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When You Need Another You

Dazed by Busy Schedules, More People Are Ceding Responsibilities of Daily Tasks to 'Lifestyle Managers'

By Annie Gowen
Washington Post Staff Writer
Excerpts

Forget the dog walker and errand runner. Today, some busy two-career families are turning over virtually every aspect of their existence to lifestyle managers. These hired hands, who charge a monthly membership fee or up to \$100 an hour, become like an extra member of the family.

Lifestyle managers have searched for a reliable used car for a client's 16-year-old or taken over their scrapbooking project. One wrote an online dating profile for a client. Others have negotiated overseas adoptions or bailed their clients out of jail. Another was handed a brown paper bag full of insurance documents from a client's recent surgery with the command to sort it out.

People are ceding more and more of their lives to others. "It's going to be a huge trend around here. Our clients are mostly suburban families because they have a whole range of problems to deal with -- kids, carpools, dogs, houses."

Once, lifestyle managers were a perk for celebrities and professional athletes. But now, families are hiring managers to help them through their busy lives, or at least the boring parts. Experts say the industry is on the rise because people are overwhelmed by basic tasks, their increasingly fragmented lives and long commutes. In the Washington region, high median incomes have also helped the boom.

Pets need constant attention, not just someone to walk them. One employee flew a dog to Colorado so it could spend a summer with his family in Aspen, Colo. Other helpers changed the TV channel daily at one client's house; her beagle liked the Animal Planet network, but the client didn't want the dog watching its more troubling animal-rescue shows.

Personal concierge services and errand running, industries that have grown exponentially in the past decade, are embracing lifestyle management as well, said Katharine Giovanni, chairman of the International Concierge and Errand Association.

Founded in 2000, the group has doubled in the past two years and has 650 members, including more than two dozen firms locally.

"Recently, the terminology of 'lifestyle management' has come across the pond, and concierges have embraced it because it's better terminology for what they do. . . . Originally, concierges were errand runners. Now it's 'Let me do *everything* for you so you don't have to,' " Giovanni said.

Confidentiality is important because of the volume of personal information the helpers are handed -- credit card numbers, health insurance papers, Social Security numbers. (Clients should check references before handing over such data, Giovanni said.)

Such personal helpers are often hired by mothers who want to appear as if they're doing it all and don't want their neighbors -- or husbands -- to know otherwise. One Leesburg company has its employees remove the magnetized signs from their cars when they visit certain homes.

When Maureen Coleman and her husband, Tim, moved to the area from New York City three years ago, she struggled with a chaotic schedule that included caring for their two young children, a busy career and remodeling their Potomac home. In addition, she and her husband have maintained their ties to New York firms; each works two to three days there every week.

Then her garage door broke.

"That's when I realized I need another 'me,' " she said.

The couple hired Judy Laist from Potomac Concierge, a firm that advertises its employees as multifaceted "problem solvers."

On a recent weekday, Laist and Coleman sat down in her dining room to discuss items in a binder Laist had made for house maintenance. Laist also handed her a thick folder of birthday cards she had chosen for Coleman's friends and family members, carefully stamped and arranged by month. Coleman had guiltily requested this after she had forgotten a relative's birthday.

Coleman said that hiring Laist to manage the pesky details frees her up to spend time with family. She has held onto certain rituals with her children, such as driving them to school -- even if she's on her way to catch the New York shuttle -- or packing their favorite lunch of Mediterranean rice and yogurt.