

## MY BRILLIANT CAREER

# Concierge beats bonus

*Latest perk being offered to Canadian executives is a full-service personal assistant*

BY CLIFF VANDERLINDEN  
*Financial Post*

When busy Montreal executives don't have time to pick up their dry cleaning or take their cars in for service, they call Karen Quinn.

Ms. Quinn, a McGill commerce graduate, is a corporate concierge. She teamed up with her sister Paula five years ago to offer their services to Montreal and West Island businesses.

Once the preserve of hotel lobbies, the concierge is rapidly becoming a staple in executive benefit plans in corporate Canada.

Ms. Quinn regularly procures dinner reservations and concert tickets much like the hotel concierge does. However, unlike her counterparts in the hotel, she is a full-service personal assistant. Whether it's booking your next vacation, gathering quotations for a home renovation, or picking up your children from school, a corporate concierge does it all.

"Companies hire us to look after their senior executives and take care of all their needs for them and their families," she says.

Although pricing structures vary, most corporate concierge services charge a retainer fee in the range of \$50 to \$100 a month for each employee, plus a per-hour fee, typically \$50, for services rendered.

"There's nothing that they won't do," says Janice Parente, president and managing director of Ethica Clinical Research Inc., who uses Ms. Quinn's services regularly, for everything from arranging dinner parties to facilitating home cleaning services.

But it's the out-of-the-ordinary tasks for which she gives her concierge acclaim. Ms. Parente, a molecular pharmacologist with two young daughters, recalls Ms. Quinn's search for the family's missing hamster.

"I don't even know how he escaped, but he'd been gone since Sunday night and we didn't know what to do," Ms. Parente says.

Ms. Quinn says there is almost no limit to what she'll do for her clients. One of her favourite occupational tales is about an executive who promised his family a new sailboat for their summer vacation.

"Hunting for a boat is very time-consuming, and he was midproject," she says. But a quick call to his corporate concierge spared the busy executive from a summer in the dog house.

"He told us what kind of a boat he wanted and we found him the perfect boat in Ottawa," Ms. Quinn remembers. "On a Saturday he drove up, looked at it, bought it, hitched it to his car and drove home a hero."

By tending to the things of everyday life, corporate concierges allow executives to focus on their work without worrying about personal commitments — and increase overall productivity in the process.

According to Ms. Parente, the concierge service has improved her home life, as well. "I have freed up time. And I don't work with that time — I spend it with my family. I take off weekends now more than ever," she says.

She is so impressed she plans to offer concierge services to her employees as incentives.

"Bonuses are great and everyone loves money, but half of it doesn't even go to you," she says, referring to the 46% income tax bite on additional earnings in the top bracket.

It's the new math for executive compensation. Instead of trying to pay large sums of cash to squeeze extra productivity — meaning more on-the-job hours — out of executives, some companies are taking aim at reducing personal commitments so employees can retain the same amount of leisure time and still be more productive at work.

The formula is timely given rising employee absenteeism in the Canadian workforce. Watson Wyatt, a human capital and financial management consulting firm, has found that short-term

absence costs, as a percentage of total payroll, jumped to 4.2% from 2% between 1997 and 2000.

Moreover, in 2000, the average direct cost of employee absenteeism in Canada was \$3,550 a year per employee.

Even if corporate concierges do not counterbalance employee absenteeism, Bob Decameron, president and chief executive of OTG Financial Inc., says he still believes the service provides a positive return on investment.

"For me to take somebody off high-value-added activities for clients to plan out a Christmas party, for example, is just not good use of money and time," he says. "I have people who have talents in the financial services world, not necessarily in planning a party."

To plan his corporate events, Mr. Decameron counts on Katherine Parris of Torontobased Parris Concierge. Ms. Parris has been providing concierge services to the Toronto business community for about five years, and much of her work is focused on event planning.

"It could be anything from product launches to sales meetings," she says. "They tell us their needs and expectations, and we execute it."

For Mr. Decameron's money, a corporate concierge simply makes sense. "If I look even at my executive assistant's cost per hour and all the things I need her to do that benefit our clients, it's a no-brainer when I look at the cost per hour of Katherine to do stuff that otherwise I might ask my executive assistant to do."

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CHRISTINNE MUSCHI FOR NATIONAL POST There isn't much corporate concierge Karen Quinn, left, won't do for clients such as Janice Parente, a molecular pharmacologist who has two young daughters.