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Virtual Gofers Tackle Personal To-Do Lists

By ALINA DIZIK

Productivity gurus have long stressed the need for virtual assistants that will do those online tasks you never seem to have time for—like getting a wedding gift or sorting out health-insurance claims. But sharing credit-card numbers or personal passwords with someone thousands of miles away can take some getting used to.



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Keith Negley

I tested four services (three based in India) that cater to personal requests like making customer-service calls or researching vacation details, or anything else that doesn't need to be handled in person. Some even do wake-up calls.

After signing up, I could assign tasks almost right away via phone, website or email on a round-the-clock basis. Each assistant received several tasks, including an especially time-consuming one, from my to-do list. Monthly fees start at about \$30 and are billed on a per-hour or per-request basis. All the sites offer a dedicated assistant option, where just one person will handle all your requests, for a higher fee.

Like with in-person assistants, there were some hits and misses. One assistant told me it was impossible to link the online credit-card accounts together (which wasn't correct). But another called me with my health insurer on the line so I could validate a request without having to listen to a second of hold music.

Privacy was another concern, though all the services are aware of the potential dangers associated with personal information. At Chennai, India-based Habilis, owned by Amnet Systems Private Ltd., payment information is handled by senior assistants or through PayPal, while personal information is stored securely within the site, says Chief Executive Aashish Agarwal. Still, I changed a password to a personal email account before giving it to an assistant because it's a password I use frequently.

GetFriday, a Bangalore-based company owned by TTK Services Private Ltd. was the most involved of the four services and required a signed contract. After emailing it, a representative called the next day to talk about what I was looking for in an assistant (I wanted someone who would ask questions to clarify what needed to be done, and not be super formal). The next day, Anjali sent me an email to introduce herself as my dedicated assistant available during the weekdays (other assistants take over during off-peak hours). The first task assigned was to find a bed and breakfast in Maine for the Fourth of July weekend. Results came back via a detailed Excel chart including the distances and names of inn owners for each option. Another task was done with equal attention: She secured a New Yorker magazine subscription for \$15 less than the rates I found online.

Next up was Red Butler Corp., a Beverly Hills, Calif., company that also offers concierge services, such as getting

restaurant reservations and hotel discounts. I received a sleek membership card in the mail with a letter detailing how we can use the concierge part of the service including discounts on airfare and food. For a fairly involved task, I asked the service to email several friends and then combine their pictures from my wedding into one website. It took about four days to complete (typically completion time is within 24 hours, says a spokesperson). I was worried, though, when two concierges misspelled my last name in emails. However a request to find housecleaning services in New York that cost less than \$25 an hour came back almost instantly with great recommendations. Chris Sterling, director of concierges, says many of the assistants have deep knowledge of specific cities in the U.S.

Habilis, which launched in the past year, provided the quickest response times. Clients are prompted to enter relevant information like health-insurance or frequent-flier accounts into a secure system and can choose to be called instead of emailed for a request update.

The first task was getting an explanation of how to import Gmail contacts to BlackBerry. Within an hour, I had clear instructions that weren't simply copied from a Web site. Another request was a customer-service call to my health insurer to find out about coverage. To get around privacy concerns the assistant conferenced me in to authorize the insurer to release my information to the assistant. On some instances the website where we could submit our tasks was slow (Mr. Agarwaal says he is looking into this matter).

To log into AskSunday, a New York-based firm that uses India-based assistants, clients could use a Google or Facebook account. It offers a series of templates for specific requests and an upload function that lets you, for instance, attach a copy of a phone bill to a request for disputing a charge. The form for a food order, for example, prompts users for the delivery date and time, restaurant name and menu items, to help speed up the process.

The first request to combine two of my American Express cards into one online account came back with an answer that it wasn't possible. However, when I set out to do the task myself, it took less than 10 minutes. Founder Avinash Samudrala says this isn't typical, "We'll take the call as far as we can and [then] we'll conference in a customer."

Another task, buying gifts off a friend's Macy's wedding registry for a specific dollar amount was really convenient, especially since I got to skip all the online forms to register at the site. I approved the purchase by viewing a PDF and then got a confirmation email once the task was complete.

At first it was hard to outsource chores, but after a while it became easier. As a matter of fact, I've already started another to-do list for my virtual assistant.

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Outsourcing Your Chores

Here's how the online personal assistants did with their various tasks:

COMPANY	PRICE RANGE	QUALITY OF TASK PERFORMANCE	FEATURES	COMMENT
habilis.com	\$10 for five tasks to \$1,000 for 160 hours a month	Excellent, quick and precise answers.	Uncluttered interface, stores personal information, can mark requests urgent.	Office and online content help, simple to understand offerings.
getfriday.com	\$10 per month plus \$15 per hour to \$1,120 per month for 160 hours	Excellent, good attention to detail.	Personal information storage, request status, quality escalation option.	Flexible plans, lower cost for dedicated assistant.

asksunday.com	\$97 for 45 requests for 90 days to \$1087 for 80 hours per month	Good; one task was done with less attentiveness.	Templates, personal information storage, can upload Google or Outlook contacts.	Stores information in personal account for later use, simple request system.
redbutler.com	\$37 (for 15 requests) to \$166 (for 100 requests) per month	Good; slower service for one task.	Personal assistant for VIP level membership, concierge services.	Travel and restaurant reservations expertise, basic template for filing requests.

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