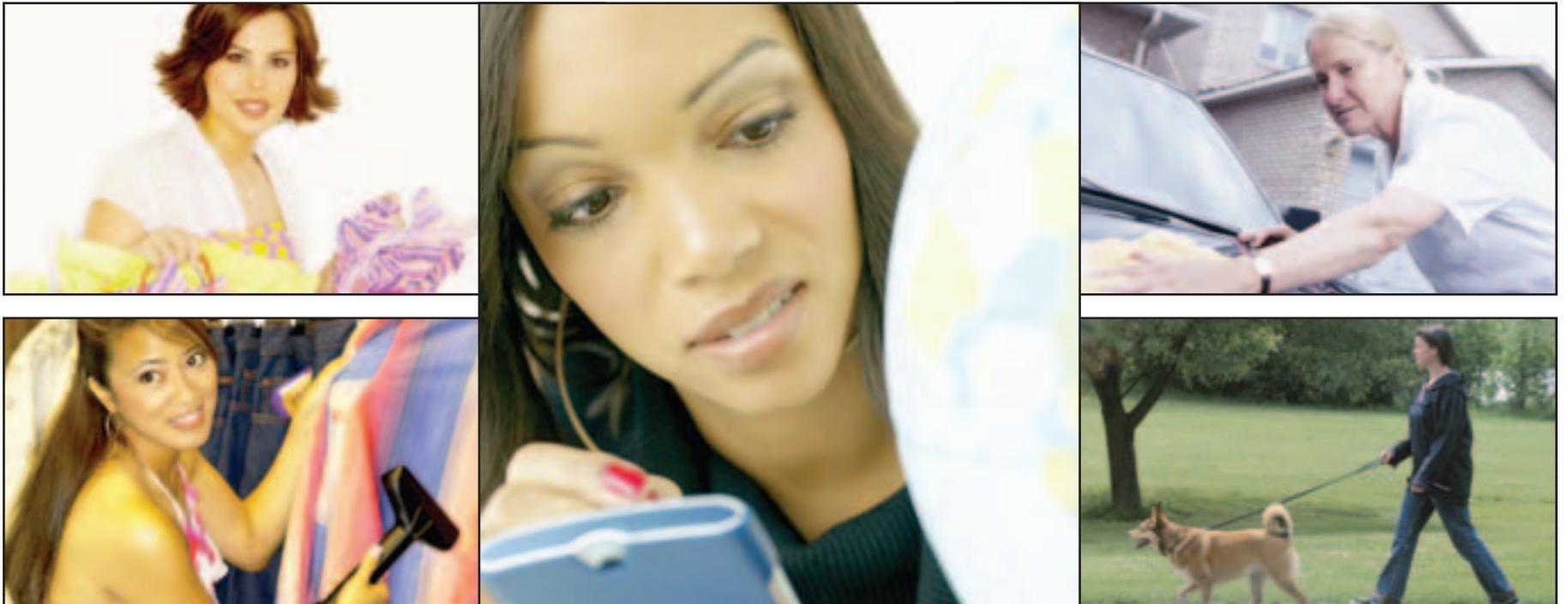


EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE

'I'll have my people call your people...'

Concierge services could provide some relief for employees whose work-life balance is taking a beating



BY BARB JAWORSKI

It's 7 p.m. and Sally's finally leaving the office, but not for home. Instead, she's heading for the airport to catch the next flight to Vancouver for a three-day business trip. When she returns, she'll have to spend the weekend in the office catching up on paperwork because on Monday morning she's off on another business trip. In the meantime, she has bills to pay, dry cleaning to pick up, dogs to take care of, a prescription to fill and home repairs to do. And she still has to find time to buy her mother's birthday present.

Her work-life balance is taking a beating. This is a familiar scenario for a growing number of professionals. For more and more people, work is becoming all consuming. They're working longer hours, commuting longer distances and, thanks to technology, are wired to the office for more hours in the day.

Organizing private lives is becoming increasingly difficult. *Shifts in Work and Home Life Boundaries*, a study of 1,000 workers conducted in 2000 for Xylo, Inc., a former Washington state HR consultancy that is now part of Workstream, found 75 per cent of employees take care of personal responsibilities while on the job. And 92 per cent admitted taking personal or sick days just to get errands done.

In response, Canadian companies are looking south of the border and following the lead of many Fortune 500 companies by offering concierge services to staff.

Concierge services can range from picking up an employee's dry cleaning and doing his grocery shopping to researching his next family vacation and organizing a dinner party. Jason Rawn, president of Thirsty Muse, a Burnaby, B.C.-based concierge provider, says such services can come in especially handy during emergencies.

"Like a plumbing crisis or when the flowers don't arrive for your wedding," says Rawn. "It's about taking some of

those personal tasks off your shoulders so you have more free time."

All the employee has to do is pick up a telephone or submit an electronic request, at any time of the day or night, and the concierge springs into action.

Last year the Canadian arm of consulting firm KPMG LLP conducted a pilot project offering concierge services to managers, senior partners and associate partners.

"We were looking at a very busy year thanks to changes in the regulatory environment," says Geri Markvoort, KPMG's vice-president of human resources. "This meant an increased workload for our people. We wanted to see if concierge services helped alleviate their personal workload. There was a very good response. Those who used the services loved it."

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Markvoort, who used the service herself to find hotels and attractions around the Grand Canyon and to plan a party, says she was very pleased with it.

Telecommunications giant Telus ran a concierge pilot project with a small group of employees in 2004. The feedback was so good Telus opened the service up to it all of its management and professional groups the following year.

"The service was especially valuable during a recent labour disruption," says Carol Craig, director of pension and benefits for Telus. At the time management was working extra hours and the concierge relief was much needed.

"Overall, it has worked really well for us and fits into our corporate agenda of providing ways to enhance people's work-life balance and enhance our retention rates."

Ernst & Young employees in both the United States and Canada have benefit-

ed from concierge services since 2005.

"We don't want our employees spending their free time running errands, researching their family vacation or doing home repairs," says Diana Chan, development consultant, Canadian practice with Ernst & Young. "We want them to do the things that matter to them, such as spending time with their children. Each request to the provider saves the employee 2.8 hours, and there's no price tag on that."

Concierge services are also part of an overall business strategy, says Chan.

"The battle for talent is ongoing," she says. "We're always looking for creative ways to attract and retain great people and helping those people achieve their professional and personal goals."

Fees for concierge services can vary widely. Circles, a Boston-based service

that recently opened a Canadian office in Burlington, Ont., charges a flat fee based on predicted usage, which is usually 30 per cent to 40 per cent of the employee population. When averaged out over the entire employee population, the price is about \$2 to \$5 per employee per month, says Elizabeth Gross, senior manager, events and experiences clients at Circles.

Although concierge services are a recent arrival to the Canadian benefits scene, their popularity is growing. Cynthia Pickering, founder of Calgary-based Time is Money Executive Concierge Service, says as Generation X takes over in the workplace, concierge services will become more entrenched.

The majority of these workers are now in their 30s and rising in the ranks of corporate Canada. They're in short supply, hence in big demand, and work-life balance is very important to them.

"Their attitude is, 'Show me what you

have up front,'" says Pickering. "If your company doesn't have what they're looking for, they'll take their skills somewhere else. That's why initiatives promoting work-life balance are growing in popularity."

Like Time is Money, most Canadian concierge services are local, specializing in services in and around major cities. This gives them a strong knowledge of the community and the ability to include personal assistance services.

"For just a few dollars per employee per month, a company sends a powerful message to its employees," says Thirsty Muse's Jason Rawn. "It's a message that says, 'We know you work hard. We care about your professional and personal life. We know your time is valuable.'"

Because these services are relatively new to Canada, where does an organization interested in acquiring these services start?

"Begin by asking for referrals," says Gross of Circles. "Will employee's credit card information be protected? If you require national or international services, can you be accommodated? And most importantly, are they willing to innovate so your employees' emerging needs can be met?"

For Rawn, it's about getting Canadian businesses to follow the lead of so many large multinational U.S. companies and buy into this new concept.

"It's about understanding that the human spirit can achieve great things once it's free of stress," he says. "Concierge services lift just some of that day-to-day stress by allowing employees to delegate those personal chores that interfere with their professional responsibilities."

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