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Hard to Find Good Help? Virtual Assistants Might Work

No, we're not talking housecleaning robots. They're real-live administrative assistants, temps, creatives -- they're just a thousand or so miles away.

By Robert Chappell

Outsourcing can be a bit of sore spot, to say the least. It's a hot topic of conversation among politicians and business leaders, as big companies boost their bottom line by hiring third-party suppliers to do anything from assembly line work to accounting to radiology.

The key word there is "big companies." Small companies need to outsource sometimes, too, for the most basic things. A solo consultant with an office in his basement might need someone to answer the phone, but doesn't really relish the idea of sharing his home with an employee -- and probably can't afford an extra desk, anyway. A touring motivational speaker might need an accountant, but doesn't have an office for herself, much less a staff.

Enter Lodi-based Team Double Click. The company -- run, appropriately enough, out of the home of Jim and Gayle Buske -- calls itself a "virtual staffing agency," and Gayle Buske says if there's another company like it in the world, she hasn't heard of it. There are a few that come awfully close, though, usually in the form of freelance job bulletin boards and the like.

"It was partly luck and partly we seized a good opportunity," she says of the company's genesis. The couple ran a trucking company, and in 2000, Gayle decided to augment their income with a little freelance graphic design work. Under the name Gayle Buske Graphic Design Studio, she placed an ad for writers to help with a couple of projects. "We thought we'd get 5 or 6 responses and it would be fine," she says. "But we got 400 or 500. So we sat back and said, 'What do we do with all these people? They need work.'"

The Buskes sold the trucking business in 2003 and launched Team Double Click with a few hundred freelancers in its database. It was the number of "virtuals" or "admins," as

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Buske calls them, that made the first few sales, and what often makes the sale today, as well. Whereas someone looking for part-time help would spend hours (and dollars) advertising, reviewing applications and interviewing, TDC has literally hundreds of people ready, willing, and able to work. "We approach clients with volume. We've got more than a handful of people to choose from," Buske says. She also stresses that TDC removes a lot of risk, since hired help is usually an unknown quantity. "Our admins are screened very, very well. When they get somebody, they've been through an eight- or nine-step interview process. What the client is getting is quality."



Buske says she has about 100 active clients scattered all over the nation. (When asked for purposes of this story whether any clients were in Madison or even in Wisconsin, the closest she could think of was a businessman in Texas who used to live in Michigan.) She adds that most of the company's income is from repeat or ongoing business.



Most of the 1,500 virtuals on TDC's list do administrative work, like Lois McDaniel of Merrimac. McDaniel has what amounts to a full-time job on TDC's payroll, working as the executive assistant for Maryland-based real estate investor Minh Pham. "A little bit of everything," she says of her duties, which include answering phones (all of Pham's phone numbers except his cellular are forwarded to her home), monitor emails, and coordinate title paperwork with attorneys. "When he's in between meetings he can call and ask, 'Who needs me first?' "It's just as if I was in his office. I have all of his files electronically. Everything's as if I were face to face with him, but I have the luxury of working in my home."

Working from home is something McDaniel has wanted to do for years, she says. "When we built our house, we built an office," she says. She had been working as a freight forwarder for a shipping company, and started to do that on an independent basis two years ago. For that job, she had five phone lines installed at her home office. But offshore outsourcing in manufacturing has caused the shipping business to dwindle in recent years, so she sought out other sources of income, and stumbled across Team Double Click.

Buske says the \$25 to \$35 hourly rate TDC charges is slightly higher than a small company would pay an employee, but, she says, "they don't have to go out and buy a desk and computer for the person to work at. They don't have to have someone traipsing through their house. Flexibility is a big one. Some of our admins will work evenings and weekends and not mind it." In addition, they don't have to pay for additional insurance, FICA, or holiday or sick pay.

Buske says TDC's freelancers -- none of the 1,500 are officially TDC employees -- include people with full-time jobs who'd like a little extra income as well as stay-at-home moms looking to contribute to the family's finances. TDC pays \$13 to \$25 per hour, depending on the type of job and the skill level involved. And the types of job vary widely -- TDC freelancers include writers, graphic designers, lawyers, paralegals, computer programmers, even medical doctors.

Buske, perhaps stating the obvious, credits Internet technology for much of TDC's success. McDaniel says many of Pham's colleagues -- lawyers, real estate investors, and the like -- find the arrangement quite intriguing. "They're all quite taken with the idea," she says. "When they hear I'm virtual, they're just amazed. They've never heard of such a thing. And this is Washington, DC, Baltimore. [Pham] freely tells them [I'm virtual]. It's not something he hides."

She says she's had more than one ask her to work for them, too, and she freely gives out the TDC phone number. "I'm easily cloned through Team Double Click," she says.

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Virtual staffing as a sector of the economy is clearly new, but is big enough that it has its own (small) trade group, the International Virtual Staffing Association. And while it hasn't had the same kind of impact on the American jobs picture as overseas manufacturing, Buske says she knows of a handful of people who laid off their "bricks-and-mortar" part-time help in favor of TDC admins.

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