

John-Paul Flintoff took the outsourcing revolution to its logical conclusion and gave control of his life to experts from Britain to Bangalore

How I let go of my life and learnt to live a little

If it wasn't for A J Jacobs, I would never have requested underpants from a married woman in Bangalore. But Jacobs had inspired me. Unable to ignore the global trend for outsourcing business operations to India, he'd decided to outsource his life — with remarkable success.

Starting with routine tasks, such as ordering food and cinema tickets, Jacobs's agents in India moved on to increasingly delicate matters. They answered his e-mails, pestered his boss, and, on speakerphone, read bedtime stories to his son. After he argued with his wife, he instructed one agent to resolve the matter online. "I can't tell you what a thrill I got. It's hard to get much more passive-aggressive than bickering with your wife via an e-mail from a subcontinent halfway round the world."

The hilarious account of his experiment, in this month's *Esquire*, has already prompted Hollywood to buy the film rights. And it prompted me to try the same thing in Britain. After all, 60% of leading companies believe the service they get in India is as good as they could get here — and the cost is much lower. I get a dozen calls a day from good-natured Indians representing British companies. Instead of resenting the outsourcing revolution I decided to embrace it.

The first company I approached, Brickwork, originally launched as a service for banks and other financial institutions. Vivek Kulkarni, its chairman and chief executive, previously worked in government and helped to attract many multinational businesses to Bangalore. For as little as \$1,500 (£820) a month, he tells me, I can have a full-time graduate assistant at my disposal for 40 hours a week.

Until now, I'd never have believed I could justify the expense of a full-time assistant. But Jacobs's experience suggests it might be worthwhile. He asked Brickwork to pester his editor about a magazine story idea he'd sent in. The letter his assistant wrote was insistent but polite. "It would be great if you could invest your time and patience on giving thought to [Jacobs's] plans. Do let him know... Your decision would be accepted with utmost respect."

Jacobs loved it. "My boss can't just e-mail a terse 'No', as he might to me. Her finely crafted e-mail demands a polite response. The balance of power has shifted."

Brickwork had its limits, however; it declined to handle personal matters. So Jacobs hired Get Friday, a Bangalore-based service originally established to aid the thousands of Indians living abroad. (Most use it to run errands for aged parents back home.) The price for individuals is a reasonable \$299 (£165) a month. And there's no limit to the number of requests you can make.

I believe I'm the first customer in the UK who isn't Indian. Sunder Prakasham, the chief operating officer, reassured me: "It really doesn't matter if the service is to be rendered in New York or Hong Kong or Bristol. Anything that can be handled through the internet or phone is manageable, provided the language is English."

The agent who contacted me from Get Friday turned out to be Asha Sarella, who had previously helped Jacobs. She's a graduate in electrical engineering and in spare moments an Indian classical dance teacher and salsa dancer. She married earlier this year and lives with her in-laws. There wasn't much work for electrical engineers in Bangalore, so she's swapped to customer relations.

To begin, Asha had trouble understanding my British accent. "I'm sorry, Mr John. You speak a little fast. Can you repeat, please?" But she got used to it pretty quickly. I sent her a lengthy list of tasks, and it was completed in 24 hours. Get me a table for two at the Ivy and tickets for the Test at the Oval. Book the venue for my daughter's birthday party, and hire the entertainer. Find a place where I can get a health check on Bupa (I haven't seen a doctor for a long time). Locate a Chloé "Paddington" handbag for my wife (absolutely the thing, apparently), and tell me the price. Find out where I can get cheap handmade shirts, and call Brooks Brothers in New York for a copy of the measurements I had done three years ago.

Thinking I might have made it too easy, I asked her to call Marks & Spencer and get them to send me some new underpants. At the time, I confess, I thought this request rather amusing. I also asked her to find out if leading hairstylists in London and New York would take a look at my photo and advise on whether I might benefit from a new look.

Then I gave her the names and contact details for old friends I hadn't seen in a while, and asked her to get in touch with them, say I'd like to meet up. "Not quite sure if all the e-mail addresses are up to date," I told Asha. "Could you check?"

I wondered what I could do with the leisure time I would soon have. It occurred to me to take up the piano, perhaps write some poetry. I asked Asha to get prices for pianos and find teachers in my area. And I gave her the phone numbers of two well-known poets and asked her to get their recommendations on the best verse forms for an amateur poet trying to "take things up a level".

She offered no comment on the tasks — just asked when I would like my table at the Ivy. Four hours later, she sent a clutch of e-mails. The first politely declined to phone any poets without first doing some background research, and I hadn't allowed time for that. The next contained details of my nearest piano shop. She'd talked with the manager,

who recommended an upright for beginners, costing £1,600. She also attached a list of piano teachers near me.

One detailed the closest Bupa health centre, complete with map. Another gave the name of seven leading hair salons, of which two were willing to take a look at my photo. But most impressive was the message she sent my friends. "Hi mates," it began. "It's been quite a while since we

have met. Have been kept quite busy with my writings. But you know, I just hired a remote assistant all the way out in India to handle my tasks. And that should free a lot of my time.

"Now I intend to catch up with old friends like you. And do all the things I seem to be missing out on. I do miss you all a lot. It would be wonderful if we could meet up sometime soon, individually or together, whichever works best. I hope this e-mail gets through. If not, I might need to ask my assistant to call each one of you." The message was signed "John-Paul", but beneath that was Chloé handwriting (£762) was "crazy and unprecedented... the waiting period could run into weeks". Brooks Brothers no longer kept my measurements, and anyway wouldn't give them to a third party. And I would need to give Asha an upper limit so she could bid for Test match tickets on eBay. They were selling for £1,000 a pair.

And my amusing request for underpants? By mid-afternoon UK time, Asha had already worked a long day. She left me in the hands of a colleague, who sent a link to M&S underpants online. Arun pointed out that I'd need to choose between boxers, trunks and briefs, and indicate the size, colour and quantities I required.

I hated the pants on the website, but couldn't back out now. I replied (copying the message to Asha as requested) that I'd like an £8 pack of three Y-fronts, medium-sized, in a colour called teal. "Believe it or not, these are the pants I want," I wrote. "At least, they'll do. Usually what happens is this: I buy pants, and when my wife sees them she laughs for about an hour. Perhaps better stick to just one pack for now."

Despite this mild humiliation of my own making, outsourcing my life was proving a success. Work would continue overnight. As Jacobs put it: "I'm not wasting time while I drool on my pillow. Things are getting done."

But nobody in India can handle the problems that bother me most, those that need someone right here in my house, now. They can't tidy up my daughter's toys, move the radiator standing where I want the piano, or make me a cup of tea. I needed to outsource locally, too.

So I tried Quintessentially, a concierge service I'd read about in style magazines. It claims to offer access to the inaccessible — which in practice means upgrades, invitations to big social events and tables at the most fashionable restaurants. Surely Quintessentially could get me a table at the Ivy before December? It certainly should: a dedicated "lifestyle manager" costs £2,500 a year.

I left a message asking someone to call, but after two hours I'd heard nothing. One does become accustomed, when one has remote executive assistants, to a swifter response. When the call did come through, I wasn't sure I liked the tone: I may have been softened by Asha's sweet voice, but this male caller sounded like a rather pushy estate agent.

I gave up on Quintessentially, having by now found a company called Buy:Time, whose "lifestyle managers" cost £25 an hour, with no membership fee.

Some clients book lifestyle managers at regular times each week, the founder, Claire Brynteson, told me. Others keep it ad hoc. Lifestyle managers do anything as long as it's legal. Others keep it ad hoc. Lifestyle managers do anything as long as it's legal. Others keep it ad hoc. Lifestyle managers do anything as long as it's legal.

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hire and supervise builders... The list goes on.

Feeling guilty going behind Asha's back, I asked Brynteson to find me a lifestyle manager at once. And soon afterwards I got a call from Sophie Appleton, asking what she could do for me.

To be honest, I was running out of tasks. But I asked her to collect a couple of pictures waiting for me at a Hampstead art gallery, and to fetch my favourite cheesecake from a nearby cake shop.

Then, if she didn't mind awfully, I'd like her to find a plumber who could move that radiator.

Everything worked out fine, with one hitch. I hadn't made it clear that I only wanted a slice of cheesecake, and when Sophie phoned to check, I was asleep. Consequently she arrived with a mighty slab six times the size I needed. I did think about offering her a slice, but soon decided against it. Eating cheesecake is one thing I don't need to outsource.

Flintoff with Sophie Appleton, his London helpmate



HOW TO OUTSOURCE



Asha: Bangalore calling

IN INDIA

Get Friday: First set up to serve expat Indians, it now runs errands for English-speakers everywhere. Individuals pay \$299 (£165) a month and there's no limit to the number of requests you can make. "It may seem ridiculously low," says its boss Sunder Prakasham, "but we don't expect most customers to order tasks like Flintoff did, all in a single day." www.getfriday.com

Brickwork: More business focused, it was co-founded by an Indian politician who led the wooing of multinationals outsourcing to Bangalore. A graduate assistant for four 40-hour weeks costs \$1,500 (£813). Sometimes clients and assistants find each other's accent tricky, so communication is better by e-mail. www.brickworkanalyst.com

IN BRITAIN

Buy:Time: Claire Brynteson, 35, founded Buy:Time three years ago. For £25 an hour (no membership fee), you get a "lifestyle manager", who will do more or less anything, so long as it's legal. www.buy-time.co.uk

Quintessentially: A global club that promises members access to the inaccessible: restaurants, premieres, fashion shows, you name it. The general concierge service costs £750. Elite membership costs £20,000 a year. www.quintessentially.com

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