



Get All The Help You Need— Virtually

By Coeli Carr

Virtual assistants offer business owners much-needed administrative and financial relief.

When David Goldsmith started The Goldsmith Group, a strategy consultancy business in Santa Fe, NM, he hired an assistant to handle routine office tasks like making travel arrangements, helping prepare presentations and conducting research. The assistant can't, however, greet visitors or run out for coffee. This right-hand helper works from her own home office in Michigan.

The trade-off of having an off-site assistant is well worth it in savings alone, says Goldsmith. He estimates that a full-time office employee would cost around \$30,000 annually. Instead, he pays his assistant only for "time on task," which averages about 5 to 10 hours a week, and totals an estimated \$15,000 a year. Savings are even greater after factoring in employee expenses like recruitment and administrative costs, taxes, insurance, benefits, bonuses, furnishings and equipment.

Goldsmith is one of many small business owners who are finding new efficiencies in outsourcing office tasks to an estimated 8,000 virtual assistants worldwide, according to Danielle Keister, a Tacoma, WA-based VA, and founder of The Virtual Assistance Chamber of Commerce (www.virtualassistantnetworking.com), a volunteer organization which helps small business owners connect with qualified VAs. These professionals can handle everything from basic administrative functions to more specialized work such as bookkeeping tasks, data processing, human resources and graphic arts. Tapping this virtual resource enables you to hand off time-consuming tasks, or fills a void in office capabilities such as creating PowerPoint presentations or designing marketing materials in Photoshop.

VA fees increase proportionately depending on areas of expertise. Hourly rates typically range from \$30 to \$100, according to Stacy Brice, president and founder of Assist University (<http://www.assistu.com>), a Baltimore, MD-based company, which offers professional VA training. Keister, whose clients are primarily attorneys, works only on retainer, and offers various packages ranging up to \$1,200 for 20 hours.

Although the fees stun some prospective clients, others don't blink an eye, because they realize the value of having someone who's highly skilled and can get things done, says Keister.

For Jeffrey Korn, owner of Jeffrey Korn \ Creative (<http://www.jeffreykorn.com>), a Belmont, MA-based Internet strategy and design firm, mining the VA pool offers him the flexibility to bring on board people with different skills, and pay them accordingly. One relieves him of mundane tasks, such as buying office supplies and inputting business card information into his database. The other is a more skilled professional who coordinates usability and focus group research.

Why Not Hire a Temp?

Many small business owners use temps when they are in a crunch. But temps are just that, temporary. They're here today and gone tomorrow. Most VAs, on the other hand, prefer working on a contractual basis.

Goldsmith enjoys the stability a VA offers. He likes throwing off 20 task-requesting e-mails at a time, when the ideas strike him, knowing his VA is taking care of it all.

Most VAs want "long-term, collaborative relationships," says Brice. The idea of having an assistant who can be more of a partner rather than employing someone who is just collecting a paycheck is appealing, adds Keister.

More importantly, VAs are small business owners, too, and understand that their success depends on their ability to service their clients. If they do a good job, they get more work and/or referrals.

Finding the Right VA

Unfortunately, the VA industry is unregulated and fractured, says Brice. Anyone with a PC and phone line who works remotely can call themselves a VA. If you're considering hiring a VA, Brice suggests the following:

Hire certified VAs. Organizations like Assist University and others offer professional or certified training programs. VAs are generally professionals who have had many years of experience out in the workforce. Members of professional VA organizations— like the VA Chamber of Commerce— pledge to abide by an established code of ethics requiring integrity, honesty and due diligence.

Finding a certified VA is easy. [AssistU](#) helps business owners locate VAs who meet various criteria such as skills, time availability and accessible technologies. Other organizations offer user-friendly VA directories, including [The Alliance for Virtual Businesses](#), [International Virtual Assistants Association](#), [The Virtual Assistance Chamber of Commerce](#), and [Virtual Assistance Certification](#).

Start small. “Hiring a VA for a short-term project is a good option for business owners who want to play it cautious,” says Brice. You’ll soon see if you are comfortable working with someone who is out of eyesight, and if you complement each other’s personality and skills.

Build trust. If a VA is going to be doing bookkeeping or other work that involves your finances, “finding a person you can trust is key,” says Brice. “Don’t just walk into a virtual relationship and say, ‘Here are my passwords.’”

Don’t be a “virtual hoverer.” If you are a micromanager and need someone at your beck and call you will surely need to adapt your management style. Don’t be a “virtual hoverer who barrages their VA with e-mails to check the status of their work,” warns Brice. Instead implement policies and standards to make sure they are fulfilling their job requirements.

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