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Roberts: Gift delivery, dog feeding all in a day's work.

WORKLIFE

Concierges checking in at Bay Area firms

Who has time to pick up laundry, wait for cable guy? Your personal assistant

BY KRISTEN BOLE
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Eric Roberts never knows what to expect when the phone rings: Questions on the best treks in Nepal, a request for help waiting in line at the Post Office, or a plea to take care of a cat.

"Anything can hit you — a top-of-the-line dog collar, anything," said Roberts, a manager at 2 Places At 1 Time concierge services in San Francisco. "And you have to research that on your own."

But Roberts' callers aren't a concierge's traditional clientele, hotel guests. They're harried office workers.

As the pace of life and length of workdays rises in the Bay Area, people increasingly complain that there just

isn't enough time in the week to work 60 hours and still handle the logistics of home life.

Now, companies are cropping up to fill in that gap, offering services at the office that used to be the domain of the stay-at-home wife. Among the latest entrants in the Bay Area is Atlanta's 2 Places At 1 Time, which offers on-site corporate "runners" to take the car in for detailing, research a vacation, zip home for the cell phone left on the counter or feed pets during extended travel.

"There have been times when we've even stocked people's refrigerators for them so they had food when they came home from a business trip," said Roberts, who launched the concierge service on Monday at Genentech

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Inc., in South San Francisco.

While the service has become common in the world of finance and consulting, including Arthur Anderson and Ernst &

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Judy Heyboer
Genentech Inc.

Young, Genentech is among the first companies outside that sector to pick it up. The change is partly because the average high-tech job nowadays keeps people away from home almost as much as consulting jobs do.

"I look at it as a work-life balance," Roberts said. "Men and women are putting in so many hours at work, they'd rather have someone else pick up their dry cleaning or pick up groceries so they have more time on the weekends."

A number of the region's larger companies have caught the bug. Netscape Communications has also set up a concierge service, with San Francisco-based Les Concierges — a company that has done everything from planning weddings in Australia for clients to meeting them at the airport with a suitcase of clean clothes. Both 3Com and Arthur Andersen have also hooked up with 2 Places At 1 Time, with

about half of the staff using it in a given year.

The inspiration is clear at companies like Genentech, which have built their headquarters in industrial parks where employees find themselves stranded.

"If you're in the city, you can run errands on your lunch hour," said Genentech Human Resources Director Judy Heyboer. "That is hard for us to do in South San Francisco."

Much of what the concierges do, though, is hard for anyone nowadays.

As Heyboer pointed out, most professionals now are either on their own or have a partner who works similar hours. Many at Genentech also work late hours in the labs. So when the power company or delivery van says it will arrive between 9 a.m. and noon, chances are, no one will be home.

"It fills the need for the stay-home spouse," Heyboer said of the new concierge service. "They'll go to the home and wait for a package or wait for the cable man. You just tell them where and when and they'll go."

The expense, too, is moderate, especially for a company that already offers on-site day care, travel agents, postal services and a general store. Genentech provided the concierge a computer and workstation, paid an entry fee and guaranteed a set amount of business for the full-time concierge and runner. Employees pay \$10 for the first hour, \$15 an hour after that, and colleagues can bundle chores to cut costs. Roberts handles the hiring, pays the staff, trains them in Internet research or other skills and makes sure Genentech's needs are met.

"It's fairly cost-effective," said Heyboer,

who started trying to set up a concierge system about six months ago. "If it goes as well as it seems, it should improve productivity for us and offer peace of mind for our employees."

So far, Roberts said the response has been positive at Genentech, from both management and staff. And unlike many consultants, who often use concierges to shuttle business projects or equipment, much of the interest so far has been for personal services. Once it gets personal, it starts to get interesting.

As a result, though, it's not a job for just anyone.

"It has to be someone who genuinely enjoys making people happy," he said. "We look for the individual who has a knack for achieving the impossible. It's a people-helper position — for some people, that's impossible." ■