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Virtual assistants enjoy work, comforts of home

Staff

Workers need to constantly update their job skills

By **ERIK SCHWARTZ**

Courier-Post Staff DEPTFORD

Jackie Eastwick's job varies from legal secretary to nonprofit administrator to Web site designer.

And she never has to leave her house.

Eastwick is a virtual assistant, one of a growing number of home-based workers providing a wide range of office services, or what colleague Tammie Williams calls "outsourced administrative rescue."

"If you want to keep doing this, you constantly have to update your skills," Eastwick, 42, said recently in her basement cubicle.

That's how the self-trained Deptford resident explains her progression from medical transcription and typing college students' papers to running the Web site of a Hawaii-based life coach who counsels people on the Internet.

"It went from being more of a profession to being a way of working," said Eastwick, who left insurance underwriting to start her business in 1999, a year after her daughter was born.

About 4.2 million people said they usually worked at home in 2000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, including some 107,000 in New Jersey.

Home-based workers make up a small fraction of the overall work force, but the census data released Wednesday shows that, between 1990 and 2000, the number of virtual assistants and others in administrative support at home grew four times faster than the number of people in similar jobs away from home.

"The work sort of follows people anywhere," said Gil Gordon, a telecommuting consultant to employers who works out of his home in Monmouth Junction, Middlesex County. "The office is rapidly becoming one of a growing list of locations where office workers do their jobs."

He said this is especially true in New Jersey, where census data show the proportion of home-based workers employed by private firms (43 percent) beats the national rate (35 percent). In the state and nationally, the majority of home-based workers are self-employed.

"In New Jersey you have a fairly well-developed technological infrastructure so we're very fortunate," Gordon said. "And we're also very ripe for telecommuting because of our population density, transportation problems and concentration of large employers."

Williams left a large employer to start her home-based business in 1996. A legal secretary for a Philadelphia law firm, she sought "freedom from filing and phones."

Williams, 37, of Camden, found it, but not without struggles.

First, she became active in the South Jersey Chamber of Commerce.

"People do business with people they know, and people do business with people they're comfortable with," Williams said.

She developed a client list that included aspiring authors, students, small businesses and nonprofit groups. She offered services such as writing and editing, desktop publishing and computer training.

By 2002, she took a full-time office job with accounting giant Ernst & Young in Center City.

She works at Ernst & Young from 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., with "flex time" to continue at home as a virtual assistant.

Eastwick, too, said she liked her work, especially after she raised her hourly rate from \$25 to \$35 in 2002. The hike helped her reduce her workload from more than 30 hours a week to about 20.

"To me it's more important that my life goes stress-free and steady, so I increased my rates rather than take on more work and stay at the lower end of the pay scale," she said.

About 53 percent of home-based workers in New Jersey earned less than \$30,000 in 2000, census data show. The rate was 45 percent for people who worked outside the home.

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