

Web site brings tasks and workers together to get your jobs done

by John Wilkens

Darren Berkovitz works in Beverly Hills, Calif., for an Internet incubator - a company that creates Web sites. One day the subject of his girlfriend came up. He doesn't have one.

A HIRER POWER - Heather Blaise has used DoMyStuff to find 'virtual assistants' for various tasks, including development of a business plan. 'I think it's a great tool,' she said. CNS Photo by Earnie Grafton. He told co-worker Stacy Stubblefield he's too busy to look for a girlfriend, and he joked that maybe he should hire someone to find one for him.

They looked at each other. That's not a bad idea.

The Web site, DoMyStuff.com, has been up for six months. Without any advertising, it has attracted about 40,000 registered users across the country - those who want stuff done, and those willing (for a price) to do it.

The stuff ranges from the ordinary (house cleaning) to the obscure (Lithuanian lessons). One guy in New York hired someone to help him propose to his girlfriend. A woman in Atlanta hired someone to help her be more "girly."

People in San Diego have used it to find workers to buff the finish of a sports car that had been egged, to design a book cover, to replace a belt and a water pump on a 2002 Prius.

"What it comes down to is saving time and saving money," said Heather Blaise, a San Diego real estate investor who has posted several jobs on DoMyStuff. "It's a great way to find someone who has the skills you need."

The site is an electronic bulletin board that's a cross between Craigslist and eBay - with a little bit of concierge thrown in. It's outsourcing on a personal level.

Outsourcing on a corporate level - saving money by shipping jobs to places where salaries and benefits are lower - has drawn criticism and political heat in recent years. But the trend continues, with smaller firms using Web sites such as Elance to find skilled freelance workers, and now Average Joes turning to DoMyStuff for just about anything.

"Technology was supposed to make our lives easier, but many of us are busier than ever," said David Davin, chief operating officer for DoMyStuff. "The push is on to compartmentalize our lives, to save time by hiring people for different chores and errands."

Part of the push comes from the expanding reach of the Internet, which creates more and more online communities and alters the traditional way of doing all sorts of things. Another factor is the popularity of self-help books like "The 4-hour Workweek," which advocates outsourcing as part of a radical rethinking of the way people approach their jobs and lives.

There appears to be a different approach going on in at least one home in Folsom, Calif., (the town, not the prison), where a resident posted a notice on DoMyStuff recently looking for a "professional nagger."

The "employer" (that's the term the site uses) asked for an "assistant" (again, the site's word) to call at around 5 a.m., three days a week, "to make sure I get out of bed and get to the gym!"

Pay would be on a per call basis for that "nag" and approximately 10 others to be performed each week, depending on what tasks the employer needed to be reminded about. Several bidders offered to do the job for

around \$5 per call.

Another listing, from New York, was headlined, "MY CLOSET! HELP." It was from a woman in New York City who wrote:

"I am not going to live long enough to wear all the clothes that I have. I need someone to help me decide what to keep and what to let go. I can't do it alone. I would like to get someone with a sense of style."

She got three bidders, all describing themselves as fashionable, with prices ranging from \$100 to \$180.

In Burke, Va., an employer wanted an assistant willing to help make a fake ID. "I will not be using this ID for any illegal purpose. There is a benevolent agenda to this." Maybe so, but the one bid listed was sealed, visible only to the employer.

Davin said most of the chores on the site - there are usually hundreds listed at any given time - involve work around the house. Wallpaper a dining room. Clean a fish tank. Rake the lawn. Clear the gutters. Each task typically receives three or four bids, he said.

Employers like the site because it's faster and easier than looking for contractors and gathering bids on their own, he said. They post the job and wait for the bids to come in.

He said assistants like it because they can find work instead of waiting for it to find them. There's no charge for either employers or assistants to use the site.

Both have to register, though - a safeguard to ensure, for example, that the person in Orlando, Fla., outsourcing the removal of an alarm system on a house is actually the owner.

Blaise, who lives in downtown San Diego, used the site to find someone to design the cover for a book she's written on investing; to develop a business plan for a new Internet company; and to create a Web site.

She said she'd shopped for contractors in more traditional ways, approaching them for bids, but wasn't happy with the quoted prices. On the business plan, for example, she was told it would cost between \$1,000 and \$4,000. On DoMyStuff, she got bids as low as \$350 and hired someone to do it for \$800.

"A lot of these freelancers can do it for less money because they have less overhead," she said. Or they live in other countries. The person she found to do the Web site - a job she'd been told locally would cost up to \$4,000 - is in India and charged \$350.

David Mitchell, a San Diego mortgage broker, hired someone to put up 100 real estate signs on weekends - \$1 per sign. He said a commercial company would have billed him \$2.50 each.

He also found someone, for \$79, to buff the finish of his black Nissan 300ZX sports car. He said the previous owner didn't know the car had been egged until the residue dried, leaving gunk that won't come off with simple washing.

"I think more and more people will be outsourcing in the future," Mitchell said. "The DoMyStuff Web site is ahead of its time."

It's not yet profitable, though. Davin said they charged a fee in the beginning, 7 percent to 10 percent of the winning bid, but stopped because they wanted to encourage more users.

"We haven't decided how to make money off it," he said. They're surveying users about what they like on the site, asking about possible new features, and may charge for those.

In the meantime, there seems to be no end to what people are eager to outsource in their lives. Potty-training for the kids. Waiting in line to buy an iPhone. Removing ear wax.

Current listings include this one from a youngster with homework trouble: "I need help completing math problems." (After that, maybe spelling.)

Lakenya, a Brooklyn woman, wants someone to come to her house one or two times a month to braid her hair.

And Nicole, in Saskatchewan, Canada, would like someone to clip her toenails. "I must admit," she wrote, "it had been too long."

As of this writing, the number of bids for that one: Zero. There may be a limit to outsourcing after all.

Domystuff's job description

There is no charge to post chores, or bid on them, at DoMyStuff.com. Anyone can browse, but users have to register. Here's how the site works:

- "Employers" post tasks, describing the work to be done (with pictures, if they want), the budget and the length of bidding. They can limit the bidders by geography or by the feedback rating received from previous jobs.

- "Assistants" bid on the tasks, explaining what they will do, how much they will charge, and when they will start and finish the work. They can fill out profiles listing credentials, experience, references.

- A message board allows employers and assistants to ask more questions. Once an agreement is reached, the employer deposits the funds in an escrow account run by the Web site. The assistant can check the account to make sure the money has been posted.

- When the work is finished to the employer's satisfaction, the funds are released to the assistant. Any disagreements are mediated through the site.

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