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Denver firm helps manage the store

Local travel agency uses a virtual assistant

BY SCOTT WUERZ
News-Democrat

One of Michael Holland's favorite employees has never been to his Fairview Heights office.

Karen Reddick helps Holland and partner, Ray Careme, keep up with e-mails, return messages and answer the phones -- all from her home in Denver, Colo., 850 miles away.

"She's a tremendous asset to our business," Holland said. "We have gone on cruises for three weeks, and having her to take care of things makes it seem like we never left."

The concept of a virtual assistant, which is made possible by Internet technology that allows Reddick to access computer files and telephone lines remotely, is spreading across the country. It's such a hot topic that NBC's today show set up one camera in Holland's office Wednesday and another in Reddick's Denver home to do a story about the hot new business trend.

The film, which took five hours to record, will be edited to show how Holland Travel and Reddick's company, V-&-E Services, work together in real time.

Reddick said NBC sought her out after one of its producers called a source in Boston and the source told the producer to call his assistant in Arkansas.

"Apparently, he was shocked to learn that people had assistants halfway across the country, so they thought it would make a good story," Reddick said. NBC representatives haven't yet informed her of when they plan to air the piece on her business.

Although Reddick isn't a travel agent and doesn't book trips, Holland said his customers may have talked to her and never known she wasn't sitting behind a desk in his office.

An executive administrative assistant for 25 years, Reddick said she decided to give up the travel and hustle and bustle of the corporate world after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Today she has 10 clients around the globe, from California to Massachusetts in the United States and in Russia, Thailand and the United Kingdom internationally.

"I did this because I wanted to be able to spend more time with my family," Reddick said. "So I limit myself to 10 clients, otherwise I'll be back in the same position I was before."

Reddick's services cost \$45 an hour, but Holland said it's a bargain because she is so efficient and professional.

"When you talk to a lawyer, you may only talk to them for a couple of minutes but they bill you for 15 minutes," Holland said. "Karen bills us by the minute, so you only pay for what you use."

Reddick said she uses time-tracking software that actually monitors her work down to the second. She adds it all up and sends an invoice at the end of the month.

"My clients only pay me for the time I am working on their project," Reddick said. "They



Derik Holtmann/News-Democrat

Michael Holland, with Holland Travel in Fairview Heights, works at his computer with a production crew for NBC's Today show.

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don't pay for me to drink coffee, talk with my friends or the other things that happen in a normal office environment. They also don't have to pay for the overhead of an office."

Reddick is a member of the International Virtual Assistant Association. Although she had no idea how many people were doing similar work across the country, she said the organization, which is one of many, has more than 4,000 members.

"I think it's just going to keep getting bigger," Reddick said. "About 10 years ago, it sounded like a radical concept. But now that people see how it works, it just makes too much sense."

Contact reporter Scott Wuerz at swuerz@bnd.com or 239-2626.

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