

Executive IT

Arm's-length army

They're just a click away and ready for work

In cyberspace there are workers to suit your needs, Jayahn Saward reports

CHRIS Durst recently had the kind of nightmare a first-time Internet entrepreneur hopes for.

Her business had grown so busy she had to start turning away clients. Durst is a "virtual assistant" — one of a growing breed who market a range of office and administrative services online.

Her clients are home-office people who cannot afford an employee, and small and larger businesses which, for several reasons, do not want to employ further support staff.

While she won't turn up in the client's office at 9am sharp, she is always on call and ready to reach across the globe as part of her regular assignments.

When Durst started her business in 1995 it seemed nobody had heard of such a thing.

"It was a strange concept, even among the very Net savvy," she says.

The Web site she created to advertise her services did not initially create a lot of interest. But early this year it was receiving 400 to 425 hits a day, enough to keep the work rolling in.

Now she is playing midwife: bringing more people into the industry to meet what she claims is an ever-increasing demand.

What Durst and others like her would like you to know is that in cyberspace there are people with the ability and willingness to carry out tasks on a fee-for-service basis.

A virtual assistant is accessible via mail, phone or fax.

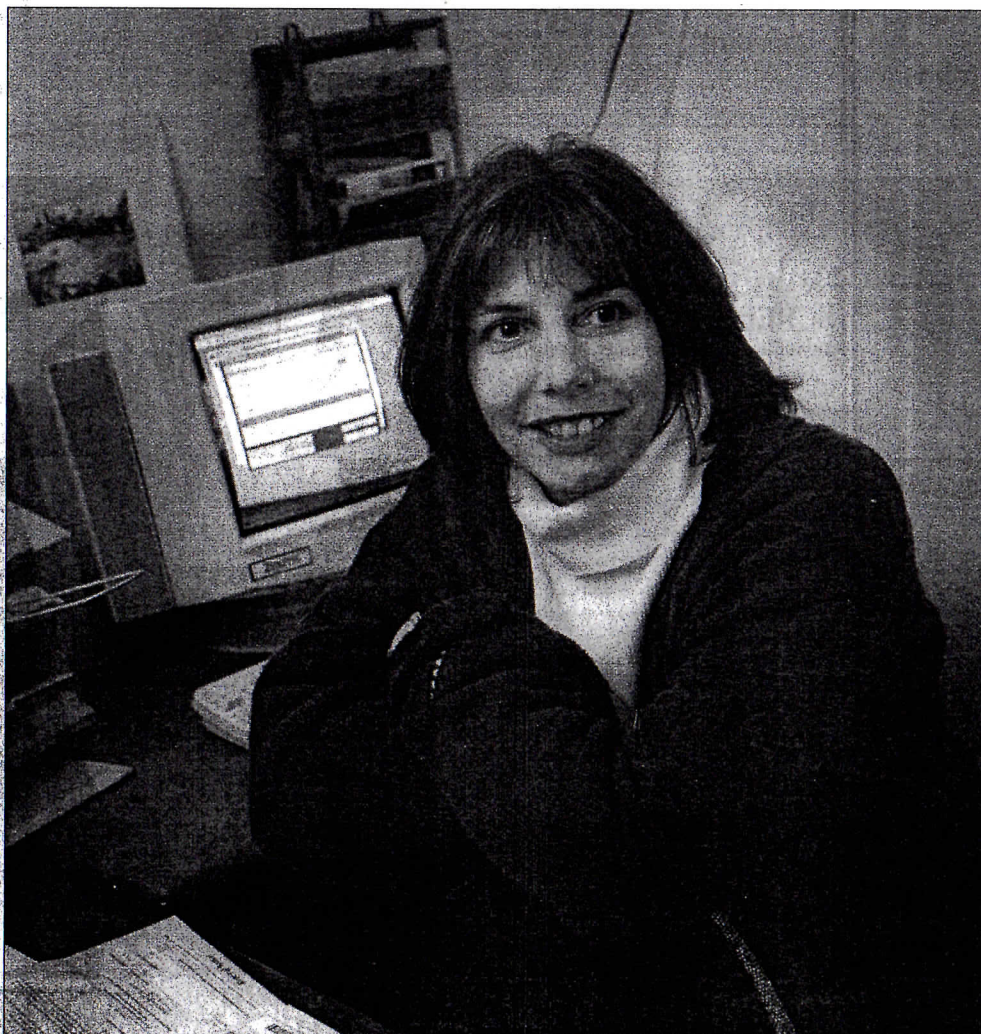
He or she is ready to undertake a range of tasks from event planning to searching for the best lap-top deal; from word processing to bookkeeping; from returning phone calls to finding an overnight replacement for your factory manager in New Delhi.

It does not really matter where you or the assistant are based.

Virtual assistance can be arranged from across the city or across the planet. Search the Web for a virtual assistant and you will come across some interesting characters.

Michael Worsley is a trouble-shooting management consultant who has pinned the VA (virtual assistant) tag on his extensive operations. Before the term became fashionable he was already doing it.

"I essentially have been operating in this regard for 20 or 30 years," he says. "I specialise in doing things I know nothing about in places I've never been to before."



that we need VAs." At that time Souter had never heard the term virtual assistant but once the lifestyle coach explained the job description, a green light went off in her head. The lifestyle coach, in fact, became Souter's first client.

Kathie Thomas has been marketing her secretarial services on the Internet for a couple of years but she began working out of her Melbourne home in 1994, and at that time was preparing a brochure to tell businesses about her new service.

"I hadn't settled on a name. As I prepared the brochure, I finished it with 'let me be the secretary you have when you haven't got a secretary'."

"A 'Clayton's Secretary' immediately came to mind and the name has been with me since."

Now Thomas works remotely for several organisations doing tenders, proposals, designing and maintaining databases and basically anything else a well-trusted personal assistant might be called upon to do.

She has clients she rarely sees face-to-face and one who she met only once.

"He faxes me, I e-mail him and he prints off in his office," Thomas says.

Her clients get the professional support they require without the add-on costs of hiring an employee.

It is far more advantageous for them to engage the services of someone who already has their own office, equipment and software.

Her clients tend to come by word of mouth or via her Yellow Pages listing but enquiries arising from her Web site are increasing.

Thomas relies heavily on the Internet in her day-to-day work. Clients use e-mail to instruct her in their business requirements and for passing work back and forth.

"I still use fax and telephone though, but not as much as I did around two years ago," she says.

Thomas has been so successful she is passing work on to other home-based secretaries.

She has set up The (Global) Internet Home-Based Secretaries Network which has members in six States of Australia and a few overseas.

A number of other such networks can be found on the Web, including Virtual Assistants for Hire (va4hire), which lists a few dozen VAs — most of them from the US.

Closely associated with va4hire is the

GADGET MAN GREG CALLAGHAN

Snappy photo system

AUSTRALIANS have been slow to catch on to Advanced Photo System cameras. Sales here have been slow, which is a pity, because they combine the best of digital technology with good old-fashioned film. Minolta's Vectis 2000, due out next month, is one of the sexiest and smartest APS cameras to date. It offers an advanced close framing guide and improved close-up capability. The cost is expected to be around \$499.

This phone for hire

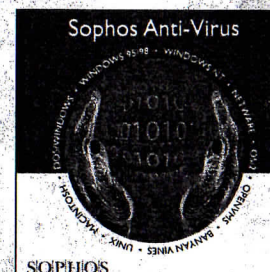


YOU have no doubt heard about Iridium phones — those go-anywhere-in-the-world mobiles that cost a bomb. The bad news is that they haven't come down in price; the good news is that you can now rent one. If you live in the outback, or a mountain retreat in Tasmania, or if you're a frequent flyer to parts of South-East Asia or South

America, you'll appreciate the convenience of a satellite phone.

Rental of the phone costs about \$25 a day. For further information ring (03) 9654 4880.

Experienced bug-catcher



VIRUS detectives are barely keeping up with some of the nasties infecting our network computers these days. Or so you would think from the number of anti-virus software