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FEATURE:

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MOBILE MANAGER: MAKING YOUR COMPANY INTO A VIRTUAL ORGANIZATION

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Think back to just seven or eight years ago in the business world. Faxing still was a big method of communication, while video teleconferencing was an expensive novelty, costing around \$200 for half an hour. Seems like ancient times, **doesn't it?**

Technological leaps since then have made virtual organizations—coalitions of parties connected via home offices who share information while working on collaborative or individual projects—a vibrant alternative to the standard “go to the office to do my work” routine. Even five years ago, this system rarely existed in much of America. Now, it is more commonplace in the business world, and more importantly, I am finding that more customers and employees want to avail themselves of the conveniences associated with virtual organizations.

I am talking here about true virtual organizations where everyone works in his or her own home-based office every day, not just businesses where employees work from home a few days a week. Once you become accustomed to it, this system can be very beneficial to the employee, company and client.

The Advantages of the Virtual Organization

There are so many advantages virtual organizations have over traditional offices that listing all of them could take up this entire article. One of the biggest advantages of going virtual is cost. There is no rent or other fixed capital expenses to pay because no buildings exist. Likewise, there are no charges for cleaning an office after work hours or providing power, phone lines and other office supplies to your employees.

Running a virtual organization broadens your employee base considerably, too. We have highly qualified retirees who want to work fewer hours and do not want to leave their homes, as well as financially independent younger workers who do not care for full-time work yet want to remain active and contribute to society. Our employees can and do include people living across America in various



time zones. Primary caregivers—both male and female—appreciate having a job at home that allows them more time and flexibility to be with their families.

Last but not least, people with disabilities that make it difficult for them to leave their residences can be active participants of your operation. In fact, I had one employee who worked for me for three years before I even realized he was physically challenged.

What Your Staff Needs

Those who join your organization should have a high quality phone system (including unlimited long-distance service), a personal computer and a printer/scanner. They will be responsible for establishing and maintaining their own broadband Internet service as well.

They should not possess a predisposition toward working at traditional “brick-and-mortar” offices. Once I hear a prospective employee say he or she prefers not to work at home, I know immediately he or she will neither enjoy working for my firm nor be productive in it.

I did employ someone who could not manage the concept of working at home without being collocated with his boss—after a couple of months we had to part ways. The discipline of working from home simply was not there for this young man. (Yes, some recent college graduates raised in the information age still need to work outside their homes.)

Along with that, your employees should realize that working from home does not mean that they are taking care of young children at the same time. They must physically and mentally separate their office space at home from the rest of their lives. Otherwise, their project schedules and quality will suffer because of the interruptions they will face from friends and family. One colleague is so dedicated to this belief that her children are forbidden to enter her office at home—at all times.

What You Need As The Virtual Boss

A big challenge at a virtual organization is monitoring how your employees serve your clients. To that end, I highly



advise you to develop or buy a web-based system to log in projects and capture the progress of employees working on those projects in real time. The system should include a time-entry component that keeps very detailed records about how long employees took to complete aspects of each project. This helps ensure adherence to the client's budget, and it will help you in estimating future efforts.

I also recommend developing a system or employing a service to convert tracked work time into invoices quickly for smooth billing. Not only will this save you time and money and assist you at tax time, but it also helps you determine if any of your employees are spending too much time on a client or project.

Managing Your Growth

Let's assume you follow my guidelines and your virtual business shows progress. It has happened with my company, where over the last year we have doubled in size. To accommodate this growth, I added a new

management infrastructure that would help move my employees from just being independent consultants to being members of the team. So far, this has been successful for me, although you may prefer not to restructure and delegate some of your authority to new managers as you expand.

Whatever approach you choose, remember that when you lose touch of what your employees are doing, you lose control of your business. I believe you should oversee no more than 15 to 20 people if you want your virtual organization to run efficiently and be monitored by you appropriately. Whatever your number is, you must set a limit on the number of people you can manage effectively if you want to continue to prosper.

A Big Pitfall—(Lack of) Communication

When it comes to talking with your staff, DON'T RELY COMPLETELY ON E-MAIL. Staff can misinterpret what you say (and vice versa) in an e-mail, and e-mails can be forgotten easily. It also lends a very impersonal touch if e-mails are the only way your employees hear from you. Instead, be proactive and try to prevent misunderstandings with occasional phone calls and even team meetings.

To inspire better communication among my staff, I recently held an annual "all hands" meeting, with most of those working for me showing up at one location to discuss key aspects of our business and their roles. It has made a huge difference in everyone understanding their value to and responsibilities within the organization, and it allowed employees to share helpful tips and advice with each other.

I recommend all virtual organizations have a meeting of this kind at least once a year. I also like to have monthly luncheons with my local employees as well, and I suggest you consider something similar to keep the lines of communication flowing smoothly among everyone.

Do Not Become a "Virtual Slave"

Perhaps the biggest drawback to leading a virtual organization is letting it overwhelm your free time. Resist the temptation to check your e-mail on your Treo or Blackberry every minute at night or on weekends. You do not have to answer your messages immediately.

And when you go on vacation, really go on vacation—let someone cover your major duties, and forget your daily worries. Why not? You have earned it, because you have established a successful virtual organization. **ME**

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