

The virtual reality of getting good help

GRANT BUCKLER

Special to The Globe and Mail

Carl Whittier would find it hard to run his business without Janice Byer. She answers the phone for Whittier's Caledon East, Ont.-based business, Whittier Canada Enterprise Inc., which sells snow-making equipment to ski resorts. She types letters, prepares invoices and purchase orders, goes through Mr. Whittier's e-mail for him and deals with the company's accountants.

Ms. Byer doesn't sit at a desk in the room next to Mr. Whittier, though. On the rare occasions when he needs to see her face to face -- to give her a paper document, say -- one of them must make the 10-minute drive between Mr. Whittier's home office and Ms. Byer's.

Nor is Ms. Byer a full-time employee of Whittier Inc. She runs her own Caledon business: Docu-Type Administrative & Web Design Services. She works for more than 30 employers all over North America, some on a regular basis like Mr. Whittier, others on occasional projects.

She has worked for Mr. Whittier for years, and as his business grew, so did her assignments.

Ms. Byer is a virtual assistant, one of hundreds of Canadians doing a job that has become increasingly common in the past half-dozen years, thanks largely to the communication capabilities of the Internet. For small business operators like Carl Whittier, the boom in virtual assistants means help with everything from typing and receptionist duties to accounting; website design and marketing is available as needed, without having to hire a full-time employee the business may not need.

Some of the jobs that virtual assistants do have been farmed out to independent part-timers for years. Home-based typing businesses are nothing new, for instance, and some of today's virtual assistants started off as home-based secretaries. For some virtual assistants, word processing is still a large part of the work day. But the term "virtual assistant" -- which started appearing at the end of the 1990s -- isn't just a fancy new name for the same thing.

High-speed computer-to-computer communication makes distance less important, allowing virtual assistants to tackle tasks they could not have done before and eliminating the need to be close to their employers.

"Now with technology you can have clients all over the world," says Elayne Whitfield, who runs Executive Assistance Business Solutions Inc. from her home in Barrie, Ont. "I can go into my client's computer [via an Internet connection] and do work on their computer, on their database."

Among Ms. Whitfield's current assignments is keeping track of inventory for a couple of funeral homes in Japan. Ms. Byer says she has no customers that far afield, but does work for companies across Canada and the United States.

Some virtual assistants are generalists; some are specialists. Tawnya Sutherland, who runs Mediamage Business Solutions from her home in Port Coquitlam, B.C., says she didn't even know there was such a thing as a virtual assistant when she started doing secretarial work from home in 1998, but her business has evolved into a focus on Internet marketing, helping customers improve their websites and other on-line marketing efforts.

If they can't do everything themselves, virtual assistants will often subcontract work to other VAs with the required expertise, Ms. Byer says.

One of Ms. Whitfield's clients is John Cameron, president and chief executive of SuiteWorks Inc. in Barrie, Ont.

It's natural that Mr. Cameron would employ a virtual assistant, because SuiteWorks is about remote work. The company operates a facility in Barrie where employees of Toronto-based companies can work without travelling into the city, and plans to add similar facilities in a ring around the city.

With access to Ms. Whitfield's network, "You gain access to a much broader level of expertise," Mr. Cameron says. "I may not even know who does the work, but at the end of the day, what I get back is very high quality."

Mr. Cameron says working with remote assistants doesn't create any problems for him, thanks to technology. SuiteWorks has only 10 full-time employees, but uses contractors extensively, he says.

Mr. Whittier, who employs two full-time workers in Ontario and one in Nova Scotia, as well as relying on contractors for equipment installations across the country, plans to open an office in British Columbia soon. He sees a possibility his business could grow to the point where Ms. Byer can no longer do everything he needs and also work for other clients.

"At present I wouldn't even want to think about that," he says. "It would take a lot for me to get away from Janice, because she is so great."

Of course there's no guarantee every relationship with a virtual assistant will turn out as well.

Choosing a virtual assistant is much like hiring an employee and businesses need to approach it as carefully. Besides obvious steps such as checking references, there are credentials. The Professional Virtual Assistant (PVA) and Master Virtual Assistant (MVA) certifications are based on independent review of assistants' work experience and are backed by the International Association of Virtual Office Assistants and Web-hosting provider A Virtual Solution, both of Red Oak, Okla., and Virtual Assistance U, a Corpus Christi, Tex.-based training group. The CVAC recently introduced a similar designation, the Certified Canadian Virtual Assistant designation.

For small business operators, Mr. Cameron says, the beauty of virtual assistants is the ability to contract and pay for as much work as you need. "The overhead of bringing in your own support for this type of work is quite significant," he says. Relying on virtual assistants for as much work as you need, Mr. Whittier says, is "a great way to grow your business."