

The Virtual Office  
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Have you ever wanted to go after a project, but didn't feel you had the resources to pull it off? Well perhaps you should consider the virtual office.

The concept of the virtual office is simple. You gear up to meet project opportunities by temporarily adding the expertise, time, workspace and equipment of others as you need them. With the computers and fast communications available today, it's easy to expand to meet the demands of a larger project by adding team members who can be in many separate locations (the virtual office). These consultants work in their own spaces with their own equipment (equipment and space that you don't have to purchase or maintain).

To make a virtual office work, you need to make sure everyone is on the same page. First the consultants need to be competent in the computer programs that you intend to use, such as CAD, graphics, word processing, spreadsheet, database, and communications programs. You also need to produce and distribute project standards, including standards for CAD (line weights, layers, classes, fonts, etc.), and drawing organization.

Now that everyone is speaking the same language, you need to provide an efficient way to communicate. Everyone should be on the internet, preferably with a high speed connection such as DSL or cable, so files can be moved around quickly with ease. Of course, some communication will take place via fax, telephone and physical delivery (use whatever works best in each particular situation). You also need to provide a central repository for resources, such as a library of details, symbols, text notes, etc. and a place that progress sets can be posted on a daily basis. A password protected online server is ideal for this. With an online server, consultants can upload their work on a daily basis, for your review, and for coordination with others. An additional benefit of an online server is that it provides a means for offsite backup (good insurance in case something happens to the physical office). Online storage is easy to use, and not very expensive. My office for example, has been using a server at Apple Computer which provides 100 MB of online storage (along with some other benefits) for about \$10/ month.

What are the advantages and disadvantages to this system? The advantages to you are: less overhead (smaller work space requirements, and less equipment & software to purchase and maintain), ease of gearing up or pulling back as needed, and using experienced consultants requires little or no time for you to train them.

The advantages for consultants are; they are able to work in their own space with their own equipment, they have the flexibility to work according to their own schedule (as long as agreed upon deadlines are met), and they have the

opportunity to work on projects they may not be qualified to do on their own. Also, consultants can at the same time have their own practices, make more per hour than an employee, and enjoy the tax advantages of being in business for themselves.

What's the downside? You have less direct control than you would have in a traditional employer/employee relationship, and it can be difficult to find, and keep good consultants. For the consultant, this arrangement does not have benefits or stability of a full time job and it requires that they provide and maintain their own equipment and workspace.

For people who are independent and prefer to work in their own environment (wherever it is located) this can be an excellent arrangement. I've been practicing in the virtual office for over 10 years (both as a prime and a consultant), and have found it to be a rewarding and productive way to work.

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