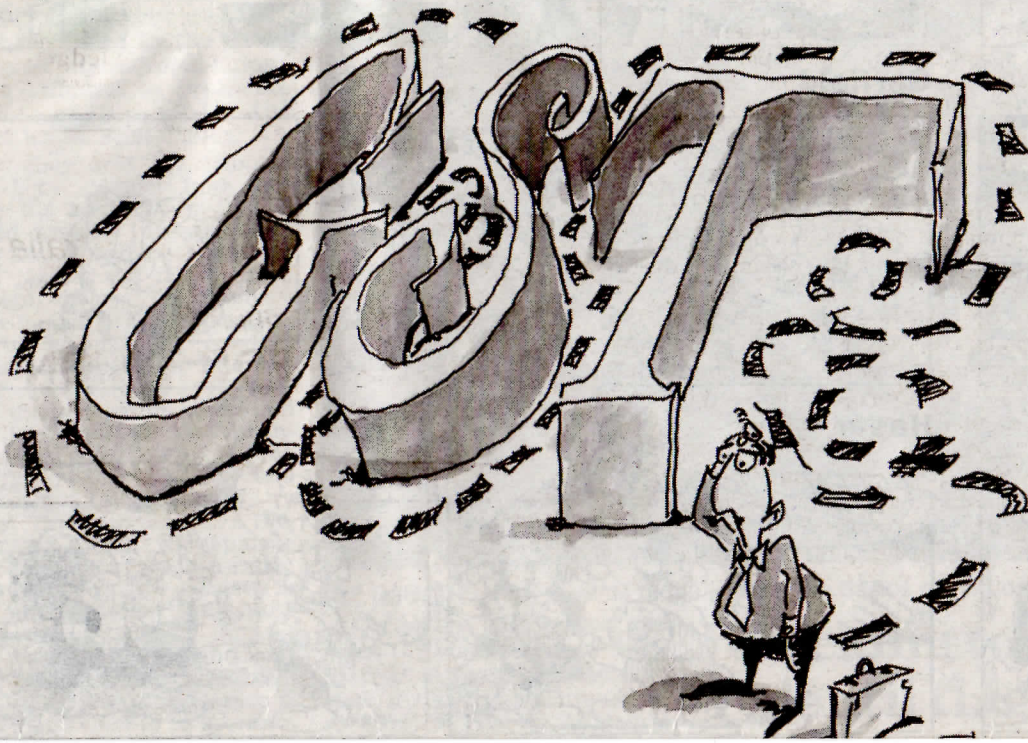


A costly maze of goods and secretive tax



Virtual office workers

A GROWING network of virtual secretaries have inspired a number of large corporates to outsource a vast portion of their administration work.

The network is the brainchild of Kathie Thomas who formed her own business called A Clayton's Secretary six years ago.

But Ms Thomas was deluged with inquiries from aspiring secretaries eager to jump on the virtual bandwagon.

This prompted the es-

tablishment of a specialised group three years ago to help industry participants overcome the problems of isolation and loneliness that are often linked with running a micro-business.

Her success is indicative of a sector brimming with optimism about its financial future despite battling long working hours, a study by the Australian Society of Certified Practising Accountants shows.

The nationwide survey of nearly 500 businesses

released this month showed about a third intend to top up their staffing levels during the next 12 months, painting a rosy outlook for the nation's 750,000 micro-businesses.

Ms Thomas has built an impressive client portfolio with a vast menu of services including database development, Web page design, Internet research and Power Point presentations as well as mail mergers and transcription. - Annie Lawson

Credit card companies face \$12bn suit

NEW YORK: Wal-Mart and other large US retailers will seek \$US8.1 billion (\$12.4 billion) in damages from Visa and MasterCard for alleged debit card antitrust violations, *The Wall Street Journal* has reported.

In a lawsuit in US District Court, the retailers accused Visa USA Inc and

MasterCard International of using monopoly power in credit cards to dominate debit cards, forcing them to pay high transaction fees and increase costs to consumers. The damage estimate represents alleged overcharges since 1992. The award would triple under antitrust law to \$US24.3 billion.

