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Virtual Assistants to the Rescue



Dearborn Heights Company provides employees who work online from home

By Gary Anglebrandt / Special to the Detroit News

DEARBORN HEIGHTS – More Metro Detroit companies are joining a national trend of hiring “virtual assistants” to help ease workloads.

And Nikita Allen hopes to capitalize on that.

Allen, 29, founded Simply Virtual LLC in 2000 in her Dearborn Heights home. Unlike most employment agencies, which send temps to work on-site for a specific project, Allen’s firm provides administrative assistants, bookkeeper, graphic designers and word processors who work online from home on a contract basis either on projects or ongoing tasks, like processing invoices.

“We can do anything an in-house assistant can do.”, Allen said.

Allen’s 19 clients are mostly small businesses such as real estate and consulting firms. In addition to Allen, Simply Virtual has two full time workers on contract and others are on call.

Allen said hiring virtual assistants over temporary workers helps her clients because she ensures the client is happy with the quality of work. “A temp just comes there to do a job. We’re concerned that the clients are satisfied, so they will come back to us.”, she said.

Still, many potential customers still can’t get past the idea of not actually seeing their workers on the job. “If you’re a control freak, we’re not for you.”, Allen said.

Allen was an executive administrative assistant for companies such as Ford Motor Co., Detroit Edison and Prudential Healthcare. After a layoff, using her severance pay, she began a career development consulting company in Atlanta in 1997. She later returned to Michigan and started Simply Virtual.

Simply Virtual’s net income tripled from 2001 to 2002, but remains less than \$50,000, Allen said.

To labor activists, the use of temporary workers is a way for

companies to avoid paying worker benefits. “Virtual assistance is in the same category.”, said John Revitte, professor of labor relations at Michigan State University.

“For some individuals, (virtual assistance) is a benefit, but on a societal basis, it’s a troubling trend.”, Revitte said. “If they’re paid enough, it doesn’t matter, but if not and health care costs are rising as they have been, then it’s just a reduction in wages.”

But Allen said virtual assistant jobs let people who need to be at home earn money. One Simply Virtual contractor for example, cannot drive because of an illness. Allen said



Photo by Bridget A. Barrett

“A temp just comes there to do a job. We’re concerned that the clients are satisfied, so they will come back to us.”, says Nikita Allen, founder of Simply Virtual.

she pays her contractors more than the hourly rate they would receive at comparable full-time jobs.

She plans to soon hire another full-time contractor and open an office outside her home--

Gary Anglebrandt is a Metro Detroit free-lance writer.

