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Modern-Day Convenience

Virtual assistant takes office on the road—literally
By Stephanie Andre

There isn't much you can't do with a computer these days. Just ask virtual assistant Amber Drake.

Drake runs a successful virtual assistance company—Essential Admin (www.essential-admin.com)—from her home office, which just happens to be located in her RV.

Drake wanted the best of both worlds—she wanted to work and she wanted to travel. So, over a year's time, she and her family (her husband and two girls) sold their Northern California home and literally everything in it and packed in to their newly purchased recreational vehicle.

"I was in Northern California—it's such a fast-paced way of life and the cost of living [is unbelievable]," Drake explains. "We love to travel. We wanted to do something where we could learn more about history and the different sites, plus have an income and live comfortably. It's really about slowing down a little bit of the pace—not technology."

Drake began researching her options to determine if it would even be possible—technologically speaking—to run her business from a mobile location. She then began taking experimental trips to work out the bugs.

It's taken about a year, but she's now on the road full time.

"It's been a little crazy," she says. "It's crazy to think that you are selling everything you own. It's a different lifestyle—a real 'less is more' mentality; it's the opposite of our culture today."

Despite the drastic changes, Drake says it's been an interesting and freeing experience. "You have to say to yourself, 'well, we don't really need that.'"

The Power of Today's Technology

From anywhere in the country, Drake—a certified master virtual assistant—can assist her clients, which include small-business owners and Realtors.

"An Internet connection is our heart—and our biggest hurdle," she says. "It took quite a bit of learning [to figure out what we needed]."

Drake uses a satellite connection—DataStorm Satellite Internet System, which is powered through DirecWay and mounted on the roof of her RV—when she is not moving. "You can use it anywhere, even in places like Yosemite [National Park] where there are so many trees."

While driving, she uses a Verizon aircard, which she says looks like a wireless card and works at the speed of a 56K modem.

A Virtual Office

Drake says it's easy to work from the road when today's technology allows her the ability to do it all just by having a wireless connection.

And while some may consider her office setup unusual, other features of her business are not—Drake works daytime business hours, Monday through Friday; her clients can reach her by phone or Internet; and they can pay for services rendered via the Internet. She has set up a mailing address in California as well.

Despite its unconventional nature, even one of her vendors seems to think Drake's mobile office is a novel idea. "If you can work with people out of state, why not from state to state," says Celeste Starchild, vice president of SettlementRoom, a Web-based software company that coordinates, manages, and archives real estate transactions. Drake has used SettlementRoom's software for listing marketing coordination for more than two years.

'You Always Need a Backup'

According to Drake, the most important thing she can do is have multiple contingency plans—"anything can happen," she says.

"You always need a backup. And then you need a backup for your backup." For example, Drake says when she was recently in Yosemite National Park, there were no wireless phone capabilities and the closest town was 14 miles away. "Of course, all the payphones were broken too," she says.

At that point, Drake's contingency plans came up big. "Backup is key—always," she says. "I used Skype voiceover technology.

They're out of Europe. You don't need a phone. Over the Internet, you can talk to anyone, just like you are using [a regular] phone."

Still, she says if her satellite connection were to fail, as well as the additional methods she has for wireless connection, there's always a DSL line at "trusty Starbucks."

For more information, visit www.essential-admin.com.