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'Get Me a Hair Appointment and Empty My Inbox'



By SUE SHELLENBARGER

Many people fantasize about having a personal assistant at their beck and call to handle all the annoying tasks and to-dos that eat up time and energy.



Virtual assistants are being called on to unsnarl people's lives. WSJ's Sue Shellenbarger has the pros and cons of a virtual assistant, and Profitably.com CEO Adam Neary shares how a virtual assistant helped him get his life back. Photo: Getty Images.

A growing number are fulfilling that fantasy by hiring virtual assistants. These skilled online helpers work from home or through outsourcing firms to handle a widening range of clients' tasks, from scheduling a doctor's appointment, managing meetings or cleaning out an email inbox, to finding the perfect hairdresser or pair of pants.

Businesses have long hired virtual administrative assistants online. Now, consumers are sharply increasing use of virtual assistants in their personal lives.

Ben and Lydia C. Choi, parents of 3-year-old twin boys, were swamped last August preparing for a move. Mr. Choi, chief executive of CoffeeTable.com, maker of a catalog-shopping app, and Ms. Choi, who heads a sales strategy team at Google, had purchased a home in Palo Alto, Calif. The historic, century-old house had drafty windows and a broken furnace that needed repairs. The family also needed to have utilities and Internet service up-and-running on moving day. "We had an endless list

of to-dos that neither of us wanted to handle," Ms. Choi says.

Transferring all that to virtual assistant Phyllis Kaelin of Culver City, Calif., more than 350 miles away, eased the tension, Ms. Choi says. Ms. Kaelin, who worked for 30 years as a researcher helping develop educational

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Would you hire a virtual assistant for routine household tasks?

- Yes
 No

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Edward Cheng

Ben and Lydia C. Choi, with their twin boys, needed help with moving into their Palo Alto, Calif., home in August.



Phyllis Kaelin

The Chois got help from virtual assistant Phyllis Kaelin, above, who found movers, got the utilities turned on and arranged for home repairs.



Lydia C Choi

The Chois' home in Palo Alto.

Related Video



Virtual assistant apps like Zaarly and Task Rabbit are creating a mobile marketplace for peer-to-peer transactions, in real time and in the

curriculum, now works for Zirtual, a Las Vegas-based provider of virtual assistants. She was already helping Mr. Choi with his business. For the family move, she researched movers, shut down utilities at their house in Burlingame, Calif., and turned them on in their new home. She also found an Internet provider and a contractor to replace the furnace.

The Chois, who pay \$397 a month to Zirtual for Ms. Kaelin's services, estimate the assistant saved them 10 hours a week over about two months. "Phyllis has been great for our marriage," Ms. Choi says.

Virtual assistants may be students working their way through college, parents who want to work from home or older people who are semi-retired. Many assistants never meet their clients, communicating instead by email, instant message, phone or videoconference. Some live continents away from their customers, while others live in the same state or city.

Finding the right match with a virtual assistant requires work. One route is to buy a subscription through an outsourcing company, which matches virtual assistants with clients for a monthly fee. The most popular subscription to Zirtual, where Ms. Kaelin works, costs \$197 for 10 hours' service by a U.S.-based virtual assistant, says founder Maren Kate Donovan. Assignments range from a business traveler's request to find a hairdresser in her destination city, to an Italian client's wish to find a perfect replica of actor Steve McQueen's chino pants in the 1963 film "The Great Escape." (A Zirtual assistant located a specialty clothing company and delivered the goods.)

Other outsourcing firms manage virtual assistants overseas, including Brickwork India in Bangalore; Vahut in China and Hong Kong, and Pepper Virtual Assistants in Manila.

Another route is to hire an assistant directly on a freelance website. Some 50,000 virtual assistants found work on the website Elance in 2012, up 44% from 2011, says chief executive Fabio Rosati. Job postings for virtual assistants on oDesk, another freelance site, rose more than tenfold, to 28,000, between 2008 and 2012, says Jaleh Bisharat, the company's vice president of marketing. Pay rates quoted include the websites' fees.

Pay for individual virtual assistants typically ranges

immediate vicinity of the users. WSJ's Andy Jordan checks out a few, and farms out the bathing of his own cat.

Christine Durst, co-founder of RatRaceRebellion.com, a job-hunting site for at-home work.



Alexandra Milak

Brooklyn entrepreneur Marc Plotkin needed help managing his voluminous emails.



Charles Phillips

Danielle Johnson, a virtual assistant based in Indiana, is a former teacher.

Vetting an individual virtual assistant can take time. ODesk's Ms. Bisharat suggests hiring several candidates to complete the same small project, then selecting the best performer. Adds Ms.



Getty Images

Ms. Johnson helped Mr. Plotkin arrange for a gym membership, among other tasks.

Durst: Assign less-important projects first, such as maintaining a mailing list. Make sure instructions are crystal clear and avoid micromanaging.

It isn't wise to share credit-card or password information with freelance virtual assistants before building a trusting relationship, experts say. Elance and oDesk take steps to verify freelancers' identity, provide tracking tools to measure time worked and post freelancers' skills-test ratings, client reviews and work history. But spokesmen for both sites suggest exercising caution when giving out personal information.

Adam Neary, chief executive of Activecell, a business-software company in New York, says he is delighted with several virtual assistants he has hired for \$6 to \$8 an hour on oDesk, from the Philippines, China, Poland and Argentina. They have handled research, Web postings, software testing and other administrative tasks, freeing up more personal time for him. "They literally charge by the minute, and when the meter is running they can perform a wide range of tasks," Mr. Neary says.

Marc Plotkin, a Brooklyn, N.Y., entrepreneur and musician, hired assistants on freelance sites because he was swamped trying to answer 1,000 emails a day for his 25-employee software startup, DecisionDesk. His personal life was suffering too. "I was in the workaholic mode of, 'I don't have time to be more sociable,'" he says. But Mr. Plotkin's hires didn't work out. "Every time it would start off OK, and then they would drop the ball at some point," usually because of gaps in language skills, he says.

Since he signed on with Zirtual last year, his virtual assistant, Danielle Johnson of Valparaiso, Ind., gets his email inbox down to zero each night. Some

emails get standard responses, others get put in project folders. Some responses require consulting first with Mr. Plotkin. To expand his social life, Ms. Johnson schedules regular lunches for Mr. Plotkin, selecting from a list of friends he provides. She recently had printed and framed a photo of Mr. Plotkin with three friends, which he sent to the friends as a gift.

Ms. Johnson, 23, is a former English teacher who says she wants to shift to a career in business or entrepreneurship. Mr. Plotkin pays Zirtual about \$700 a month for her services.

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