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My outsourced Life

Call centers do it. IT firms do it. Manufacturers are doing the hell out of it. Even the CIA does it. So why can't I?

By: A.J. Jacobs

I really shouldn't have to write this article myself. I mean, why am I the one stuck in front of a computer terminal? All this tedious pecking out of words on my laptop. Nouns, verbs, adjectives, *prepositions*. Jesus. What a pain in my ass. Can't someone else do it? Can't I delegate this to one of my new assistants and spend my day kicking back on a chaise longue, Sam Adams in hand, admiring Mischa Barton's navel on my TV? What about having Asha write it? Or Sunder, Vivek, or Mr. Naveen? Or best of all, my sweet, sweet Honey? Pretty much anyone on my overseas staff will do. Or maybe not. Maybe that's one of the lessons of these jarring and curiously enlightening four weeks. Dammit. I guess I'll have to write about the *lessons*, too. Okay, on with it. Here you go. As my team might say, thanking you in advance for reading this story.

It began a month ago. I was midway through *The World Is Flat*, the best-seller by Tom Friedman. I like Friedman, despite his puzzling decision to wear a mustache. His book is all about how outsourcing to India and China is not just for tech support and carmakers but is poised to transform every industry in America, from law to banking to accounting. CEOs are chopping up projects and sending the lower-end tasks to strangers in cubicles ten time zones away. And it's only going to snowball; America has not yet begun to outsource.

I don't have a corporation; I don't even have an up-to-date business card. I'm a writer and editor working from home, usually in my boxer shorts or, if I'm feeling formal, my penguin-themed pajama bottoms. Then again, I think, why should *Fortune* 500 firms have all the fun? Why can't I join in on the biggest business trend of the new century? Why can't I outsource *my* low-end tasks? Why can't I outsource my life?

The next day I e-mail Brickwork, one of the companies Friedman mentions in his book. Brickwork--based in Bangalore, India--offers "remote executive assistants," mostly to financial firms and health-care companies that want data processed. I explain that I'd like to hire someone to help with Esquire-related tasks--doing research, formatting memos, like that. The company's CEO, Vivek Kulkarni, responds: "It would be a great pleasure to be talking to a person of your stature." Already I'm liking this. I've never had stature before. In America, I barely command respect from a Bennigan's maître d', so it's nice to know that in India I have stature.

A couple of days later, I get an e-mail from my new "remote executive assistant."

Dear Jacobs,

My name is Honey K. Balani. I would be assisting you in your editorial and personal job. . . . I would try to adapt myself as per your requirements that would lead to desired satisfaction.

Desired satisfaction. This is great. Back when I worked at an office, I had assistants, but there was never any talk of *desired satisfaction*. In fact, if anyone ever used the phrase "desired satisfaction," we'd all end up in a solemn meeting with HR. And I won't even comment on the name Honey except to say that, real or not, it sure carries Anaïs Nin undertones.

Oh, did I mention that Vivek sent me a JPEG of Honey? She's wearing a white sleeveless shirt and has full lips, long hair, skin the color of her first name. She looks a bit like an Indian Eva Longoria. I can't stop staring at her

left eyebrow, which is ever so slightly cocked. Is she flirting with me?

I go out to dinner with my friend Misha, who grew up in India, founded a software firm, and subsequently became nauseatingly rich. I tell him about Operation Outsource. "You should call Your Man in India," he says. Misha explains that this is a company for Indian businessmen who have moved overseas but who still have parents back in New Delhi or Mumbai. YMII is their overseas concierge service--it buys movie tickets and cell phones and other sundries for the abandoned moms.

Perfect. This could kick my outsourcing up to a new level. I can have a nice, clean division of labor: Honey will take care of my business affairs, and YMII can attend to my personal life--pay my bills, make vacation reservations, buy stuff online. Happily, YMII likes the idea, and just like that the support team at Jacobs Inc. has doubled. And so far, I'm not going broke: I'm paying \$1,000 for a month of eight-hour days from Honey (Brickwork gave me a half-off deal) and \$400 for a month of four-hour days from Your Man in India.

To pay for YMII, I send my MasterCard number in an e-mail. The company's CEO, Sunder P., replies with a gentle but stern note: "In your own interests, and for security purposes, we advise you not to send credit-card information through e-mail. Now that it has been sent, there is nothing much we can do about it and we confirm safe receipt." Damn. I know what he's thinking: How the hell did these idiots ever become a superpower?

Honey has completed her first project for me: research on the person Esquire has chosen as the Sexiest Woman Alive. (See page 232.) I've been assigned to write a profile of this woman, and I really don't want to have to slog through all the heavy-breathing fan Web sites about her. When I open Honey's file, I have this reaction: America is fucked. There are charts. There are section headers. There is a well-organized breakdown of her pets, measurements, and favorite foods (e.g., swordfish). If all Bangalorians are like Honey, I pity Americans about to graduate college. They're up against a hungry, polite, Excel-proficient Indian army. Put it this way: Honey ends her e-mails with "Right time for right action, starts now!" Your average American assistant believes the "right time for right action" starts after a Starbucks venti latte and a discussion of last night's *Amazing Race* 8.

I get an introductory e-mail from my personal-life outsourcer. Her name is Asha. Even though the firm's called Your Man in India, I've been assigned another woman. *Hmm*. I suspect these outsourcers figure I'm a randy men's-magazine editor who enjoys bossing around the ladies. I e-mail Asha a list of books I want from BarnesAndNoble.com and a birthday gift I'd like her to buy my wife, Julie--a silicone pot holder. (Romantic, no?) Both go smoothly.

In fact, in the next few days, I outsource a whole mess of online errands to Asha: paying my bills, getting stuff from drugstore.com, finding my son a Tickle Me Elmo. (Actually, the store was out of Tickle Me Elmos, so Asha bought a Chicken Dance Elmo--good decision.) I had her call Cingular to ask about my cell-phone plan. I'm just guessing, but I bet her call was routed from Bangalore to New Jersey and then back to a Cingular employee in Bangalore, which makes me happy for some reason.

Every day Asha attaches an Excel chart listing the status of my many tasks. The system is working--not counting the hitch in the drugstore order: Instead of wax paper, we get wax-strip mustache removers for ladies. My wife is insulted.

It's the fourth morning of my new, farmed-out life, and when I flip on my computer, my e-mail in-box is already filled with updates from my overseas aides. It's a strange feeling having people work for you while you sleep. Strange, but great. I'm not wasting time while I drool on my pillow; things are getting done.

As on every morning at 8:30, I get a call from Honey. "Good morning, Jacobs." Her accent is noticeable but not too thick, Americanized by years of voice training. She's the single most upbeat person I've ever encountered. Whatever soul-deadening chore I give her, she says, "That would indeed be interesting" or "Thank you for bestowing this important task." I have a feeling that if I asked her to count the number of semicolons in the Senate energy bill, she would be grateful for such a fascinating project.

Every call ends the same way: I thank her, and she replies, "You are *a*lways welcome, Jacobs." I'm starting to like her a lot.

One task for which Honey is thankful is e-mailing my colleagues. I've begun to refuse to communicate with them directly. Why should I? Honey can be my buffer from the unpleasant world of office politics. I'll be aloof and

mysterious, like the pope or Mark Burnett. This morning, I ask Honey to pester my boss about an idea I sent him a few days ago: an article on modern gold prospectors.

Mr. Granger,

Jacobs had mailed you about the idea of "gold prospecting." I am sure you would have received his mail on this. It would be great if you could invest your time and patience on giving thought about his plans. Do revert and let Jacobs know about your suggestions on the same. As you know that your decision would be accepted with utmost respect.

Jacobs is awaiting your response.

Thanking you, Honey Balani

Another advantage to this strategy: My boss can't just e-mail a terse "No," as he might to me. Honey's finely crafted e-mails demand a polite multisentence response. The balance of power has shifted.

It's Julie's birthday today, and I've kept Asha busy with celebration-related tasks. Picnic orders, reminder e-mails to Julie's friends, and so on. Asha is more distant than Honey. I now have a vague sense of who Honey is--she's a mere twenty years old, likes to go bowling and go-carting, wears sleeveless shirts--but Asha? Nothing. In my few phone calls with Asha, I've noticed that her accent is slightly more pronounced than Honey's and that she speaks in sort of a monotone, so I can't even tell if she likes me. Which makes me insecure. And I'm even more nervous about her boss, Sunder P. He's been monitoring Asha's orders and sent me a note that she "missed the point" and bungled a communication about a kitchenware item. He's tough. But then today, the YMII team up and sends Julie an unsolicited birthday e-card--with butterflies and a Robert Louis Stevenson quote. I feel much better. I shoot back a thank-you.

Sunder P. writes back:

Looking at the things we have been ordering on behalf of you, Asha almost was feeling like being part of your household. So isn't it befitting that we wish your family and be part of your celebration. (Remotely . . . from 10,000 miles away.)

I tell him that we feel she's part of the family, too. I don't have the heart to inform him that Julie was kind of disappointed that I had asked Asha to call 1-800-Flowers. The roses and lilies looked fine to me, but apparently 1-800-Flowers is the McDonald's of florists, and she was expecting more Daniel Boulud.

I think I'm in love with Honey. How can I not be? She makes my mother look unsupportive. Every day I get showered with compliments, many involving capital letters: "awesome Editor" and "Family Man." When I confess I'm a bit tired, she tells me, "You need rest. . . . Do not to overexert yourself." It's constant positive feedback, like phone sex without the moaning.

Sometimes the relentless admiration makes me feel a little awkward, perhaps like a viceroy in the British East India company. *Another cucumber sandwich, Honey! And a Pimm's cup while you're at it!* But then she calls me "brilliant" and I forget my guilt.

Plus, Honey is my protector. Consider this: For some reason, the Colorado Tourism Board e-mails me all the time. (Most recently, they informed me about a festival in Colorado Springs featuring the world's most famous harlequin.) I request that Honey gently ask them to stop with the press releases. Here's what she sent:

Dear All,

Jacobs often receives mails from Colorado news, too often. They are definitely interesting topics. However, these topics are not suitable for "Esquire."

Further, we do understand that you have taken a lot of initiatives working on these articles and sending it to us. We understand. Unfortunately, these articles and mails are too time consuming to be read.

Currently, these mails are not serving right purpose for both of us. Thus, we request to stop sending these mails.

We do not mean to demean your research work by this.

We hope you understand too.

Thanking you,

Honey K B

That is the best rejection notice in journalism history. It's exceedingly polite, but there's a little undercurrent of indignation. Honey seems almost outraged that Colorado would waste the valuable time of Jacobs.

Along the same lines, Honey wrote a complaint letter to American Airlines for me; the flight I recently took offered only shrimp for dinner, a dish I don't eat. "Since it has caused such an inconvenience, I demand reimbursement," she wrote. Don't mess with Honey.

Incidentally, Honey and Asha don't know about each other. I'm constantly worried about getting busted for my infidelities, for my life of outsourcer bigamy. What if they run into each other at the Bangalore hardware store? What if I call Asha "Honey" and she thinks I'm hitting on her?

My father-in-law has come to town, which means a dinner filled with a series of increasingly excruciating puns. Asked whether he ever suffered gout, he replies, "No gout about it!"

Damn, do I wish I could outsource this dinner. Where's Honey? Where's Asha?

I've become addicted to outsourcing. I am desperate to delegate everything in my life but have to face the depressing reality that there are limits. I can't outsource those horrible twenty-five-minute StairMaster sessions. I can't outsource taking a piss. I can't outsource sex with Julie. Not that I dislike it, but we're trying to have another kid, which means a whole bunch of sex, and enough is enough, you know? It gets tiring. I can't outsource watering the ficus.

Still . . . every weekend, I place a dutiful call to my parents. It's a nice thing to do, I figure--but it's also a huge time vacuum. This weekend it's Mom and Dad's anniversary, so I can expect it to eat up even more of my day than usual. Mr. Naveen to the rescue. I e-mail Mr. Naveen--the YMII employee who will be on duty at the time--a few concerned-sounding questions and a couple of filial sound bites. Next day, I get this e-mail:

I made an out bound call to Jacob's parents. They very happily received my call. I first introduced myself to them. Then i wished them Happy Anniversary they both told me thank you. . . . I asked them how is the weather in their place. They told me that it is pretty nice temperature here and the garden looks beautiful.

I won't reproduce the whole transcript, but apparently my mom's sprained foot has gotten better (though the rain does not help), and my dad's law practice is going along very well. As for me, I had a good week, apparently. This was highly successful outsourcing, saving me at least half an hour of sweaty-eared phone time.

My outsourcers now know an alarming amount about me--not just my schedule but my cholesterol, my infertility problems, my Social Security number, my passwords (including the one that is a particularly adolescent curse word). Sometimes I worry that I can't piss off my outsourcers or I'll end up with a \$12,000 charge on my MasterCard bill from the Louis Vuitton in Anantapur.

In any case, the information imbalance is pretty huge. I know practically nothing about them. So I e-mail them both to request a minibiography.

Honey sends me a two-page file called Honey4U. She's a jazz and salsa dancer, loves *Friends*, reads Jeffrey Archer. She has a boyfriend. She works from 2:00 P.M. to 11:00 P.M. her time and has an hour-and-a-half commute at either end. She trains people in customer-handling skills and in how to lose their Indian accent. She likes broccoli, coriander, and orange juice.

Asha, as expected, is a little less prolix but still gives me some nuggets: She's also a salsa dancer, oddly enough. She used to do something called "value-based education through dance." She studied electrical engineering, got married in February to a guy in real estate. She works from 9:30 A.M. to 5:30 P.M. Bangalore time. She lives with her in-laws.

I've realized something: Asha and Honey never say no. I find myself testing them, asking them to perform increasingly bizarre tasks, inching toward abuse of power. Read *The New York Times* for me. E-mail me a bunch of questions from *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. Send me a collection of Michael Jackson jokes (e.g., "Why was Michael Jackson spotted at Kmart? He heard boys' pants were half off"). I keep pushing, but I haven't yet found their limits. The closest I got to a no was when I made the admittedly odd request that Asha play the card game hearts for me, since I was wasting too much time playing it myself on my PalmPilot. Asha replied that she thought this was a "good idea" but that maybe she would do it after finishing the other projects.

Emboldened by Mr. Naveen's triumph with my parents, I decide to test the next logical relationship: my marriage. These arguments with my wife are killing me--partly because Julie is a much better debater than I am. Maybe Asha can do better:

Hello Asha,

My wife got annoyed at me because I forgot to get cash at the automatic bank machine. . . . I wonder if you could tell her that I love her, but gently remind her that she too forgets things--she has lost her wallet twice in the last month. And she forgot to buy nail clippers for Jasper.

AJ

I can't tell you what a thrill I got from sending that note. It's pretty hard to get much more passive-aggressive than bickering with your wife via an e-mail from a subcontinent halfway around the world.

The next morning, Asha CC'd me on the e-mail she sent to Julie.

Julie,

Do understand your anger that I forgot to pick up the cash at the automatic machine. I have been forgetful and I am sorry about that.

But I guess that doesn't change the fact that I love you so much. . . .

Love

AJ

P. S. This is Asha mailing on behalf of Mr. Jacobs.

As if that weren't enough, she also sent Julie an e-card. I click on it: two teddy bears embracing, with the words "Anytime you need a hug, I've got one for you. . . . I'm sorry."

Damn! My outsourcers are too friggin' nice! They kept the apology part but took out my little jabs. They are trying to save me from myself. They are superegoing my id. I feel castrated.

Julie, on the other hand, seems quite pleased: "That's nice, sweetie. I forgive you."

I shoot off another e-mail to Asha:

Could you thank her for forgiving me for not getting cash? And tell her that I, in turn, forgive her for forgetting to tell me about the Central Park date with Shannon and David until I overheard her talking about it with a friend.

The next morning I get CC'd on another Asha e-mail to Julie.

Am happy you forgave me for not getting the cash. And I am glad to do the same about the Central Park date with Shannon and David.

It's human nature to forget. Perhaps, I could do better by having Asha put up a calendar and sending us reminders about these little things.

Love

AJ

Good. At least this time I got my little dig in. But Julie just brushes it off--it's hard to trump a hugging-teddy-bear apology note. Like it or not, those damn stuffed animals improved my marriage. Asha should take care of all my bickering; she's my better nature.

Honey seems to be lavishing me with even more adulation these days. She tells me that she waits eagerly for my e-mails. I'm beginning to feel like David Koresh without the guitar or weapons stash. It's a little stressful. I'm forever afraid of disappointing her, of not being creative or brilliant enough to merit her acclaim. On the other hand, maybe she's just doing her job and actually despises my white imperialist ass.

At the least, I figure I can take advantage of the exaltation. I ask Honey to write an entry in Wikipedia--the online, open-source encyclopedia--about me and my recent book, *The Know-It-All*. It reads in part:

"A. J. Jacobs is a not so unheard of international figure, who can threaten the most au courant wizards with his knowledge. . . . [He] is a writer and editor of phenomenal grey matter."

Perfection.

Friedman quotes outsourcing advocates who argue we should embrace it as an opportunity. If someone else is plugging away on the lower-end tasks, that frees Americans to work on higher-end creative projects. Makes sense. After all, Jacobs is the creative genius with phenomenal grey matter. The world is better off with me focused on the high end.

But lately, Honey has started sending me unsolicited ideas--and some of them are pretty good. Granted, there are a few clunkers in there, and the English sometimes needs to be decoded, like a rebus. But there are also some winners: Honey suggests Esquire conduct a survey on what women want men to wear. Could work.

The point is, she's got talent. If Honey is a guide, the Indian workforce can be just as innovative and aggressive as the American, so the "benefits" might not be so beneficial. Us high-end types will be as vulnerable as assembly-line workers. (Friedman's other pro-outsourcing argument seems more persuasive--that free trade will open up the huge Chinese and Indian markets to American exports.)

Regardless, if I end up on a street corner with a WILL EDIT FOR FOOD sign, then at least I'll know that I've lost my job to decent, salsa-loving people like Honey and Asha.

Despite three weeks with my support team, I'm still stressed. Perhaps it's the fault of Chicken Dance Elmo, whom my son loves to the point of dry humping, but who is driving me slowly insane. Whatever the reason, I figure it's time to conquer another frontier: outsourcing my inner life.

First, I try to delegate my therapy. My plan is to give Asha a list of my neuroses and a childhood anecdote or two, have her talk to my shrink for fifty minutes, then relay the advice. Smart, right? My shrink refused. Ethics or something. Fine. Instead, I have Asha send me a meticulously researched memo on stress relief. It had a nice Indian flavor to it, with a couple of yogic postures and some visualization.

This was okay, but it didn't seem quite enough. I decided I needed to outsource my worry. For the last few weeks I've been tearing my hair out because a business deal is taking far too long to close. I asked Honey if she would be interested in tearing her hair out in my stead. Just for a few minutes a day. She thought it was a wonderful idea. "I will worry about this every day," she wrote. "Do not worry."

The outsourcing of my neuroses was one of the most successful experiments of the month. Every time I started to ruminate, I'd remind myself that Honey was already on the case, and I'd relax. No joke--this alone was worth the \$1,000.

I've outsourced my marriage and filial duties, but somehow my son has gotten overlooked. It's time to delegate some parenting to the Jacobs support staff. Julie is out watching her childhood friend do a stand-up-comedy gig, and I'm stuck alone with Jasper. It's 7:00 P.M., Jasper's bedtime, but I've got to write some semi-urgent e-mails. No time for hungry caterpillars or jumping monkeys.

"Mr. Naveen? If I put you on speakerphone, would you be willing to read to my son? Oh, anything. The

newspaper's fine. Yeah, just say his name once in a while. It's Jasper. Okay, I'm going to put you on now. Okay, go ahead."

A pause. Then I hear Mr. Naveen's low but soothing voice: "Taiwan and Korea also are subscribing to new Indian funds in their markets." Jasper isn't crying. I'm tapping away on my PowerBook. "European Union . . . several potential investors . . . parliament." I glance at Jasper again; he seems perplexed but curious. "Aeronautical engineers and technicians." Jasper seems to like aeronautical engineers. "Prospects of a strong domestic demand." After three minutes, I start to feel guilt-ridden. I've officially begun to abuse my power. Why didn't I just turn on the Wiggles? Then again, Mr. Naveen's lilting voice is so comforting; if there were bright-colored cartoons of strong domestic demand, this would be ideal.

Speaking of the Indian domestic economy, it's looking pretty rosy. My team is good, cheap, and absurdly eager. They will do anything short of violating the Geneva Conventions. And with most of the tasks--online shopping, thank-you notes, research--my crew saves minutes or even hours of my day. Admittedly, the outsourcing of my life is sometimes counterproductive--an ill-fated order of an eggplant dish from a nearby restaurant comes to mind. But overall, it's working. To me, it seems the future of outsourcing is as limitless as . . . blah, blah, blah.

You know what? I'm kind of bored writing this piece. I'm going into the other room to enjoy some *Entourage* on HBO. So I've asked Honey to finish up writing this article for me.

Once, I was watching I, Robot with my wife and I thought Life would become so easy with a robot. Then, the next instant I thought not just a robot but more of a humanized robot. In the book The World Is Flat, the author wrote about an interesting job that could be outsourced to India, which provoked me to have a Remote Assistant. Though I have never seen Honey K. B., I speak to her almost everyday when she calls me. Though our communication is not visual, I still know that she is a reliable assistant. Our interactions that we have had through mails and telephonic conversation never made me feel that she is miles away from me. To conclude I would say I did not get a robot but yes a Human like me who can think and work for me.

Yes, America, we're cooked.

Mr. Kenney,

Managing Editor, Esquire

Good Morning!

This is in regards with the article on 'THE HARDEST QUIZ EVER.' Jacobs has been working on this article, currently. Jacobs is aware that this article is slated to appear in December's issue. Jacobs would like to know the appropriate day and date for its completion or a deadline.

Awaiting your response,

Thanking you,

Honey K. B.,

Executive Remote Assistant, A.J. Jacobs

From: "Honey K Balani"

Date: Tue Jun 7, 2005 9:33:58 AM US/Central

To: XXXXXXXX--Winery

Subject: A. J. Jacobs -- Editor Esquire Magazine

Dear All,

I am A. J. Jacobs Remote Assistant. I am writing this mail on behalf of him. This is in regards with the mails that Mr. A. J. Jacobs usually receives from you.

Thank you for the Invitation. That was definitely interesting. Congratulations for the New Releases. However, Mr. Jacobs would not be able to attend any kind of meetings or releases. He is too occupied for it.

Further, we do appreciate you inviting us. However, it would not be of any good reading these mails that he has received from you. As this would be time consuming for both of us. Jacobs is often busy with a lot of assignment work.

Hence, we request to stop sending these mails.

We do not mean to demean your mails.

But, we hope you understand.

Thanking you,

Honey K B

Executive Remote Assistant

A. J. Jacobs

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