The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

A Personal Assistant Is Only a Click Away

By Lena Smirnova

June 21, 2011

She can order you a table in a restaurant, organize the perfect date, put together a complex spreadsheet and meet your grandmother at the airport with a bouquet of flowers. She is anonymous, won't take up any space — and best of all, she has stopped asking for commitment.

Virtual assistant services in Moscow are beginning to differentiate their business models. Instead of hiring a long-term assistant, individuals and corporations can now post requests online to specialized companies and get quick responses from a pool of virtual assistants.

This option is ideal for companies that need some extra help but don't want to hire a full-time employee, said Karina Srtlyan, who founded the Value Your Time service in April after she herself struggled to find a virtual assistant for short-term chores. She charges on a per-task basis, between 300 rubles ($10) and 6,000 rubles, depending on the complexity.

Hiring "one person would be good if there is a lot of work, but it is good to come to us when there are only a couple of tasks," Srtlyan said.

The most popular requests at Value Your Time — which works in Russian and English — are to create personalized tour programs and determine which product to buy in a store, Srtlyan said. Foreigners also ask for help finding services, such as hairdressers, and organizing their evening plans.

Workzilla.ru started operations last fall and has since processed more than 3,000 requests. Although Workzilla.ru also offers virtual assistance, its founder said it does not compete with Value Your Time.

"They focus on longer, more complex and time-intensive tasks," said Pyotr Shchekochikhin. "Our focus is on simple tasks that can be done over the Internet."

Virtual assistance companies are better than freelancers because they offer additional security, business owners said. Companies provide safe money transactions and check the quality of services rendered. They are also less likely to have disruptions, Srtlyan said.

"One person can get sick or not be able to complete a particular task," she said. "We have people with different backgrounds. We can take multiple requests and complete them quickly."

But companies that specialize in longer-term services are not disappearing from the market. Owners say these companies are still in demand because they offer clients round-the-clock support and faster responses.

"Customers need different services," said Mikhail Kudryashov, head of Concierge, which requires a minimum three-month commitment from its subscribers and has a basic package starting at 3,000 rubles. The ongoing relationship allows for greater intimacy and therefore faster comprehension of what the customer wants, he said.

The key to picking a virtual assistant is to ensure that staff is available day and night and can be reached by phone, e-mail and Skype, Kudryashov said.

Off-hour assistance is sometimes necessary. Concierge had to contact the New York Police Department several time zones away and fill out official papers after one of its clients was robbed while traveling abroad.

Fortunately, most of the requests are not as serious. Concierge often fields obscure questions from its customers on Friday and Saturday nights. One Workzilla.ru client requested to send a fake love letter to his friend as a prank.

A virtual assistant happily obliged.

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