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More firms use virtual assistance

By Nick Easen for CNN

(CNN) --The Internet has revolutionized many business sectors and has single-handedly created one -- virtual assistance.

Over the last decade, thousands have swapped corporate jobs to provide services for new bosses who they may never actually meet.

These home-based workers help out with anything from bookkeeping, Web design or travel arrangements via phone, e-mail or fax.

And the industry is now so big that there are trade groups and Web sites that assist virtual assistants (V.A.s) -- and try to attract potential clients.

"The growth is fastest in the U.S. There is also a substantial base in Australia, Canada and the UK," Bronwyn Robertson a virtual assistant for British arts companies, told CNN.

"Many employees who suffered from downsizing discovered they could offer their skills on a self-employed basis."

Even though the concept has been around for a while, according to some virtual assistants, many bosses are only just beginning to realize administrative support can easily be done virtually.

"The term virtual assistant is frequently not looked for because the general public are still not familiar with it," said Kathie Thomas, a virtual assistant in Australia.

"They tend to think -- home-based secretary -- or something similar."

However, as independent contractors, V.A.s are involved in all kinds of work including data entry, tax advice, accountancy and technology support.

Those in the industry say it is on the rise because it is cost-effective. The employer does not pay for extra office space, furniture, equipment or software. There is also no additional cost for training, pensions or work insurance.

In the U.S., medical practitioners, legal practitioners, realtors, public speakers and corporate trainers are the most prominent users of V.A.s.

The downside of employing them is that relationships take longer to develop, since they are not actually in the office.

Carolyn Moncel a V.A. in Paris, France, provides support for companies in North America, while her employers take advantage of the time difference to meet deadlines.

"I think people choose to be a V.A. because it gives them a alternative way of working -- it's mobile, flexible and empowering," she says.

Many mothers have become V.A.s in order to balance work with family commitments and for many the advantages are numerous, while others miss the office environment.

"I sometimes miss the camaraderie of my former work colleagues, although there is instant messaging, E-mail and phone," says Robertson.

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