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Virtual assistant: Your legal secretary, law clerk and support staff are only a phone call away...

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Everyday, Marion McDonald plies her trade as a legal secretary for Toronto lawyers, typing letters, processing billing, transcribing dictation and more. None of this is unusual for her job description — except for the fact she is doing this from her rural home in the Muskoka area, two hours' drive and a world apart from the hustle of the nation's largest metropolis.

McDonald is one of a growing group of business people calling themselves virtual assistants, or VAs. The new — but burgeoning — industry uses communications and computer technologies to bypass having an extra body in the law office. Now a number of lawyers around the country are finding the option a useful way to take care of time-demanding work, to free up their paralegals and their in-house secretaries for more valuable work.



Marion McDonald, principal of The Satellite Secretary, plies her trade from Muskoka.

McDonald started her business — The Satellite Secretary — in 2003, after nearly three decades as an in-house legal assistant. Five years on, she says the growth is only accelerating.

"There is a trend I see of lawyers leaving the big firms and going out on their own to the point of not necessarily working in an office but working from their home," she says "That's a trend that's good for me."

Small practice lawyers, says McDonald, don't have the income to justify hiring many staff. In fact, some have the notion they will do almost everything themselves. But VAs such as McDonald argue spending hours on paperwork takes time away from billable hours.

While hourly rates may actually be similar to or higher than some in-house traditional secretaries' (McDonald charges a base of \$30 per hour), VAs say the savings from not having to buy equipment, devote expensive office space or pay for holidays and sick leave can be in the tens of thousands of dollars per year.

One client who swears by the VA system is Toronto estate litigator Ian Hull, of Hull & Hull, LLP. The managing partner in a firm with 17 lawyers, Hull says he has used VAs — including McDonald — for about 10 years.

"I am constantly looking for opportunities to outsource," he says.

He and others interviewed for this story cited the best-selling book *The 4-Hour Work Week*, as a spur to embracing virtual assistants. The book's 29-year-old author Timothy Ferris explains how to free up

time and money with methods such as outsourcing work to cheaper overseas providers, such as those in India.

Lawyers like Hull, burdened with increasingly demanding clients, say using VAs has saved them time and money, and Hull says he encourages other partners in his firm to do the same. He disagrees, however, on going as far as India to find help.

In law, he says, it's important to maintain confidentiality and have complete trust in those working with often sensitive client information. As a result, Hull has tended to work with virtual assistants he previously had in house. Using someone sight unseen, or from east Asia, is not in the cards for his firm, he says.

Regardless of the threat from offshore outsourcing, virtual assistance is an industry that has taken off in Canada in the past decade.

So says Elayne Whitfield, who runs the Canadian Virtual Assistant Connection (CVAC). According to Whitfield, since 2000, her group has grown from zero to over 650 VA members. And that's not including those who haven't joined CVAC.

"A lot of people have been packaged out or retired early and started their own business," she says. "Plus many employers don't really have the budget for a full time administrative person or the facilities to house (one)."

CVAC serves as a way for VAs to network with one another, and find out about business ideas, but it is also a one-stop shop for lawyers or others in need of VA services.

A searchable database for example yielded 15 providers who included the word "legal" or "law" in their service description.

Lawyers, however, remain a small niche, according to Whitfield, who says career coaches and realtors are among the professionals who most commonly use remote assistant services. Some actually say lawyers have been downright slow to catch on.

Kate Kerans, who runs a VA business out of Calgary, spent years working as a paralegal in real estate conveyance — a niche she thought would attract scads of work in a booming property market such as Alberta's.

As it turned out though, she says, her customers have come from all profession but law. Some lawyers have trouble accepting her as an independent contractor, she says, while others found her wages high. But most of all perhaps, is a reluctance to embrace new technology. "It's actually a disadvantage for lawyers," she says. "One (legal) employer was of the mindset that accessing information over the Internet is insecure," she said.

Using the Internet is crucial to what VAs do. McDonald, for example, provides her clients with training in using a digital dictating machine, and sending her the compressed files to transcribe. In addition, she can set up her home computer to access billing and other programs on her client's servers.

But those that have made the transition, such as Hull, say there is no looking back. He says younger lawyers in their 20s and 30s, now entering practices, are likely adopters of VA services. "At some level," he said of virtual assistance, "it's a wave of the future,"