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A real demand for virtual assistants

Numbers are growing and so is the need.

More people leveraging their business skills to market to companies.

By **Laura Raines**
For the AJC

Twelve years ago, the field of virtual assisting hardly existed. "Today, the industry is growing by leaps and bounds, and in the next 10 years I think we'll see a huge explosion in these services," said Cindy Opong, owner of Creative Assistants in Colorado Springs, Colo., and president of the International Virtual Assistants Association.

The field is growing on both sides of the supply and demand equation.

"More people are leveraging their administrative, creative, technology or financial skills to start their own virtual assistant businesses, and more large and small companies are in need of their services," Opong said.

She's seen her association's membership and jobs board increase in the past several years.

Virtual assistants perform administrative duties and other



Jonathan Bill owns Sound Business Services Inc. in Austell. He provides accounting and other services to a variety of clients. "I let them focus on what they do best by doing what I do best." *Leita Cowart Special*

tasks from home on a contractual basis for business clients. They command roughly \$20 to \$75 an hour, depending on geographic location, personal circumstance and skills.

"A company can hire multiple virtual assistants to do different types of tasks, like office management, Web site design or accounting," Opong said.

For streamlined companies, the arrangement provides considerable cost savings. A virtual assistant is not an on-site employee, so employers aren't pay-

ing for a salary, benefits, office space or equipment, said Jonathan Bill, virtual assistant and owner of Sound Business Services Inc. in Austell.

"They only pay an hourly rate for the tasks performed," he said.

Bill took his accounting expertise and other skills virtual in 2006 when he saw a good market in helping small businesses that couldn't afford a full-time accountant. He provides accounting, payroll, desktop publishing, technology troubleshooting and other services to a variety of cli-

ents. He's also a QuickBooks Pro-Adviser. Bill uses a computer service that allows him to work remotely on his clients' computers, or he uses his own computer and faxes or e-mails the results.

"It takes a lot of stress off small-business owners to have someone else taking care of their books. I let them focus on what they do best by doing what I do best," he said. "I love helping them grow their businesses and establish a more professional image."

Virtual assisting is a relatively inexpensive small business to start. All one needs is a computer, Internet service, office equipment, some marketable skills — and an entrepreneurial spirit.

"If you're the type who likes the stability of a paycheck and 8-to-5 job, this isn't for you," Bill said. "You have to find clients and keep them. Every client is different, so you have to be flexible and have the character and perseverance to accomplish what he or she needs done. The juggling can be hard, but if you work hard, you could make more money in the long run."

Having worked with her colleagues virtually at Earthlink for eight years, becoming a virtual assistant wasn't a big jump for

Virtual continued on G2

A reading list to build your work life skills



Amy Lindgren
Working Strategies

For job seekers and career changers putting together reading lists, the choices are endless.

I'm devoting the next two columns to books that have come across my desk recently. This week I'll focus on guides to building skills in your work life; next week we'll look at books to help in your job search.

● "Being Strategic: Plan for Success, Out-Think Your Competitors, Stay Ahead of Change," by Erika Andersen, St. Martin's Press, 2009, \$24.95. She outlines a step-by-step approach to developing a strategic mindset for workplace issues.

Recommendation: A

Growing demand for skills

Virtual

continued from G1

Lindsey Schocke, owner of Geeks on Tap in Acworth. She offers newsletter writing, e-mail organization, search-engine optimization and technology support to small business owners, many of whom are business coaches.

"Clients soon realize that

good book to pass around your workplace to get conversation started about problem-solving.

● "Strategic Project Management Made Simple," by Terry Schmidt, Wiley, 2009, \$29.95. Here's another look at strategy, within the framework of project management.

Schmidt outlines painstakingly precise steps for breaking apart a problem, identifying desired outcomes and accounting for assumptions and variables.

Recommendation: Use this book to learn the fundamentals of project management.

● "The Art of Organizing Anything," by Rosalie Maggio, McGraw-Hill, 2009, \$16.95. The book starts with an overview section to discuss concepts and "secrets" of organization. The second section covers methods for dealing with people and time. The final section provides specifics for organizing one's work life, home life, computer and papers.

a VA can do the job quicker than hiring and training a temporary employee," Schocke said. "I never know what I'll be asked to do next. The smaller the business, the more likely they'll need help with multiple tasks. When you complete a project that has been bothering a client for weeks, there's always a virtual smile."

Before starting her Philadelphia-based business, Virtual Business Acceleration LLC, in April, Shari Graham took the 20-week certification with AssistU, a virtual training institution for virtual assistants. She had taken early retirement as a project manager with Verizon when it cut her division.

Recommendation: If disorganization is clouding your thinking, this book would be a good start.

● "Who's Got Your Back," by Keith Ferrazzi, Broadway Books, 2009, \$25. Ferrazzi turns his attention to our relationships with the people around us.

Noting surveys that show many Americans don't have anyone to confide in, the author tackles how to create and nurture such relationships. His thesis? That we become better managers and workers if we go beyond mere networking to actual trust-building and friendship.

Recommendation: Ferrazzi has something important to say about the power of connection.

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"I had such a strong skill set from my corporate work, but AssistU taught me how to start and run a micro-business," she said.

She's found that being a virtual assistant requires good communication, customer service, project management, networking and organization skills in addition to the skills she supplies to clients. She knows it will take time and hard work to build her business.

"But I love working with different clients, being able to partner with them to help their business," she said. "Having an opportunity to make a difference in someone's life is very satisfying. I'm so glad I found this industry."

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