

At Your Service

Overworked? Understaffed? Virtual assistants may offer the help you need

By MICHELLE K. MASSIE

PAULA HARRIS HAS AN assistant who always seems to be there for her—even though they're not based in the same city or even in the same state. Harris, a Chicago television producer

and promoter, last year hired Vonetta Booker-Brown, a "virtual assistant" based in Bridgeport, Conn., to answer her phones and handle other office-type duties. Now, says Harris, "I can concentrate on running my business without getting overwhelmed by administrative tasks."

Virtual assistants, or V.A.s, are typically home-based, self-employed workers who handle everything from travel arrangements to bookkeeping. The twist is that they aren't physically located in the same place as their employers. Typically, they are hundreds, if not thousands, of miles away, and they stay in touch with their bosses by phone, e-mail and fax. The market for V.A.s has grown large enough in recent years that today there are several trade groups that represent workers in the field, including the Virtual Assistants Association and the International Virtual Assistants Association. "Anyone can use a V.A., from a corporation to a small-

business owner," says Rebecca Trelfa, a virtual assistant who entered the field through AssistU.com, an online V.A. training, certifying and networking group that was founded in 1997.

"[Virtual assistants] are an excellent choice for someone who does not need the physical presence of an assistant to run errands or do on-site filing."

Virtual assistants usually have to pay for their own benefits and expenses. Clients typically hire them on either a project or a retainer basis and sometimes take on more than one at a time.

Hourly rates for V.A.s usually start at \$30. However, the compensation rate may vary, depending on skills and services.

Hiring a V.A. can make a small company seem larger or help a self-employed person appear to have a staff. Says Trelfa: "I used to have a dedicated phone line for one of my clients in my home office and would answer it as if I were just at another one of

my client's business locations." V.A.s have also become something of a status symbol. Says Booker-Brown, who operates a virtual-assistance business called RightHand Concepts: "When a client's customers see that they have an assistant, it lends a certain legitimacy to their business in the minds of others." ■

IT'S SKI TIME

Hoping to benefit from the deep, dry snow on the north face of Montana's Lone Mountain, America's first new destination ski resort in 20 years plans to open there Thanksgiving weekend. Moonlight Basin, right around the mountain from the east-facing, 30-year-old Big Sky Resort, will charge only \$39 for its all-day adult lift ticket (its rival asks \$59). A six-person express lift will take skiers from the base to above timberline. Moonlight's 3,050 ft. of vertical descent, including 1,200 ft. of inbound hike-up terrain, is on a par with the long drops of Park City, Mammoth, Killington and Deer Valley.

—By Pat Dawson



Step Aside, Slim Jim

Thanks to low-carbohydrate diets like Atkins, beef jerky is in the midst of a Chanel-bag-like revival. Cathy Sturm of Wisconsin-based Jack Link's Beef Jerky says manufacturers are winning over women and children to the macho snack with softer, tenderer products such as jerky nuggets and more sophisticated flavors like Hawaiian teriyaki. There is even a vegetarian option: meatless jerky made from mushrooms or soybeans. Niman Ranch, whose meats adorn plates at such acclaimed restaurants as Gramercy Tavern and Chez Panisse, has started selling steak jerky for \$29 per 9 oz. in the Williams-Sonoma catalog this fall. If your palate demands something more exotic, try game jerky by Covered Wagon Jerky in Derby, Kans. It offers wild boar, ostrich, pheasant and outback-kangaroo jerkies.

—By Kristin Klobertz

