

SMALL OFFICE/HOME OFFICE

Hire-a-concierge firms help the super-busy cope

Offers hotel-like aid with chores, appointments

BY SAMUEL FROMARTZ
REUTERS NEWS AGENCY

WASHINGTON — In an era when people have too much to do and less time to do it in, it's natural that a new industry would answer the call of the overworked.

Atlanta-based Two Places at One Time, for instance, has picked up chilled fertility injections from a doctor at a precise time and delivered them to one executive at the office during her ovulation period.

"To know when your client's ovulating is to really know them," said founder and president Andrea Arena of the Atlanta-based corporate concierge company. "We become an intimate part of these people's lives."

Arena is a leader in the nascent industry, which prides itself on providing any service that's legal and ethical to corporate clients.

The aim of these businesses is to help professionals get through the week, whether it's setting up a luncheon meeting,

doing grocery shopping or sending flowers to a spouse. In this era of the ever-expanding work day, companies are offering the service as a time-saving perk to employees.

One manager at a consulting company in Atlanta, who is single and travels four days a week, said she relies on the concierge to help her with her chores, whether it's picking up dry cleaning or letting a repair person in the door.

"It makes a real change in the quality of your life on the weekends, when you're back at home," she said.

If she ever considered another job that required a lot of travel, she said the presence of a concierge would be a factor in her job decision.

The industry, which began in the 1980s, has its roots in the hotel concierge business. Former concierges offered their skills to wealthy individuals, and soon landlords were seeking out the services for the lobbies of office buildings. From there, it was a short hop into the corporate suite.

Such was the evolution of San Francisco's Les Concierges, which was founded by a former hotel concierge. Its customers have included Sun Microsystems, Texas Instru-

ments, and a bevy of office buildings.

Arena, who was a hotel concierge at the Hyatt Regency while attending the Georgia Institute of Technology, formed Two Places at One Time in 1991, two years after she graduated. She claims to be the first to offer outsourced corporate concierge services in the U.S.

Concierge companies typically receive a monthly retainer of several thousand dollars, which accounts for the bulk of their revenue. Arena's clients then charge their employees a small fee (\$5-\$10 per hour U.S.) to offset the retainer. Arena's client list has included Ernst & Young, Deloitte & Touche, Anderson Consulting and what is now PricewaterhouseCoopers.

In a competitive labour market, the corporate concierge might be a way to recruit and retain employees. Texas Instruments hired Les Concierges because it wanted to have "the most competitive benefits program in the semi-conductor industry," said Employee Services Manager Jeff Asmus.

But when the economy cools or cost-cutting becomes paramount, the concierge may be viewed as an expendable benefit.