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Dublin-based virtual assistant helps small businesses with IT tasks, general office work

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Marla Jones spent 20 years working in the corporate world as an information technology professional, but these days she uses her expertise to help small businesses, especially lawyers, with their information technology chores.

It's not just computer tasks that she helps with, either. Jones, who operates Dublin-based Your Professional Helper, does any number of jobs for her clients in her role as their virtual assistant, from sending out bulk mailings and doing project management work to making dinner reservations, and a wide variety of tasks in-between.

About a decade ago she started her virtual assistant career as a professional organizer and concierge for professionals. Ultimately she decided to combine her computer skills and organizing skills and started Your Professional Helper.

"If people needed organizing in their personal lives, I felt, who's helping them with their computer (organization)?" said Jones. "I went to a professional organizing conference and said, 'Somebody has to do this from a computer side.' It let me put my computer experience to work."

For her, working as a professional organizer is something that comes naturally.

"I had a personal move years ago and people said, 'This is the most organized move I've ever seen,'" said Jones. "It's just innate for me."

She was still working full time in IT when she decided to try her hand at becoming a professional organizer. Doing it on the side she realized she enjoyed the work, but it wasn't until she stumbled upon the International Virtual Assistants Association that she found her new calling. Then five years ago she became a certified virtual assistant and

took the plunge into the profession full time.

She first started working with small business owners but then discovered a niche of specializing in work with lawyers, which is now the bulk of her business.

"It was just another type of small business that reached out and needed some help," said Jones. "I free up your time to help you focus on your business."

She essentially comes in and works as a small business' or attorney's IT department, since those businesses often lack the resources to have their own IT departments.

"We supplement what they do. You'll call me in in areas where maybe you're weak," said Jones. "I can be called in to be the expert or you may give me what I call the low-hanging fruit so your staff can focus on bigger projects."

With today's technology she's able to do most of the work from home, something that's not only beneficial for Jones, but her clients, too.

"You don't have to have a desk for me or have a computer for me," said Jones, a journalism major in college who "fell into" work as an IT professional.

Her assignments vary greatly, from helping with some simple IT tasks, perhaps setting up or advising on a website update, to projects that can last a year or longer. And if she can't perform the task she will help her client find someone who can.

Whether it's pitching in to help a business with a single project or assisting an attorney who is hosting a video conference, Jones said she enjoys the gratification of helping a business become more profitable.

"Nothing against the corporate world, but I really wanted to make a difference in someone's life ... to do something that I knew would help someone. I really feel good at the end of the day," she said.

"Some people don't like leaving their comfort zone. I really like learning new things, which takes me out of my comfort zone," said Jones.

She said many people don't even know that virtual assistants exist, though she's doing her part to spread the word about their availability.

"I try to get out and speak about it as much as I can," Jones said.

