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Virtual assistance a click away

By Warren Henderson

Staff Reporter

Administration and secretarial help are yours via the Internet

In a virtual world where technology allows bosses, clients and employees to work together while being thousands of kilometres apart, Kelowna's Paula Humphries has found her niche.

She's a virtual assistant who provides her company's clients with various services from the comfort of her own home and her own computer.

"You can serve your clients without setting foot in anyone's office," says Humphries, who is one of four associates working for **Michelle Jamison VA and Associates** of Keswick, Ont.

"I think this will continue to be the way of the future," she says.

Humphries specializes in editing, proofreading and Internet research. Other services provided by Jamison's company include desktop publishing, transcription, book-

keeping, consulting, project assistance, e-mail and voice mail service, market research, and travel arrangements.

Humphries and her colleagues are administrative assistants, planners, coaches and secretaries, filling the needs of clients from all across the continent.



Virtual assistant Paula Humphries does research, editing and proofreading for clients across North America, all from the comfort of her Kelowna home. Photo Gordon Bazzana

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"This sort of thing has been happening for a while now, but there just wasn't a label for it before," adds Humphries. "Virtual assistant sums it all up."

Most of Jamison's clients are personal coaches, those who help other people reach their personal and professional goals. But Humphries says the services offered by Jamison's firm can apply to many other professions such as law, real estate or consulting, any company that would ordinarily require the services of an administrative assistant or secretary.

Humphries has done work for clients from Maryland to Chicago to Georgia and as close as Vancouver.

For clients, the benefits of using a virtual assistant include the freedom from some of the hassles and financial burdens which often go along with being a boss. A solo entrepreneur can retain their privacy, eliminate payroll taxes, workers' compensation, insurance and other benefits. VAs don't take up office space and are only paid for the time they actually work. And unless there's a binding contract, VAs can be dismissed at any time.

Lisa Martin, a Vancouver-based coach of working women, is one of Jamison's clients who is sold on the concept of virtual assistants.

"It's particularly good for self-employed people who want to take work off their desk," says Martin.

"It frees you up to grow your business and do what you really love.

"If you're not good with the administrative side of running your business, then virtual assistants are perfect."

Other than having the proper equipment, Humphries says a VA should have the ability to work independently, as well as having self-discipline and above all, good communications skills.

"In a virtual world you need to build up that trust, respect and confidence," says the graduate of the British Columbia Institute of Technology's administration management program. "You need to be able to work on the administration side, be a secretary and a partner all at the same time."

While she hasn't yet met her boss or any of her clients face-to-face, Humphries says relationships continue to grow and develop over time, another satisfying aspect of her new job.

And what Humphries enjoys as much as the job itself is the ability to do work out of her home where she can spend more time with her three young children.

"I do a lot of my work in the evening and I don't have to worry about daycare for my kids. It's a real feeling of independence."

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