

SO WHO NEEDS A SECRETARY?

Cruising down a rural Georgia road on the way to a speaking engagement, Jordan

Ayan, a technology consultant in Naperville, Ill., got an urgent call on his cellular phone. It was Wildfire, his electronic personal assistant, which had tracked him down and told him someone was trying to contact him. Ayan recognized the caller's name as a potential client who, as it turned out, wanted to book him for a speech at the last minute. "In the past, I would've lost that business. He wouldn't have been able to reach me and probably would've hired someone else," says Ayan, who spends 70% of his time on the road.

Wildfire and two other systems, Atlas and Oryx, represent a new breed of easy-to-use interactive telephone service that could make secretaries obsolete. They not only perform basic tasks, such as taking messages and connecting calls to your office directly to your mobile phone or hotel room, but actually engage in verbal give-and-take.

POLITE VOICE. The 18-month-old Wildfire was the first of its kind and is still the most lifelike. Hailed for its ease of use, it relies on sophisticated speech recognition to complete tasks. Say a call comes into your office. Wildfire answers in a polite female voice: "Hello, I'm the Wildfire assistant to Mr. Jones." The voice asks the caller to state his or her name and to say "Take a message" or "Put my call through." If the person needs to speak to you, Wildfire rings as many as five preprogrammed numbers, which can be easily changed, until it finds you.

Perhaps you're at an airport chatting on your cellular phone. Wildfire cuts in, whispers the name of the caller—only you hear it—and asks if you want to accept the call or have a message taken. By putting your current call on hold, you're connected to the new call. Otherwise, Wildfire will take a message. Later, while retrieving the message, you just say: "Wildfire, give them a call," and it will automatically dial the number.

Wildfire can also give you a morning wake-up call or a meeting reminder. Its call-back feature is especially cost-effective. If you're in a hotel room in Thailand, say, and someone is trying to reach you from the U.S., Wildfire can dial the caller from within the U.S. at the cheaper domestic phone rates and then connect you. It even has a sense of humor: Tell it you're depressed, and it says: "You're depressed. I



live in a box."

Once limited to corporate users who could shoulder the \$50,000 up-front cost of equipment, Wildfire is now targeting the home-office market through independent service providers. They buy the equipment and then charge the user a monthly fee of about \$39, plus telephone usage. By yearend, Wildfire may be available through larger companies such as AT&T and Pacific Mobile Bell.

While Wildfire only takes messages from telephone callers, Atlas and Oryx can notify you of an incoming fax and can customize services to your needs. Atlas, which is being launched this spring, uses an impersonal male voice to do all the tasks that Wildfire does, and then some. For example, Atlas collects your phone, fax, and pager messages, which can then be accessed on your PC via the Internet. You view messages on your screen or listen to them.

POPULARITY. Perhaps you're working on your portable computer. Before your cellular phone rings, an Atlas icon pops on your screen to alert you to an incoming call. Using your computer keypad, you choose whether you want to answer it, send it to voice mail, or pass it to a colleague. You can type your weekly schedule with forwarding numbers into your computer so that Atlas can track you down.

Oryx' basic features are similar to those of the other services, but its speech recognition is limited to dialing numbers. For other functions, you use the telephone keypad to respond to computerized voice prompts. Oryx has a few unique features. If your cellular phone battery starts to expire, you can transfer the call to a nearby phone without interrupting your conversation. Oryx also automatically reconnects a cellular call if you lose transmission while you're driving between zones.

Expect to see plenty more companies offering these services as their popularity increases. With an electronic personal assistant, even those who operate out of a home office don't have to feel like they're working alone.

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TELEPHONES

Follow-Me Phone Systems

SERVICE/COMPANY	APPROXIMATE COST*	COMMENTS
ORYX PRIORITY CALL MANAGEMENT 800 840-8618	\$20/month	Automatically reconnects cellular call if user temporarily loses transmission; limited speech recognition
ATLAS PRECISION SYSTEMS 800 TALK-PSI	\$25/month	Only service that allows user to pick up phone, fax, and pager messages via computer
WILDFIRE WILDFIRE COMM. 800 WILDFIRE	\$39/month	Lifelike and easy-to-use with elaborate voice recognition; collects phone messages only

* Doesn't include telephone charges

DATA: COMPANY REPORTS; BUSINESS WEEK