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A HOME-BASED, FREE LANCE BUSINESS BILLING BY THE HOUR OR PROJECT

A farewell to executive secretaries— here come virtual assistants!

The trend is taking place all over the world and catching up in Argentina. Even courses are delivered to teach professionals how to work in this way, with hourly professional fees of \$25 to \$60 an hour

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It doesn't matter if you're an employee or an upper level executive, at a multinational company or a small firm— working from your own home is increasingly common. And secretaries are not left out. Some of them even dare to start a new business and become “virtual assistants”.



What's the difference between virtual assistants and traditional secretaries? Virtual Assistants work off-site and are self-employed, use their own equipment (with the necessary technology to be able to be connected to their clients) and bill their fees according to the actual time spent on the tasks performed. On the other hand, those who hire them maximize their cost-benefit ratio (as they pay only for the required tasks) and save money on work expenses, equipment and office space.

“We're small entrepreneurs (micropreneurs). We offer value adding secretarial services; the only difference being that ours is a home-based business. We work for entrepreneurs, freelance professionals and small or medium companies that don't need to hire a full-time employee and don't want to increase their staff”, explains Victoria Miles, who has been in the virtual assistance business since last November, after working as an executive secretary at a number of companies for 15 years.

Apart from performing the usual tasks (as confirming meetings, doing paperwork, buying plane tickets and making hotel reservations), off-site assistants also make presentations, track pieces published in the news, make transcriptions, write, attend to letters and e-mails, and provide bookkeeping and purchasing services. Also, they perform marketing activities, such as supervising an advertising plan or updating a data base. Besides, they resort to the web— some of them specialize in website and blog maintenance, and creation of newsletters.

As they use the e-mail and other tools (such as chat, videoconferences or voice over IP solutions), they are connected online to their bosses. “We use any and all available technology tools to do our job and deliver our service as efficiently as possible”, says Bárbara Langer, who runs the asistencia-virtual.com site. For online secretaries, distances are not an issue. “I work for a Colombian speaker and he sends me his lectures in mp3 format for me to transcribe. I can do that from Buenos Aires perfectly well. That’s why we get many orders from abroad”, says Langer.

Even though they promote themselves through their websites, virtual secretaries admit that most jobs are obtained by referrals and word of mouth.

A virtual assistant can be hired by the hour (from 25 to 60 Argentine pesos), or by a monthly retainer fee, to perform certain tasks. “I’d rather work on a regular basis for the same person because that way I feel part of the team. Our clients notice an increase in efficiency and productivity and can therefore convey a more professional image for their clients and suppliers”, comments Miles.

Although in the local market this trend is still getting off the ground, the virtual assistant industry has already developed a great deal in the US (where it has started a decade ago), Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia, where they are called just VA’s. According to a survey conducted by the **Virtual Assistance Chamber of Commerce**, i.e. an American organization, there are from 5,000 to 8,000 virtual assistants in the world. In Argentina, around 60 people have already taken a course or program to get certified as such.

At temporary staffing agencies, this kind of service is now required as well. “Some multinational companies do ask for virtual assistants now for specific tasks to be performed, such as serving as the help desk of a project or confirming the people invited to an event. They probably used to use this work proceeding in their countries. It proves to be very useful for those who don’t wish to have somebody else working in their office. I believe the word has not spread yet but it will and stay for good”, explains Pablo Liotti, Major Accounts Director, Adecco.