

## **Virtual assistants look to raise real-world profile**

*By TYLER CHRISTENSEN of the Missoulian*

They have their own associations, training organizations, chambers of commerce - even their own international day of recognition.

Yet few understand what a virtual assistant is or does.

Lorri Morin, for one, is out to change that. Morin is a new virtual assistant in Missoula, and she is among the thousands of like-employed workers worldwide who are celebrating the second annual International Virtual Assistant's Day on Friday.

Virtual assistants, or VAs, make up a relatively new and rapidly growing field, Morin said. They are essentially contractors who use the latest in communication technology to assist executives, small-business owners and other entrepreneurs - wherever they might be.

While it's hard to peg the exact number of virtual assistants (estimates range from 5,000 to 20,000), there is little doubt the field has grown since it was created 11 years ago. Stacy Brice, founder and president of the first formal training organization for virtual assistants, said her group has trained nearly 1,000 VAs and currently counts 600 active members.

"We're growing by about 30 percent a year," Brice said via telephone from Maryland, where AssistU is based.

Virtual assisting is now an international industry, with VAs working not just in the United States, but also in Australia, Canada, England and India, said Sharon Williams, chairwoman of the Alliance for Virtual Businesses and president of 24-Hour Secretary.

"It's a worldwide phenomenon," she said. "It's the wave of the future."

The occupation got its start in the mid-'90s, when Internet advances made it possible for many business owners and managers to run their ventures remotely. At the same time, Williams added, a lot of companies were downsizing, and many administrative assistants feared for their jobs. They began looking for ways to put their skills to use while going into business for themselves.

The field came together slowly at first and then surged in 2000, aided partly by new technology that made cross-country communication easier than ever and by an increasing focus on work/life balance, Williams said. The majority of virtual assistants, she continued, are skilled women who want to work - but who don't want to sacrifice their family lives to do so.

“I think a large number of us are mothers who wanted to be able to spend more time with children, who wanted more flexibility with our time,” said Missoula's Morin, who worked as an administrative and executive assistant in various capacities for more than 20 years before deciding to strike out on her own with Virtual Synergy in early 2005.

“I got to the point where I wanted to be more available to my family, and have more balance myself,” she explained.

While some virtual assistants go into business with just their administrative knowledge, Morin received training and certification through one of AssistU's 20-week intensive programs. She graduated in May 2005, and has been growing her client list gradually in the months since.

“I'm selective about my clients and want to be sure I'm bringing in clients that would be long-term,” she said.

Her clients work in a variety of industries, from book publishing to financial advising.

“I don't work with just one niche,” she said. “I like working with a variety of executives and administrators in different fields.”

Certain people tend to be more likely to need a VA, Williams explained. A lot of small-business owners and entrepreneurs, for example, don't need a full-time assistant.

“Anyone who has a flexible business style themselves, they could easily see the benefits to using a VA,” she said.

Virtual assistants aren't always less costly than an in-office assistant, Morin said, but usually they are because employers don't have to provide benefits and other brick-and-mortar supplies.

Her clients, however, are more interested in convenience than in cost savings. They like the fact that Morin tries to be a one-stop shop for all her clients' needs. If they are looking for a Web designer or a bookkeeper, for instance, she can help them out with that.

“I have a great network of colleagues and contacts, and I'm always looking to meet new people who may become a resource,” she said.

Morin herself handles a number of tasks, from calendar-keeping to customer intake. She also acts as a sounding board for new ideas and delights in helping her clients focus their business strategy.

In fact, there's very little these days that can't be done virtually, she said.

“I've known somebody that actually put all their files in a box and shipped them to a virtual

assistant to be sorted into neat little folders and shipped back,” she said, “so the client could just pick up the whole box and drop it in a filing cabinet.”

However, virtual assisting requires near-constant training to keep up with the latest technological advancements, she added. To that end, there are a number of online communities that allow virtual assistants to trade information and stay connected. For the past few years, one of Morin's groups has even organized a virtual Christmas party.

Missoula's economy is expanding and more residents are starting or growing new businesses, Morin noted. She sees western Montana as a place that's ripe with opportunity for entrepreneurs like herself.

From what Williams has seen, she expects the number of virtual assistants worldwide to double within the next five years.

Right now, the most common question Brice hears is “What is a VA?”

“I genuinely believe,” she said, “that in the next five to 10 years that question will change to ‘Who is your VA?’ ”

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