



A NATIONAL NETWORK  
OF LEADING METROPOLITAN AREAS



## Philadelphia Inquirer, The (PA)

February 19, 2002

**Section:** PHILADELPHIA

**Edition:** CITY-D

**Page:** B01

### Cyber-secretaries find niche online

From home, administrative assistants pull in work. Their ranks have swelled as companies have cut back.<

*Zlati Meyer INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF*

Jackie Eastwick's bosses have never seen her.

And probably never will.

That's because the people she works for are dozens, if not thousands, of miles away.

The 40-year-old Deptford resident is a **virtual assistant** who works from her home, juggling assignments from companies as far away as Australia and Lebanon. Most communication is done via phone or e-mail from the 200-square-foot office she has carved out of her basement.

The number of these cyber-secretaries has exploded, fueled by a tight economy that has forced businesses to cut costs. It's much cheaper to have a secretary work on an as-needed basis (no salary, paid vacations or benefits) from home (no need for extra office space or additional, pricey machines).

The International Virtual Assistants Association reports a 500 percent increase in membership over the last two years, from 60 to more than 300. In fact, the organization will host its first annual convention this October in Las Vegas. And Staffcentrix.com, a Web clearinghouse for the industry, boasts 1,434 members, up from the 30 at its founding four years ago.

Like traditional assistants, the majority are female. Organizing one's own schedules and working from home are particularly alluring to many. Some get paid as much as \$75 per hour. And advancements such as cell phones, personal digital assistants and e-mail, have enabled this sector of the administration industry to flourish.

"I was doing a flyer for a friend who was a cell phone saleswoman and thought if I could do it for her, I could charge other people for it," said Eastwick, who launched her business in April 1999 after working as an insurance underwriter for years.

With months of computer classes, a self-admitted addiction to the latest software, two computers, two printers, two transcription machines, a digital camera, separate phone and fax lines and two modems (a cable one and a backup), Eastwick established the world headquarters of Allison Lane Business Solutions, named for her 3-year-old daughter.

Eastwick promotes her one-woman operation by ensuring top-notch placement in search engines and showcasing a well-organized, informative Web site. She estimated she spent \$2,000 to launch her business and \$7,000 last year to make sure her name was out there. She charges \$25 per hour; sometimes, the clock starts ticking at 5 a.m.

And those rates appeal to post-boom firms, according to Munir Mandviwalla, executive director of Temple University's eBusiness Institute. "The downturn in the economy has forced many companies to find ways in which information technology can be used to reduce costs, which leads into this," Mandviwalla said.

In many cases, though, what makes virtual assistants' fees so palatable to companies is the

omission of benefits. Eastwick, for example, said bye-bye to her retirement fund. And she said she is making only slightly more than her old \$30,000 annual salary.

For Teri Johnson, the sole proprietor of SonShine Office Solutions in Perkasio, the freedom to be her own boss made her abandon the regular workforce.

"I got tired of the corporate B.S.," said Johnson, 40, who first handled the swimming pool plumbing business of her husband, Homer. "I was doing this at home. I already had the resources, the technology and the ability. . . . I enjoy working at home, the flexibility for the kids."

In November, Johnson, mother to Chaz, 15, and Josh, 9, quit her bookkeeping and marketing job at a 23-doctor practice in Doylestown to focus on the business she had founded four months earlier. She networks at local Chamber of Commerce events and responds to e-job postings and newspaper want-ads. (She answers the latter by explaining she would do the work from her home.)

But necessity is what drove Northeast Philadelphia's Linda DiCamillo to start Just Your Type Service - she had been laid off from her job as a supervisor at a telemarketing call center. The 39-year-old specializes in transcription services, for which she charges \$30 an hour, for six to seven pages; her clients include Temple University Hospital's Heart Center, Aon Consulting and PricewaterhouseCoopers.

And like Johnson, she takes advantage of the flexible hours.

"When it's needed, I'm online sending transcripts at 1, 2 in the morning, because they said they need it by 3 p.m. the next day," DiCamillo said. "I'm strictly not '9-to-5 period.' I'll throw dinner on the table for my husband and daughter and go back up and continue. I don't want anyone to say, 'Don't go to Linda, because she misses deadlines.' "

That sense of responsibility is key. Kristin Taliaferro, a Dallas-based life and career coach, hired Eastwick a year ago, after interviewing about 20 people. She has her never-seen secretary maintain her Web site, proof read newsletters, communicate with clients, do research, and help develop an e-course.

"I think [virtual assistants] are higher caliber," said Taliaferro, who used to have an in-the-flesh assistant. "They're really driven if they want to work from home. The other advantage is they're paid by the hour, so you don't get locked into a monthly or annual salary.

"Another advantage is, because they work from home, they're very, very organized. They have more of an edge; people who work for you [at an office] can get a bit lazy."

Zlati Meyer's e-mail address is [zmeyer@phillynews.com](mailto:zmeyer@phillynews.com).

#### **Illustration:PHOTO**

HINDA SCHUMAN / Inquirer Suburban Staff

Teri Johnson works from her home in Perkasio. "I already had the resources, the technology and the ability. . . . I enjoy working at home, the flexibility for the kids." But this day was a bad-computer day.

SHARON GEKOSKI / Inquirer Suburban Staff

Jackie Eastwick, with daughter Allison Lane Eastwick, 3, for whom she named her virtual-secretary firm. She deals with her "bosses" via phone or e-mail.