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Q&A CINDY OPONG

VIRTUAL ASSISTANT PROVIDES REAL HELP

Home-based entrepreneur takes on tasks for clients

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Cindy Opong is a virtual assistant.

That doesn't mean she's a character scampering across

a computer screen in a virtual world. She's a real person working in the real world. But instead of being an in-office assistant, she works from home, keeping in touch with clients via e-mail and phone.

Opong operates her Creative Assistants from her home of-

fice on the east side of Colorado Springs, specializing in the high-tech sector. She started her business after being laid off from Hewlett-Packard several years ago. She's also president of the International Virtual Assistants Association; she assumed that role April 1.

Question: So what is a virtual assistant?

Answer: A virtual assistant is an administrative professional who works on a contract basis with businesses and has multiple clients and runs their



Opong

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OPONG: Appreciates flexibility of job

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own business. On a little bit broader level, we help make our clients' lives easier. We help to relieve them of a lot of the day-to-day things that get in the way of them getting out and getting more clients, more business themselves.

Q: What are some of the functions a virtual assistant might perform?

A: Anything that an executive assistant would do in the corporate world, from making travel arrangements to helping prepare presentations, doing documents, all of that. But also, on a more detailed level, doing book-keeping, graphic design, Web site design at times, more specialized projects.

Q: What is the advantage to a business of having a virtual assistant rather than one in the office?

A: You don't have to pay for office space, the equipment, payroll benefits, all that stuff. Also, we can work on an as-needed basis, so you don't necessarily have to pay someone 20 or 40 hours a week.

Q: How long have virtual assistants been around? Are they new, or is it just a new term?

A: It's debatable. We actually have a lot of members who have been doing this type of work for 20 or 30 years. They used to be called home-based secretarial services.

Q: What are the advantages to you of having a home business?

A: The flexibility, and being able to create your own schedule, is way up there. I'm not as good at being tied to a desk in an office from 9 to 5. I like to do a lot of my work after hours and on the weekends, and have the flexibility to go out and do errands.

Q: What are the disadvantages of being a virtual assistant and not being there in the office?

A: Sometimes there are communication breakdowns. You really have to be on top of that and be in constant contact with your clients to make sure you're understanding what they think. And I can't do their filing.

Q: What makes for a good

virtual assistant?

A: They definitely need to be organized and detail-oriented. They need to be committed not only to their business but to their clients and to doing whatever's necessary to get the job done. And the clients don't always tell you how to do it, so you have to figure it out on your own.

Q: What specific skills do they need?

A: They need to be well-versed and confident in Microsoft Office. A great command of the English language, written and spoken. And have a good phone voice.

Q: What advice do you have for someone who might decide they want to do this?

A: Realize it is a lot of hard work and it is starting your own business, and you have to treat it as such. A lot of people drop out after the first year because they don't realize how hard it is to get that client base started.

Questions and answers are edited for space and clarity. Call the writer at 636-0272.