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MINDING YOUR BUSINESS

Technology links virtual businesses

Advances spur rise in collaborative work

By Ann Meyer
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Schaumburg-based Insight Design Solutions is a one-woman design boutique. Or is it?

Owner Anastasia Athans-Stothoff has no full-time employees but relies on as many as 35 independent contractors each year to help create catalogs, annual reports, corporate logos and product labels.

Like Athans-Stothoff herself, the vast majority of those she hires are sole proprietors who operate their companies via computer. And they frequently tag-team a job, with each contributing a special talent, such as copywriting, editing or photography.

"Everything is done virtually," she said, noting that several contractors are located in foreign countries. "It has really brought the world together. It's so easy."

As contracting out work has become the norm for many companies looking to cut costs and gain efficiencies, the number of virtual businesses cropping up to fill those needs is climbing dramatically, experts say.

But behind the trend is more than the economics of outsourcing. Virtual businesses are heavily dependent on technology, from the Internet to business software, which is making it easier to communicate, trade files and stay organized from a distance. Thanks to the new technology, virtual professionals also are collaborating on jobs to provide a wider range of services to their clients.

"We've developed a great network. When we have a need outside our skill set, we call on our network of highly trusted virtual assistants," said Sue Kramer, director of marketing for the International Virtual Assistants Association and president of Peace of Mind Virtual Assistance in Clarendon Hills.

Christine Durst, who founded the association in the late 1990s, estimates about 1.5 million virtual businesses exist worldwide, including 35,000 entrepreneurs who call themselves virtual assistants. Most work out of their homes, said Durst, who's also co-founder of Staffcentrix, a Woodstock, Conn.-based firm providing training and development to virtual professionals.

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The number of virtual assistants, those entrepreneurs who provide business support and services remotely, has been climbing about 10 percent a year, Durst said. They generally include administrative assistants, graphic artists, researchers, software programmers, editors, bookkeepers, marketing consultants and more.

Virtual professionals can be less expensive than full-time, on-site employees because clients pay by the hour and don't cover benefits or provide office space, Kramer said. The going rate for virtual assistants ranges from \$30 to \$70 an hour, though fees vary by skill, experience and location, she said.

But virtual companies outside the realm of business services also are cropping up. The rise of the Internet as a way to connect people and provide information spurred the launch of Bella Pictures, a virtual wedding photography business founded in 2002 in San Francisco. The company has 200 photographers located throughout the nation, including 30 in the Chicago area, said Tom Kramer, president and co-founder.

Last year, the company handled 1,300 weddings, up from 500 in 2004. And this year, it will likely do 2,000 weddings, Tom Kramer said, with most costing between \$1,500 to \$4,500, including an album.

Besides the actual picture-taking, much of the business is handled remotely. In fact, while the company has 40 sales consultants throughout the country, a growing number of brides are forgoing in-person meetings and opting to sign up online or after a phone call, Kramer said.

"Brides and grooms are busy. They want to just check it off the list," he said.

The company is a dream come true for photographers like David Maki of Chicago, who enjoys documenting weddings through photos but is glad not to have to hunt for brides.

"All I have to do is worry about the photography," he said.

Brides find Bella online through search engines or after being referred by a friend who used the company, Kramer said.

Bella relies on Salesforce.com software to stay organized across its virtual network, tracking sales and customer contacts online, Kramer said.

"As a small company, we couldn't afford to spend millions of dollars on IT infrastructure," he said, but the program allows him to log in and check on consultants' meetings taking place throughout the nation.

Without the Internet to connect the dots, the company wouldn't exist, Kramer said.

Technology also is linking other virtual professionals, who rely on one another to round out their offerings or jump in during busy periods. Designer Athans-Stothoff works overseas with Carolyn Moncel, president of Motiontemps LLC in Paris. The two make the most of the seven-hour time difference.

"I can send her some editing at night and it's waiting for me in my inbox the next morning," Athans-Stothoff said. "It's like someone is working around the clock."

Technology makes it all easier. Moncel and Athans-Stothoff use the same IT expert, Jennifer Speaker, president of CompUCoach in Elmhurst, who taught them how to access computer files remotely. Even when traveling, Athans-Stothoff said, "I can virtually access my own desktop as if I was sitting right in front of it, then send a PDF back to my client if needed. It's an amazing innovation."

Though CompUCoach makes house calls, Speaker said fully half her business is virtual, in which she

solves a client's IT problem remotely from her office, saving time and transportation costs.

"If I can get you online while I have you on the phone, I can go in and fix" many problems using software that remotely accesses the computer's desktop, she said.

Virtual professionals also can benefit from online backup software such as XDrive.com and IDrive.com, said Cathy Mallers, who launched The Office Grapevine last year. Many virtual business teams uses file-sharing software such as that found at GrooveNetworks (www.groove.net), which alerts all parties on a project when changes to a file are made.

Thanks to the technology, virtual professionals are expanding the scope of their businesses, Mallers said, noting: "We help each other out."

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