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Too Busy? Maybe the Butler Can Do It



Librado Romero/The New York Times

HAVE FOOD, WILL TRAVEL Debbie Campos, a chef, prepared a meal in Scarsdale, N.Y., for a client of Lifeworx, which provides home services for busy professionals and retirees.

By **ANTHONY RAMIREZ**

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BAL AGRAWAL'S long journey from metals specialist in India to job entrepreneur in Westchester County begins with a Romeo and Juliet story: his own.

In his native Mumbai, when he was 23, he fell in love with a Portuguese Catholic woman named Candida who, Mr. Agrawal knew, would be an affront to his Indian parents.

Mr. Agrawal married Candida and left for the United States. But, at 41, Candida fell ill and died of cancer, leaving Mr. Agrawal to raise their young son, Alok, alone.

"Once the personal pain went away, I didn't dwell on it," said Mr. Agrawal, now 54 and living in Chappaqua, N.Y. "I try to turn all my experiences, even those that are wounding, into something positive."

As a single father who was also a busy executive with the large industrial corporation, Praxair, Mr. Agrawal became increasingly focused on household errands and how he could never get around to doing some of them on time: supermarket shopping, housecleaning, the usual.

"They were the typical sorts of errands that everyone has," said Mr. Agrawal, a round-faced man whose speech gallops when he becomes enthusiastic. "But unlike everyone else, I literally had no family here to help at all, since I had left my family in India."

Soon, his musings about "Wouldn't it be great if I could just hire butlers?" became "What if I formed a company that offered a small army of butlers for hire?"

For more than a decade, Mr. Agrawal, a former Praxair executive in charge of business development as well as a Ph.D. in metallurgy from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, thought about what he should do and how he should do it.

Last year, having set aside a large nest egg, Mr. Agrawal decided to quit the big company and form a small company, which, after scores of false starts for names, he called LifeWorx.

"We're a part-time intelligent butler," Mr. Agrawal said.

If that description doesn't quite give a crisp picture of what Lifeworx does, or if the name LifeWorx seems vague, Mr. Agrawal will concede the point. "I'm still working on sharpening the marketing," he said.

He just knows that LifeWorx (the quirky spelling comes from his hunch that companies with an X prosper) is a lot better than the scores of names he rejected, like "I.Q. for Hire," "Wisehands" and even "Wise Guys."

Currently, LifeWorx has only a dozen employees: three organizers (who attack chaotic closets and other household space), three household cleaners, two pet-care groomers and walkers, one chef, a nurse, as well as an office manager and marketer. Mr. Agrawal sees adding more esoteric skills to the group, like academic research.

For now, LifeWorx has more employees than it has customers: 10 clients so far, all from Westchester County. Most of them are busy professionals, including three physicians, but two are retired, one in his 90's in an assisted-living facility.

Since Lifeworx is still small and less than seven months old, it is still working out its procedures. But the approach of Debbie Campos, 38, the Lifeworx chef, is fairly typical. A former chef for private clients in Westchester County, she is the mother of two school-age children.

"My job," she said, "is to provide whatever chef needs a client would want, whether it's regular daily meals, a special dinner for two, a cooking lesson, or a party."

For one client last month, Ms. Campos cooked a two-person dinner of risotto, chicken with bacon and sage, and roasted asparagus. When the client needs meals for children, she might cook beef and broccoli stir-fry for the parent and enchiladas for the youngsters.

Even though she is the Lifeworx chef, her job does not stop at cooking. In recent weeks she has shopped for groceries, picked up prescriptions, shined shoes, and since it was the holidays last month, wrapped Christmas presents.

The federal Bureau of Labor Statistics tracks people who do each of those things but not people who do all of those things, let alone companies that employ such jacks-of-all-trades. Terry Schau, a bureau economist, who examined several possible occupations and categories that Lifeworx employees might resemble, finally gave up. "The company's pretty much unique," he said, a bureaucratic term of art meaning it can't be analyzed. "I'm not sure what its outlook is."

But, Mr. Schau offered in an aside, "They have a nice little niche if it succeeds."

This column about the local economy appears every other week. E-mail address:

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