

Guide to Virtual Assistants

Introduction

As a small business owner, your prime objective is to make money. Did you know that by attempting to perform every task related to the operation of your business yourself, **it may be costing you up to 40% in lost revenue?**

According to statistics by the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), **the average small business owner spends up to 40% of his or her time on routine administrative tasks.** Track your time for a week and see how many hours you are spending on unproductive, time and energy draining busywork - many owners find the 40% figure to be a conservative number!



According to most business experts, **approximately 80% of your time should be focused exclusively on performing activities that create the most value and profits.** The more time you can spend planning, strategizing, marketing, networking, and creating and delivering your revenue-producing products or services, the greater your business will grow and profit.

The demand for services from Virtual Assistants has seen a steady increase in recent years as business owners seek ways to run and grow their businesses using support services that are flexible and cost-effective. Virtual Assistants can offer many benefits but it can sometimes be difficult to differentiate those that are reputable from those that have set up to make easy money without the relevant experience, skills, or systems to do the job effectively.

But in what may ultimately be a wonderful addition to your business, there are some things to know and consider **before** working with a professional Virtual Assistant.

What is a Virtual Assistant?

Secretarial services predate **Virtual Assistants** by more than a few years. Although the latter is an evolution of the former, it is important to understand **that the concepts are uniquely distinct from one another.** The fundamental difference between Virtual Assistants and secretarial services is the business model and platform of service delivery. In Virtual Assistance, the relationship is key.

Foremost is the idea that secretarial services are involved in the business of task-oriented work, but don't know the client's business well, and **only work together on a one-time or occasional project basis.**

Virtual Assistants are involved in ongoing, deeply collaborative relationships with their clients.

Below are definitions of key terms to help you understand some of the related fields and terminology often confused with Virtual Assistant services, but that actually are quite different. Being an informed consumer will help you select the right service provider for your business requirements.

Virtual Assistant (or VA)

Virtual Assistants are administrative experts in the profession known as Virtual Assistance. Virtual Assistants are typically solo operators, sometimes partnerships, who work primarily on a retained basis. This is due to the closely collaborative nature of the relationship which is necessary to evolve the efficiencies, understanding and intimate familiarity with their clients' business.

Virtual Assistants are the best fit for clients who don't have the time, space, budget or large enough workload for employees, but still want someone who can get to know them and their business, and can proactively contribute beyond simply performing tasks. True Virtual Assistants operate on this platform. Virtual Assistance is their chosen profession and they run legitimate, fully committed businesses.

Secretarial Services

This business model can be compared to a print shop, where work is project-based and delivered either virtually or at an actual brick-and-mortar office to be completed on a one-time basis. 'Projects' and 'tasks' are the operative words here. These businesses are usually either solo operators or staffed businesses with several employees. Often, they are also very highly specialized. One example of this would be transcription services where nothing but transcription/word processing is the focus.

Freelance Services

A freelancer is someone who provides occasional, transient services, and often has not formally set up an actual business. Freelancers typically work a regular job, and only provide their services doing sporadic project work. A freelancer's interest and commitment is more along the lines of making extra money "on the side" to supplement their primary employment income. A drawback here is that without an actual business in place, a freelancer's interest or continued support beyond the project is often transient as well. Business owners have commonly been left holding the bag when additional work is needed, but the freelancer is no longer available or has moved on to other pursuits.

Personal Assistant Services

A personal assistant is another kind of service provider that is often confused with a Virtual Assistant. While Personal Assistants may work on an ongoing retained basis, they focus on personal or concierge type errands rather than administrative services. This is the professional needed when you want your dry-cleaning picked up, your gift shopping done, a wine researched or restaurant reservations made, for example. While some Virtual Assistants might attend to some of these functions, they aren't considered to be business or administrative work, and you will want to specifically ask the Virtual Assistant if she or he offers that scope of personal service.

Telecommuter Services

A telecommuter is an employee who works for a company from home, as opposed to a self-employed business owner. Unlike independent contractors, who work with several clients and determine their own professional fees, telecommuters are legally required to be paid taxable wages like any other company employee. Telecommuters have accepted work from a company or virtual staffing agency that dictates their rate of pay, while Virtual Assistants set their own rates.

Virtual Staffing Agency Services

This is similar to a temporary staffing agency, except that the workers are virtual rather than onsite. In this model the business attracts the clients, the workers perform the work and are paid as independent contractors. Often workers in these agencies are under-skilled, underpaid, and beholden to the company and not the client. Some workers are only interested in making extra money and not running their own business, and therefore have no real investment in the work or commitment to the company's clients.

Virtual Professional Services

Sometimes also called virtual consultant or virtual associate. This is a generic, umbrella term used to denote any kind of professional who happens to work virtually. So while web designers, bookkeepers, Virtual Assistants, etc., may all fall under the uncategorized term of virtual professional, not all virtual professionals are Virtual Assistants, which is its own specific niche designation of administrative experts.

Do I Really Need A Virtual Assistant?

It's always a difficult question for businesses to answer as you don't want to turn business down, but you must ensure that you have the resources available to satisfy clients. **It can often be much more cost effective to use a Virtual Assistant for non fee-paying work** and free up time for you to focus on running and growing your business. Ask yourself the following questions. Your answers will help determine if a virtual assistant may be helpful for your business:



- Do you spend time on minor tasks, taking you away from building new business?
- Could you save time by using expert help on particular tasks in your business?
- Are calls from potential clients transferred to voicemail because you are away?
- Is your time billable, and are you spending some of that on non fee-paying tasks?
- Do the needs of your business vary so that flexible help would be helpful?
- Are you struggling to keep on top of day-to-day administration tasks?
- Do you have limited space which restricts basing additional support services?
- Are you looking to expand your business but don't want to commit to hiring?
- Do you want to tap into extra resources but only pay for the time you use?

If you answered Yes to any question, a Virtual Assistant may be a great resource for your business.

Understanding How Virtual Assistants Work

Just as businesses use temporary workers to provide an extra pair of hands, Virtual Assistants provide support but do so remotely, from their own office and using their own equipment. They can work on ad-hoc projects as well as on a more regular longer-term basis, so they **provide a degree of flexibility that is particularly suited to small and start-up businesses**. In general, Virtual Assistants charge between \$35 and \$70 per hour for their time, depending on the skills required for your task(s).

Virtual Assistants can provide a range of services, including the following:

- General Administrative Support
- Bookkeeping and Accounting Services
- Data Entry and Transcription Services
- Editing and Proofreading Services
- Graphic Design and Marketing Support
- Web site Design and Maintenance
- Writing and Research Assistance

Selecting the Right Virtual Assistant

As a savvy business owner, you now understand you can't do everything yourself, and you understand that **your time is most intelligently focused on activities that grow your business and generate revenue**. These days, outsourcing your administrative burdens to a Virtual Assistant (or VA) makes it very easy to get just the amount of support you need without the expense of costly in-house staff. But how do you find a highly skilled, truly qualified Virtual Assistant? Below are some practical points to consider and questions to ask as you go about the selection process.

Online Image

Since Virtual Assistants operate virtually, it's important they have an online "office" for you to visit. A website can yield critical clues as to the Virtual Assistant's competence and professionalism. A successful, experienced Virtual Assistant will have client testimonials on their website, and should also be able to provide you with contact information of satisfied clients who are willing to speak with you about their perceptions and experiences.

If the Virtual Assistant's site is littered with misspelling, sloppy writing and improper grammar and punctuation, don't expect that she or he is going to provide you with any greater skill or attention to detail should you decide to work with her. If it looks like she put little thought, time or money into presenting a polished business image, chances are that she isn't serious about her business, and may be equally uncommitted to the work she does for you. As you look through the website, ask yourself:

- Does it present a polished, credible business image?
- Is there an abundance of informative content?
- Is the concept clearly explained?
- Is it organized well and easy to navigate?
- Is it well-written and coherent?
- Is there a solid command of grammar, spelling and punctuation?

Complimentary Consultation

You naturally want to find a Virtual Assistant you can work with well, and whose personality and style is compatible with yours. You also want to gain some insight into whether this is a person offering the skills, service and expertise you need. Once you find a site that instills confidence, have a conversation with that Virtual Assistant. Many Virtual Assistants offer a complimentary consultation, and all it takes is a simple email or phone call to schedule one. In making initial contact, some things to note include:

- Does the VA respond to your inquiries in a timely manner?
- Does the VA answer the phone professionally?
- Is the VA on time and prepared for the call?
- Does the VA follow-through exactly as promised?

Service and Values Philosophy

How well the Virtual Assistant guides you through their consultation process can tell you a lot about what it will be like to work with them. Not only do you want a Virtual Assistant who is masterfully skilled and can provide superior service, but you also want someone who demonstrates excellent business sense, especially since she will be instrumental in helping you in your business. During the consultation, information you should expect the Virtual Assistant to cover with you include:

- A clear overview of how the VA works with clients
- What processes and procedures are in place
- What services the VA provides and doesn't provide
- What values and expectations are for partnership

Personal and Professional Traits

Listen for the cues that tell you this is someone you can rely on and form an excellent business relationship with. How smartly the Virtual Assistant handles their business is going to directly correlate with how well they handle your work and business relationship. Some things you should pay attention to include:

- Does the VA take the lead in guiding you through the consultation?
- Is the VA articulate with excellent communication skills?
- Does the VA inspire feelings of professionalism and trust?
- Do you feel a good connection and chemistry with the VA?
- Does the VA listen carefully to you when you speak?
- Does the VA exhibit interest and curiosity about your business?
- Does the VA ask smart, timely, and purposeful questions?

Training and Certification

A professional Virtual Assistant should have at least a minimum of five years upper-level administrative experience. Don't put too much stock in certification. Where certifications are offered, they can be somewhat subjective and misleading, and many of the veteran Virtual Assistants who established the profession and created the standards have been in business longer than these programs have existed.

Additionally, there has been a proliferation in recent years of disreputable and unqualified opportunists willing to "certify" anyone willing to pay. Unfortunately in this industry, certifications mean very little.

Business Operation

Look for a Virtual Assistant who is actually an incorporated business. If a Virtual Assistant only freelances or dabbles in this work on the side, lack of commitment may cause you many unnecessary headaches, wasted time and an all-around unsatisfactory experience. This can manifest in longer turn-around times, lack of continuity, poor communication, conflicting commitments, interrupted progress, and long or inconvenient periods of unavailability. Some important facts to obtain include:

- How long has the VA been in business?
- Is the VA in full-time or part-time practice?
- Does the VA view their business as a chosen profession?
- Does the VA have well-thought out policies and business standards

Professional Experience

Understand that the single-most important qualification of a Virtual Assistant is extensive administrative experience. However, this is an unregulated industry, and while veteran Virtual Assistants work tirelessly to promote high standards, the Internet has nonetheless attracted a certain segment of individuals who have little to no qualifications, or only entry-level skill sets that do not equip them to meet your very real and important business needs. Asking the prospective Virtual Assistant some of these questions will help you discern the difference:

- What was your professional background prior to becoming a VA?
- How many years of administrative expertise do you have?
- How would you rate your skill level in reference to certain skills?
- What is your level of understanding of business principles and operations?

Look for a Virtual Assistant who has worked in upper-level positions such as administrative assistant, executive assistant, office manager, legal secretary, legal assistant, paralegal, supervisor, manager, etc. Virtual Assistants whose only experience was in receptionist or clerical roles are not commonly going to have high-level skills and competencies.

Note: Virtual Assistants are independent professionals, not employees. Just as you would not ask an accountant, attorney or any other service professional for their resume as if they were applying for a job, it is inappropriate to ask a Virtual Assistant for theirs, and the request may be considered ill-mannered. However, the VA should be prepared to discuss in a consultation with you their skill levels and qualifications as described above.

Virtual Assistants who are in this business as their chosen, long-term profession typically have well-honed systems and offerings, and are in a position to best serve client needs and expectations.

VA Services Pricing

Virtual Assistant market rates range between \$35 - \$70 per hour. **Virtual Assistance is not the type of service you want to price shop.** Certainly, we all want to get the best price and pay the least amount possible. But we've all heard the saying "you get what you pay for," and this is very true in the Virtual Assistance industry as well.

Take your business, for example. You know you aren't the cheapest, and you wouldn't want to be. You know that delivering expertise and quality comes at a price, but **the value of that caliber of service extends far beyond mere dollars**, and, in turn, saves your clients money. The same is true with Virtual Assistant services.

Many VAs work on a retainer agreement. They block a certain number of hours per month to be used specifically for that client. The client pays the monthly fee at the beginning of the month. Unused hours do not roll over to the next month. Expenses like postage, delivery of docs, and vendor accounts are additional. **The per-hour rate is usually a discounted rate** in recognition of the client's willingness to commit to a block of time with the retainer. The retainer comes with a higher degree of commitment to the partnership for both parties. For those not ready to make a full commitment, per-hour and per-project agreements are usually available.

You will find Virtual Assistants who charge so little that they can't possibly be running a profitable, sustainable practice; one that's going to be around long enough for you to depend on. **Inappropriately low rates also signal a lack of business sense, which most often translates to poor quality**, and lack of skill and experience. The consequence of hiring a Virtual Assistant who falls in this category is that your investment in them is unstable and always at risk.

Virtual Assistants who don't price their services profitably **quickly begin to fail their clients**. In their last gasps, they may end up taking on a day-job or more clients than they can handle just to break even, becoming overwhelmed in the process. To cope, they might turn to subcontracting much of your work out to others which typically results in longer turn-around times, less availability, and inconsistent service, delivery and quality of work.

You want ability. You want someone you can work with well. You want great customer service. You want your work cared for by the person you intentionally chose to handle it. And you want someone who's going to stick around. So **look for quality and value**. It's an investment that will literally put money back in your pocket.

Getting The Most from Your Virtual Assistant

When it comes to deciding to delegate parts of your business to another person, not only is it important to know what qualities you would like to have in that person, **it is even more important to have a plan**. Whether you are ready to delegate a lot or a little, a detailed plan will set you up for success in your partnership with a VA or any assistant, for that matter.



Set some time aside to look at your business goals, and **find the area that is taking away the most of your income-producing time**. Is it lead generation, contact management, marketing, listing coordination, or another area? What tasks, or series of tasks, do you feel comfortable delegating to an experienced VA? Go through on paper, your day to day duties, and **decide what to delegate, how much to delegate, and what you could delegate later** once your partnership is well underway.

Once you have decided to use virtual support, and have found the right Virtual Assistant for you, there are a number of steps you can take to help ensure your working relationship gets off on the right foot and progresses smoothly. Any reputable Virtual Assistant will work with you to determine the following:

- Work to be carried out, specific activity, timescales, time inputs and fees
- Arrangements for billing and any other costs that may be incurred
- How changes to the outlined scope of work will be noted
- How recording and reporting of activity will be performed
- How your businesses confidentiality and security will be protected

Conclusion

A Virtual Assistant can bring huge benefits to a small or start-up business, providing an extra pair of hands for a one-off project or on-going support to help the business grow. There are many people however, who are setting up as Virtual Assistants without the right systems, experience or skills to do the job. It's worth taking the time to ensure that you choose the right support for your business – you must ensure it is an investment that adds value to your business rather than one that potentially puts it at risk.

As you can see, selecting the Virtual Assistant for your business requires the consideration of many different factors. We hope this Office Relocation Planner Guide to Virtual Assistants has helped to inform you of the some of the considerations regarding selecting the right Virtual Assistant for your business.

Note: This guide provides general guidance and should not be construed as specific financial, technological, insurance, legal, or accounting advice. Always consult a qualified advisor for specific guidance in these matters.