

TRI-CITY Life

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"Advancements such as cell phones, personal digital assistants and e-mail have enabled this sector of the administration industry to flourish."

Home work [virtually] the way to go

BY JUSTIN BEDDALL
THE TRI-CITY NEWS

Tawnya Sutherland wears whatever she wants to the office. Today, for instance, she's wearing a pair of cozy pajamas because she has a bit of cold. Most often, she just throws on a pair of blue jeans and a T-shirt.

Fortunately, she doesn't have to worry about bumping into her boss or even another co-worker when she's at the office.

"That's the advantage of working from home," explained the 39-year-old single mother of three who says she dons more traditional business attire when she meets her clients in person.

Sutherland is virtual assistant, or VA. What does a VA do? "Just about everything," Sutherland said.

Web site design, desktop publishing, research assistance, internet marketing, book-keeping, administration, e-mail and fax broadcasting, travel arrangements, event planning and typing are just some of the tasks she performs regularly.

"Every day is different and every day I'm learning something new," she said.

One night, for example, she received a phone call from a desperate client at 9:30 p.m. The caller needed a company logo designed for a press release that was going to



CRAIG HODGE/THE TRI-CITY NEWS

Tawnya Sutherland has found steady, fulfilling and flexible employment while working from her Coquitlam home as a virtual assistant to clients all over the world.

be sent out the next morning.

No problem, she said.

By around 11 p.m. that night, Sutherland — whose virtual office is equipped with a pair of computers, scanner, fax machine and dedicated phone lines — had created the logo and signed off with the customer.

Sutherland had worked as secretary (both legal and medical) for close to two decades when she decided to start her own business, MediaMage Business Solutions, in 1997. Now, she works from a solarium-style 300-square foot virtual office in her Coquitlam home, juggling assignments for companies from Florida to Ireland.

"Most of the communication is done by e-mail or telephone," said Sutherland, whose

web site (www.mediamage.com) offers a VA forum where virtual assistants can share their expertise and experiences ("Transcription tips, tricks and questions," is one topic recently discussed, for instance).

Sutherland said the global economy's current malaise has increased employment opportunities for "cyber-secretaries" because businesses are trying to reduce their bottom line.

"For the business owner it is still cheaper to pay \$75 per hour than to hire an employee and pay them the benefits," she said. "Remember, with a VA, you only pay for time on a task. Your employee's eight-hour day can be crunched into three to four hours with a VA.

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While business is booming, Sutherland admitted VAs are often under the gun to provide quick service on a short deadline because most small companies don't hire VAs until they're running short on time.

Still, she said organizing your own schedule and working from home are alluring to many would-be VAs, as is the flexibility to be able to go grocery shopping and spend more time with the children.

"When I'm done I come out of the room, and there are my kids. I think it's a great career."