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WORK & FAMILY

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Nice Work If You Can Get It: Web Sites for At-Home Jobs

As gasoline prices soar and joblessness mounts, the nonstop stream of email I get from readers wanting to work from home is rising, too. Also multiplying are the online scam artists who seek to profit on that desire.

So like the ancient philosopher Diogenes searching for an honest man, I set out looking for a few honest Web sites that actually help people find real, paying home-based work. I selected only sites with a track record and users I could interview. Help in my search came from Tory Johnson, founder of WomenforHire.com, an employment Web site, and co-author of a forthcoming book on working from home; and Peter Weddle of Weddles.com, a researcher, consultant and author on recruiting and online employment.

A word of caution: Although at-home opportunities are increasing, most are only for part-time, low-paid work without benefits; some people who use these Web sites make as little as \$5,000 a year. Many work very hard at tasks most people would find difficult, such as telemarketing. Competition for at-home work is keen; prepare to wait months to get a client, project or assignment. That said, here are some options:

If you have professional skills and experience, and are prepared to slug it out for clients in the global marketplace, a free-lance site may be for you. Elance.com and oDesk.com each link clients with about 90,000 skilled free-lancers apiece, roughly half of whom are in the U.S. The sites post client feedback and publish results of optional professional-skills tests free-lancers can choose to take through the site. The sites also serve as secure intermediaries for clients' payments, in return for commissions of about 4% to 10% of free-lancers' fees. Information-technology workers, such as programmers and Web developers, are the sites' biggest market, but they're fast expanding into graphic design, writing, engineering, translation, marketing, accounting, administrative and legal services.

One exceptional success story comes from Arron Washington, 24 years old, a Hinesville, Ga., programmer who dropped out of college after realizing he could make as much as \$60,000 a year on oDesk.com. "The offers just kept pouring in," he says.

If you like providing customer service, selling stuff by phone or in some cases making cold calls, companies that outsource call-center services for retailers, infomercial vendors and other clients are expanding use of at-home agents. Workers are typically paid by the hour, by the call or by the minute spent talking, plus incentives; most make a total of about \$8 to \$17 an hour.

West Corp. (west.com), with 15,000 home agents, is undergoing "rapid expansion," says Dan Hicks, a senior vice president. LiveOps.com, which claims to have 20,000 home agents working at least a few hours a week, plans to bring on several thousand more this year, says Jon Temple, president, world-wide operations. Arise.com, with 8,000 home-business owners as agents, plans to add 4,000 more by year end, says Angie Selden, chief executive. AlpineAccess.com, with 7,500 home agents, will hire 2,500 more people by December, says CEO Christopher Carrington. Executives at Convergys.com, with 1,000 home agents, and VIPDesk.com, with 300, also say they're expanding. WorkingSolutions.com claims 4,000 active agents and plans to hire as many as 600 more by December. In a new twist, a few of these companies, including West, are making home agents permanent employees with access to group benefits. Convergys and Alpine Access subsidize the benefits.

If you like the idea of being a "virtual assistant" -- a jack-of-all-trades who performs online many of the same services as an administrative aide in a brick-and-mortar office -- TeamDoubleClick.com offers links to clients. Pay is typically \$10 to \$20 an hour for taking calls, booking events or travel or other tasks. But entry barriers are high; some 80% of the site's 300 to 500 weekly applicants fail mandatory entry tests on typing, computer and phone skills. And only 10% of the site's 49,000 VAs are working, says co-founder Gayle Buske.

Other sites serve as job boards. Sologig.com says a sizable minority of the 8,000 screened free-lance opportunities it has posted can be done from anywhere. A smaller site, VirtualAssistants.com, offers access to screened postings for \$14.95 a month. And tJobs.com and teleworkrecruiting.com also charge a fee for access to screened work-at-home postings, which they collect from employers or elsewhere on the Web.