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Being a Virtual Assistant Offers Women Flexibility

Virtual Employees Save Money on Taxes, Supplies

By Tory Johnson

Today in Dallas we kicked off our Take Control tour where we're tackling the issues that matter most to women throughout the country.



(ABC News)

While at the Women's Museum, I was surrounded by hundreds of women who've taken control of their lives, and are now making every moment count in the ways that work best for them and their families. For many of them, it means working from home, or working with flexibility.

We met Margaret Hooshmand, an executive assistant at tech giant Cisco, who takes advantage of the company's **telepresence** technology that enables her to sit in Dallas while virtually seeing and supporting her boss in California, 1,600 miles away.

It wasn't just the availability of that sophisticated technology that enabled her to move her job to another state; most importantly, Hooshmand was seen by her boss as a solid, loyal performer, who the company didn't want to lose.

And, since flexible accommodations are rooted in mutual trust, it's essential to focus first on having and maintaining a positive relationship with your manager before asking for special requests.

A Growing Trend

Virtual assistants are a rapidly growing trend, driven by a few key factors: the desire of employees to maintain more control over their work styles, demand from businesses to lower costs and improve efficiencies, and the availability of technology that enables both sides to connect.

A virtual employee saves the company considerable costs: no need for office space, no payroll tax or benefits, and no equipment to maintain. And the job can be tailored to the exact needs of the boss. If a business only needs a few hours of administrative work each week that's what they pay for - saving the cost of a full time employee.

As a virtual assistant, you're doing much the same as an office-based admin: handling correspondence, travel arrangements, maintaining the calendar, billing/accounting, research, translation, transcription, paralegal, concierge services and more. You do this as an independent contractor or freelancer. Unlike an office employee, you set your hours, decide the services you want to provide, and choose your clients. Virtual assistants can reasonably charge between \$20 and \$45 an hour depending on the nature of the work, as well as level of expertise and the clients' needs and budget.

Training and support

While formal training and certification is not required to get hired as a virtual assistant, you're expected to be highly trained on your own and able to take quick direction to complete the tasks asked of you. If your skill level and experience isn't where it should be, consider taking courses at a local community college or online through several organizations, including **Virtual Assistance U** or **International Virtual Assistants Association**. You can also Google the term "virtual assistant" to discover other sources for training, support and leads on jobs and assignments. You can also hire a private coach who'll help you to establish your business. Check references and be sure you're clear on the expectations and deliverables before settling on

someone. Some training can be very costly, so be sure you shop around before deciding on one program over another.

Free technology. **Google Apps** offers an array of free applications and services that allows you share, edit and access files, calendars, voice and text messaging and more from anywhere in the world as long as you have an Internet connection. So you might be in Dallas while I'm in New York and we can edit and share files together through this system as if we were sitting in the same office. Google says 1,000 businesses a day are registering for these programs, so there is clearly strong demand for such applications. As an independent virtual assistant, the same technology is available here for you, too.

As a virtual assistant, you must maintain your own office set up, including a reliable computer with high-speed Internet, all of the latest software applications, phone, fax, etc. These are purchased and maintained at your cost.

Promoting your services. This is perhaps the hardest part of all: getting the word out about you and your services. Take advantage of every networking opportunity available: contact the Chamber of Commerce, attend job fairs to meet local businesses, join online or industry-specific business associations and more. Create a basic professional Web site touting the services you can provide and then send links to the site to everyone you know, asking them to share your availability. Post your services on Web sites that cater to freelance job listings like Craigslist, Guru.com, and others. Don't underestimate the need to develop a solid promotional campaign to market your services. It doesn't have to cost much money -- you can do it for under \$100 -- but nothing compensates for an investment of your time.

The beauty of working this way is that you aren't limited by geography. Every business can benefit from cost-effective support services, so it's up to you to find them and promote what you have to offer. Focus on forming long-term relationships with clients where you get to know their needs and their business instead of going after quick mini-assignments here and there. Your clients can include doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs, senior executives, and more. Once you have successful clients, be sure to use them as references to attract more business.

VIPdesk. For individuals looking to work full-time for one company, VIPdesk hires virtual assistants and concierges to work from home throughout the country to support its high-profile clients.

For example, Mercedes car owners have access to a VIPdesk concierge by pressing an in-car button or dialing a 24/7 number. They're connected to a VIPdesk concierge who helps them with answers to all types of questions, including finding a hotel that takes dogs while on a road trip, securing restaurant reservations in the nearest city, or finding an activity that would be appropriate for kids at the final destination.

For details on the qualifications and how to apply for such opportunities, visit [VIPdesk's Web site](#) directly.

Start your own concierge business. If that type of work sounds appealing to you, but you're unable to work for a third party, consider starting your own concierge business where you deliver services of convenience to clients. You might handle dry cleaning, plan a kids' birthday party or arrange pet care for travelers to support businesses where employees work long hours. This might be a doctor's office in your area or a company across the country. If you're a highly resourceful problem solver, this could be great for you.