

If you want something doing, then don't do it yourself

From renewing your passport to walking your dog, the services that have sprung up for people in a hurry



By Esther Shaw

"So much to do, so little time." For those who live life at a million miles an hour, many tasks don't seem to fit into their day. And the temptation is there to pass them on to someone else.

Until recently, the only real outlet for this was the "concierge" services offered by credit card companies, which, for example, would book concert tickets on your behalf. But now a new breed of personal services has sprung up to master the minutiae of modern life for you. For a price, these firms, or one-man bands, will do nearly everything from sorting your wireless broadband and renewing your passport, to walking your dog and finding the right shoes for a party.

While it's not usually cheap, the time-poor but cash-rich are increasingly prepared to throw fistfuls of notes at someone else to sort out a problem.

Here are some of the 21st-century services on offer.

Doing the DIY

Getting someone in - or "GSI" - was widely blamed by DIY chains last year for a slump in sales, as homeowners laid down their hammers.

It used to be hard, and expensive, to find a handyman at short notice, but a growth in small DIY firms has changed this. A company called 0800handyman (0800handyman.co.uk) charges £20 per half hour, on top of a £20 callout fee. Established in 2001, the team of workmen do odd jobs in London and the South-east such as fixing, decorating, basic plumbing and electrical work.

The handymen aren't registered with any industry bodies, but they do undergo a rigorous interview process. "We offer a satisfaction guarantee,

and if customers are not happy, we'll put things right," says managing director Bruce Greig. The firm carries £2m of public liability insurance.

Other firms include Handyman Express (handymanexpress.co.uk), the Handy Squad (handysquad.com) and Fearless Mike (fearlessmike.com), which delivers and assembles furniture from flat-pack retailer Ikea.

There is a delivery charge at Fearless Mike - starting at £25 (excluding VAT) for goods worth up to £100 but rising to £90 - and one workman costs £30 an hour.

With all these services, you should ask for references, shop around for quotes and find out whether the workmen belong to a trade association.

Also check if they have insurance - and who you can complain to if the job goes wrong.

Computer chaos

In the office, you can simply call IT for help. But what do you do when your personal computer at home breaks down?

So far your solution might have been to turn to impenetrable instructions or a pricey helpline, or simply to shout a stream of expletives. But there are now more constructive alternatives.

Scooter Computer (scootercomputer.co.uk) charges £69 for the first hour, and the same per hour after that; there's no callout charge. Technicians

are on call, on motorbikes, seven days a week and cover central and south-west London.

The service, set up just over a year ago, is aimed at "improving users' IT experience without the stress".

"We get calls on broadband connections, computers that won't start and emails not sending," says manager Dan Haysom.

Scooter also provides data backups, disaster recovery, the transfer of CD music to iPods, virus protection, and even computer lessons at £55 an hour.

Other services include Geeks on Wheels (geeks-on-wheels.com).

Call the concierge

Most concierge services will consider almost any task - as long as it's legal and moral.

You can pay on a one-off basis by the hour but most require a joining fee and a monthly subscription. And some of the more exclusive concierge services are by invitation only.

Consider it Done (consider-it-done.co.uk) has a one-off £255 joining fee and a monthly subscription of £295, for which you receive up to eight hours' service per month.

"Every client gets their own 'lifestyle manager' who works through their chores - getting a washing machine mended, a passport renewed or waiting on hold for tickets," says managing director Sue Reeve.

Quintessentially (quintessentially.com) has three different levels of membership starting at £750 a year for "general", and rising to a remarkable £24,000 a year for "elite" (by invitation only and usually for celebrities).

Launched in 2000, it gives members access to a host of time-saving services, such as where to find presents or a good nanny. It can also book clients into the best restaurants, health clubs, concerts, plays, sporting events and nightclubs.

Other services include Ten Lifestyle Management (tenuk.com), Concierge London (concierge-london.co.uk) and Cushion the Impact (cushiontheimpact.co.uk).

Walking the dog

You can find these services in most parts of the UK. For example, Middlesex-based Mutley Crew (mutleycrew.co.uk) offers a "range of personalised services", including dog-sitting, boarding, dog walking and a pet taxi. It costs from £18 per day for sitting, while dog walking starts at £8 per one-hour walk. The company is fully insured and a member of the National Association of Registered Petsitters.

Every dog owner has his day off: petsitting is one of a breed of personal services now available for the 'cash-rich but time-poor'

JAMES BORCHUCK/AP

