

Web Posted Wednesday, March 24, 2004



City Talk: In a changing economy, businesses look for virtual assistance

By Bill Dawers

Special to the Savannah Morning News

In these days of streamlining, outsourcing and maximizing productivity, businesses across the nation are trying to limit hiring. Those trends have contributed to a tight job market, but some entrepreneurs are finding ways to turn those trends to their advantage.

After years of working as an administrative assistant, Donna Elliott recently founded A Plus Virtual Assistance (www.aplusva.com). Virtual assistants, or VAs, are essentially independent contractors that offer a wide variety of administrative support to businesses large and small.

There are relatively few VAs in the Savannah area right now. However, if national trends are any indication, we're likely to see a big growth in the number of virtual assistants in coming years.

Of course, since VAs by definition operate remotely, there's no particular reason a business needs to contract a VA in its own area. Technology is the key. With cell phones, faxes, e-mail, Internet and overnight shipping, there's no reason administrative support – from bookkeeping to mass mailing – needs to be done in any particular place.

"We look at ourselves as business partners with our clients," Elliott said. "Sometimes being away from the office we can see a little bit more."

According to Elliott, VAs typically prefer to work on retainer, with perhaps a guaranteed 10-20 hours or more per month. That might cover something as simple as answering phone calls or doing bookkeeping. Additional hours then might be arranged at busy times of the year – tax time, the end of the fiscal year, etc.

Other businesses might use a VA for a short-term project, like a bulk mailing. The hourly rate is likely to be considerably more than the cost of a temporary employee, but VAs don't require any space or equipment. They also can guarantee a degree of continuity that most temp agencies cannot.

And, of course, VAs don't receive any benefits.

"It's kind of exciting," Elliott said of her varied days. "It's never the same."

Warned that most Savannah-area business managers wouldn't want to contract out important work to someone they can't even see, Elliott nevertheless reports that at least half the businesses she has approached have been open to the idea of virtual assistance. (A recent CNN poll found that more than 80 percent of businesses nationwide would consider contracting a virtual assistant.)

City Talk appears every Sunday and Wednesday. Bill Dawers can be reached at billdawers2003@hotmail.com. Send mail to 10 E. 32nd St., Savannah, 31401.