

Virtually an assistant

It will probably come as something of a surprise to British bosses that many of their PAs harbour a secret desire to leave the company and work for themselves. And temping agencies will be equally amazed to learn just how much of their business these new self-employed secretaries intend to take.

"I have just had a City company call me, absolutely horrified to discover that all four of its top secretaries had applied to join us," reports **Bridget Postlethwaite** of the International Association of Virtual Assistants (IAVA), Britain's newest and biggest cooperative body for administrators. City companies should take heed of this news, as it reflects the world's latest big move in business administration.

A Virtual Assistant (VA) is a top-level secretary who has had enough of office regimes and sells her skills from her home office. She is the freelance gunslinger of the admin world, already taking administrative business in shovelfuls, mainly from small and medium-sized companies.

"Corporations haven't quite realised how much better off they are with a VA rather than a temp," says Postlethwaite. "The reason temps are notoriously ineffective is not because of personal skills, but because they are badly briefed and managed – the first two hours of any Monday morning are wasted in working out who she is going to work for, and how. Eight VAs will probably do the work of 20 temps, and I've had a client tell me that I did in two days what his entire pool took a week to do."

Big businesses have a tendency to envisage VAs as "home typists", without realising that they do not come from the typing pool. Most VAs have already risen to the top of the administrative profession – as smaller companies have realised. Says Postlethwaite: "They know that paying a VA by the hour gets them the kind of professional PA that corporations pay £30,000 for."

The rise of the VA is worldwide. Chris Durst in Connecticut has been credited with starting the industry.

"university" to prepare PAs for self-employment, and she brings her service here at Easter. In Australia, Kathie Thomas founded Clayton's Secretary, without knowing that other VAs existed, and now she, too, has British members.

The move is driven by PAs themselves. Last year, after two press articles in 48 hours, IAVA had 500 enquiries and 27,000 visitors to the website in one week. Today, it has 315 members, and 800 ask for advice on a casual basis. Chris Durst at Staffcentrix polled her members and discovered that 66% had been in business for less than a year, or were preparing to make the leap. There is, she concluded, a vast underswell of PAs on the move, building up part-time VA businesses as they prepare to leave the safety of the paycheque behind.

Everyday administrative work is at the heart of the industry, but the average VA can handle anything, from anywhere. Postlethwaite transfers stocks and shares, works for someone in prison who writes once a week with the jobs he wants done, handles website updates for an estate agent on a guaranteed 24-hour basis, and takes "virtual bookings" for two hairdressers, without the clients realising that she isn't their receptionist.

Internet research and website maintenance are becoming big earners, reports Chris Durst. "Software packages have made site-building simple, so web design is not getting the fees it used to, but keeping a site fresh is both critical and time-consuming, and our VAs indicate fees of more than \$US35 (about £20) an hour."

This is a fair average. The British VA rates average £15 an hour, rising to £25 in London. For the employer, this is economical, producing top-level staff without overheads – the manager just picks the VA with the right skills, and if she's the wrong one, he can change instantly.

Location is irrelevant. From a Channel Islands base, Postlethwaite can work for clients anywhere. **Kathie Thomas in Australia** gives a classic example. She heard an Amer-



in time zones, he can now send a day's work off around the world, and by the time he wakes in the morning, the transcriptions are back on his desk.

Stacey Brice of Assist-U says that 400 experienced secretaries have now passed through her extremely testing 20-week course. "Many think of us as a finishing school. The people we train are already great adminis-

but never again have to be in that position."

For the VA, the loneliness of self-employment rarely exists. The British IAVA has a group email in which a simple query, such as "How do I lock a cell in Excel?", will get an answer from someone immediately. More common is: "I've received a job in a format I can't read – will someone reformat it for me and send it