being able to work from home.

“I can have a family life along with my professional life,” she said. “I get to be here with my little ones. I can work pretty much the hours I want to as long as I’m getting everybody’s deadlines met.”

Nilson said she enjoys being able to work anywhere and the flexibility that allows her. She also likes the variety in her workload.

“It’s not just one thing that you do over and over,” the 38-year-old said. “You get exposed to different kinds of businesses, too. You get to learn a lot, which is quite interesting.”



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