

From the Sunday Business Section of The New York Times

The New York Times

February 19, 2006
Spending

Free to Be Yourself (by Hiring a Personal Assistant)

By JULIE BICK

LIKE many other women in her position, Fransisca Strampher was tired. Before packing the family for a trip to the Sundance Film Festival, she paid the bills, boarded the dog, scheduled the painter for work, ordered asthma medicine, transferred a financial account to a new brokerage firm and downloaded music onto the [iPod](#).

A busy mom in action? No, Ms. Strampher, 30, is a family's personal assistant.

But she is not a Hollywood assistant who screens fan mail or appears in People magazine carrying Rodeo Drive shopping bags with her employer. She is more of an aide-de-camp, mixed with 21st-century homemaker and general contractor.

Her employer, Linden Rhoads Amadon, 39, a technology entrepreneur who has worked part time since her two small children were born. She lives with them in Seattle but also has homes in New York City and Orcas Island, Wash.

Wealthy families who need help keeping schedules and lives in order sometimes turn to "private service professionals," also known as personal assistants. These employees smooth out their employers' lives — and become privy to some of their secrets.

"Personal assistant is a lifestyle job," said Stephen Laitmon, founder of the Calendar Group, in Westport, Conn., which provides domestic staff for the wealthy. "You need to be available 24/7." Salaries may range from \$25,000 a year for entry-level assistants to \$120,000 for some of the most talented and experienced ones. Perks may include travel, gourmet meals and the use of fine automobiles, but these employees normally do not live with the families.

Typical responsibilities for a personal assistant may include arranging — and sometimes joining — family vacations, planning parties, paying bills, buying gifts, scheduling

appointments and running errands. They may also manage multiple homes, as well as the vendors, contractors and others who do work for them.

Assistants may be asked to do just about any task, said Merle Elias, owner of Exceptional Means Concierge Services in Los Angeles and author of "L.A. First Class," a guide to the city. "I knew an assistant whose job it was to accompany the employer's dogs on private jets to and from Colorado," she said.

Kerri Campos of Los Angeles, whose agency has used a matchmaking approach to place more than 500 personal assistants during the last seven years, said of the assistants' work: "You may end up knowing everything about your employer personally, mentally, financially, legally — the possibilities are endless. Discretion is paramount."

While entry-level assistants need detailed direction from their employers about which tasks to do and how to do them, seasoned ones will know how to organize, prioritize and filter everything and everyone in their employers' lives.

Some families are reticent about acknowledging that they employ a personal assistant, because they don't want to appear lazy or pretentious. "People say to me, 'You don't even have a job; why do you need a personal assistant?'" said one woman, who preferred not to be identified in order to avoid any ridicule.

Ms. Amadon, however, is unapologetic. "Some feel it's blessing enough to be a stay-at-home mom," she said. "But I worked 60- to 90-hour workweeks for almost 15 years. Now I have children and want to spend time with them, but I also want to do everything I didn't have time for in my 20's and early 30's — like travel, political involvement and pushing myself athletically." Ms. Amadon is training for a triathlon.

Now her assistant, Ms. Strampher, is the one working the 60-hour-plus weeks, managing the family's schedules, correspondence, finances, travel and event planning. Her days typically start by 8:30 a.m. Lunch is a mocha drink or salad on the go. There is a dinner break at 7, and evenings are often spent sorting through family schedules and Ms. Amadon's voice mail and e-mail messages, to prepare for the next day.

When the family returns from a trip, Ms. Strampher is waiting at home, no matter what the hour, to unpack the bags and set up Ms. Amadon's laptop.

Ms. Strampher's duties require wide-ranging knowledge and the trust of her employer. "She organizes data for tax preparation and has outfitted a kitchen for a new home without consulting me because she knows my taste," Ms. Amadon said. "To prepare for a 100-person fund-raiser at my house, all I have to do is take a shower and show up. Fransisca plans everything, from the invitations to the flowers and caterers."

Ms. Amadon said that Ms. Strampher "knows every detail of our finances, every ailment our family has had, and everyone's side of the story when there's a squabble."

For her part, Ms. Strampher enjoys the responsibility and decision-making freedom. "Linden trusts my judgment," she said. "She considers me a partner and gives me an enormous amount of discretion when I do things on her behalf."

Not all personal assistants and employers enjoy the close relationship that Ms. Strampher and Ms. Amadon share. Such relationships require trust on both sides. The employer, of course, must be comfortable that the assistant will handle personal property and information properly. And the assistant should feel secure that the employer won't pile on so many unexpected tasks to an already amorphous job description that the assistant feels overburdened.

The work of a personal assistant isn't always full time. Families with less intensive needs can turn to part-time assistants to handle a smaller portion of their tasks. Magan Wiggs, who worked for six years as a full-time personal assistant on the West Coast, now tailors her services for a small number of families.

Billing herself as a "Jill of all trades," Ms. Wiggs — charging \$35 to \$45 an hour — will shop, manage car maintenance or perform other tasks to free up her clients' time. "Initiative is key to being a great personal assistant," she said. "You need to be honest, flexible and protective of your clients, too, but seeing what needs to be done or how to do it better is the mark of excellence."

This winter Ms. Wiggs is spending much of her time at a ski resort in British Columbia, checking on her clients' properties or preparing them for guests.

As Mr. Laitmon noted, "a personal assistant may act as a concierge, transforming a vacation home into a boutique luxury hotel for her employer's friends."

For families with small children, the nanny often takes on the role of partial personal assistant, especially as the children spend more hours in school. "Our nanny does things like organize birthday parties, shop, sign the kids up for their after-school classes and manage the housekeeper," said Carolyn Anderson, a private banker who lives and works in Manhattan with her husband and two children. "She takes a lot off my plate so I'm free to spend weekends and evenings with the kids."

All the families who employed nannies and were interviewed for this article assigned household duties to them.

PEOPLE who need just a little help around the edges may call a concierge service and pay \$30 to \$50 an hour to accomplish one-time projects like researching car insurance or preparing a household for a move. They may also seek regular assistance for a certain number of hours a month. For simple needs and small budgets, enterprising college students can usually be found.

Christopher Baker, who helps clients hire domestic staff through his agency in Los Angeles, noted an increased demand for personal assistants over the last few years. "Wealthy people are buying second and third homes and creating these really big lives," he said, "and the bigger their life, the more help they need to manage it."

"But time," he added, "turns out to be the greatest asset of all, and so they hire assistants."