

What is a virtual assistant?

According to the Alliance for Virtual Business:

"Virtual Assistants (VAs) are independent entrepreneurs providing professional administrative, creative, managerial, technical, business office and/or personal support services. VAs use the most advanced means of communication, and the newest and most efficient and time saving office products and work delivery, regardless of geographic boundaries. Virtual Assistants work from their own offices, on a contractual basis, and abide by an established Code of Ethics requiring integrity, honesty and due diligence."

In short, a VA can do just about anything a regular employee can do. You just won't see his or her face every day and the manner in which you send tasks to him or her will vary slightly.

Instead of walking paper files into the next office, you can simply attach those same electronic files to an email and hit send. Your assistant will work on those files according to your instructions and return them, mail them, or do whatever else you request with them.

What can a virtual assistant do?

- Research for potential clients or customers
- Call contractors (printers, office supplies, other) to get quotes for you, pass those quotes on to you for approval, set up the contractor and baby sit him or her for you until the job is done.
- Screen clients or customers for motivation or to be sure they're qualified to work with your company
- Process mailings to potential clients or customers
- Perform outbound telemarketing calls seeking clients or customers
- Enter your leads into your CRM program
- Set/cancel appointments
- Work with Excel spreadsheets
- Work with MS Word
- Answer incoming calls for you
- Return phone calls
- Type and send letters or contracts
- Make travel arrangements
- Call for quotes
- Schedule your car for service
- Order services on your behalf

Many assistants are Jack's or Jill's of all trades, some are more specialized, but some of the tasks a virtual can do are: Accounting, Bookkeeping, Human resources, Concierge services, Collections, Sales, Marketing, Travel arrangements, Research, Word processing, Appointment setting, Meeting arrangements, Event planning, Letter preparation, Transcription, Reports, Proof reading, Manuals, Newsletters, Flyers, Mailings, Data entry, Data processing, Document scanning, E-mail processing, Answering phone calls, Procedure documentation, Customer support, Copyrighting, Web design

Virtuals are typically a very intelligent bunch. Many are college-educated and even more have countless years of solid business experience to draw on. This comes in very handy when you're looking for ideas.

How can a virtual assistant help me make more money in my business? How are other professionals using virtual assistants?

Perhaps the most important thing she can do is relieve you of the mundane, time-consuming tasks that keep you from selling. As a business professional, your time needs to be spent out on the streets or on the phones and in front of clients, not with your head tucked in a filing cabinet. She can also be your telemarketer, can do follow up calls after post cards or letters have been sent (which by the way, she can also mail those post cards or letters for you). Follow up calls and outbound cold calling are essential in any business to keep touching new potential clients -- your telemarketer can also do the cold calling for you. Give her a simple script, tell her what you want done with the good leads, and unleash her on your prospect list! If the prospect appears to be a good lead, ask her to gather as much information for you as she can and send the good leads back to you for follow through.

Your assistant can also take your inbound calls for you. I do not recommend using a company which utilizes a bank of

people answering phones. Each and every client should be treated as the individual that they are. Each client, regardless of how big or small should be assigned just one admin. This admin is then able to get to know your clients/customers, your business, and how you like your work performed. That's how the personal touch and true human element stays intact. Sending your callers to a bank of phone operators generally doesn't foster that kind of relationship or human contact. Answering your inbound calls for you is as easy as forwarding your existing business line to your admin.

A virtual assistant can save me money because I don't need to rent office space to accommodate him or her, I don't need to buy a computer or desk for her to work at, he or she is an independent contractor so I don't need to pay FICA, health insurance, vacation time, Social Security, or other taxes and benefits.

A virtual assistant can help me make more money by also acting as my marketing assistant. He or she can take inbound customer calls or make outbound telemarketing calls. He or she can search for leads so I only have to follow up with the hot ones.

How can hiring a virtual assistant benefit me and my business?

As a business professional, you need to constantly have new leads flowing through your sales pipeline. A virtual assistant can help you find those leads, help you qualify them, and basically act as an extension of you. This keeps you out there selling and can ensure a constant flow of new leads. Virtuals work best when plugged into your current marketing system. If you're doing marketing campaigns that already work well, but need to do more of it to keep the leads coming, task portions (or all) of that out to your virtual. Let her do the prep work so-to-speak and free you up for the more impactful activities like closing the sale.

They're the savviest of the savvy when it comes to operating on a low budget and using technology to their advantage. Their cost consciousness should extend to your business expenses as well.

Most are equipped with the latest software (and lots of it), multiple phone lines, Internet, e-mail, fax machine, cellular phone, copy machines, scanners, and a great attitude. Many even come with a cat or dog! He or she should use all of the latest technology to communicate with you and get your work done as quickly as possible. Hiring a virtual that already comes with all of the best software saves you hundreds of dollars by not having to purchase all of that software yourself.

A virtual should only "clock in" when they're on your project. This means you don't pay for her time playing solitaire on the computer or while she's waiting for the next assignment. A virtual assistant can free your time to do what you're good at and what's important to your company. Whether that's making sales, following up on leads, attending speaking events, or doing the other meaty tasks your business requires.

How can I trust a person I've never met in person, and never will, to keep my leads and my business confidential?

VA's are as concerned with your business success as they are with their own. In fact, their success depends on your success. So, a virtual can become one of the best assistants and business partners you've ever had. Just like you, they are business owners and very interested in helping their clients.

It's also a good idea to get your virtual or the company providing the virtual under strict confidentiality agreement. Make sure the broker thoroughly screens all of their contractors to ensure the best quality. Ask if they have tested for flexibility, trustworthiness, reliability, candidness, assertiveness, and whether or not they have a helping disposition. Ask the agency or broker if they stand behind their contractors. If a bad one slips through and doesn't work out, will they replace that person immediately? You should expect similar from any staffing agency you work with -- and get it in writing.

How can I find a good virtual assistant?

Virtually, of course! Ain't cyberspace great? That's probably the best place to go in search of your very own VA. The best option, however is to find a good virtual staffing agency. An agency will save you a lot of time by screening the virtual for you and choosing the best one to match your needs. As an added bonus, if the VA doesn't work out for you, all you need to do is make one simple phone call and the agency should be able to find another one for you quickly and without additional time wasted, or extra charges.

How can I successfully screen a virtual assistant?

There are several things you need to know before you start looking:

- What exactly do I need help with?
- What expertise does the VA need?
- How much do I have available to spend?
- How quickly do I need this project done?
- How long will I need virtual assistance?
- How often will I need my VA to work?
- What hours should he or she be available?

- What days of the week?
- Is there any specific software he or she needs to have?
- Is what I need accomplished so specific that I'll need to incorporate some training time?
- How will I pay him or her? Visa, MasterCard, Check, Paypal, wire transfer?
- How do I want to communicate with my VA? Phone, e-mail, snail mail, or a combination?
- Does my VA really need to be located in a particular time zone, country, part of the country, city?
- Any other particular qualities you'd like your virtual assistant to have?

Just as you would screen someone who would apply to work in your office, you'll still need to spend a little time screening your virtual assistant. You'll need to tell him or her what you need and want, and what is and isn't acceptable. You'll also need to negotiate pricing and terms with the virtual.

To simplify this entire process, choose a good virtual staffing agency. The agency should:

- 1) Assign one admin to you
- 2) Screen that admin
- 3) Place that admin under confidentiality agreement
- 4) Treat you like an individual
- 5) Ask their admins to time themselves carefully so your charges are accurate
- 6) Not round their minutes up to hours
- 7) Keep you updated daily on tasks completed

How do I train my virtual assistant to do what I want?

Training a virtual assistant should be no different than training an in-person assistant. Use the latest technologies that everyone has access to in order to facilitate training. Communicate your needs via telephone, instant messenger, and by emailing documents for review.

Ask your potential virtual or the virtual staffing agency supplying the virtual if there is a free training period. I highly recommend asking for at least two hours free time for training. Assistants do occasionally leave (or not work out), you shouldn't have to pay to retrain a new assistant each time this happens.

How do I ensure quality with my virtual assistant?

The best approach, if you're hiring on your own, is to get a complete history of the virtual before hiring. While this isn't always foolproof, it does help.

Next, require the VA to send you a daily reporting of what is accomplished and how many hours was logged. I recommend asking for this report in a simple end-of-the-day email. Then you always know the status of your tasks and what you're spending.

Carefully review everything your assistant returns to you completed until you've developed a comfort level with her work.

Correct mistakes quickly and immediately when they happen. No one can learn to do things differently if they're not told that they made a mistake. When you catch an error, notify your assistant and tell her how to correct it. Don't offer to correct the mistake for her but ask her to fix it and send it back to you.

How can I manage an assistant who is 100's of miles away?

Well, do you mean manage or micro-manage? No successful business owner can afford to micro-manage. If you need to micro-manage, you should find someone to sit right next to you in your office. If you can refrain from micro-managing and allow your admin to think and do on her own, you'll have no problems managing her from a distance. Through proper candidate selection, proper training, clear and concise instructions, and the daily reporting I mentioned earlier, there should be no serious problems.

What does it cost to have a virtual assistant?

A virtual is far more cost effective than a regular employee. You may pay more per hour than a regular employee, but leave out the FICA, state unemployment taxes, Social Security, health insurance, vacation time, sick time, 401(k), profit sharing, Christmas bonus, holiday pay, and other benefits you need to offer a regular employee, and a virtual's wage comes out far lower than that of a regular employee.

We recently tabulated the cost of hiring an in-house assistant for the average business. It breaks down like this:

Cost (based on 1,960 productive hrs/yr) Item

- \$13.00/hour Employee wage
- \$.53/hour Two weeks of vacation time
- \$.27/hour One week sick time
- \$.48/hour Health insurance
- \$.99/hour FICA (7.65% of wages)

\$.42/hour Unemployment insurance (3.25%)
\$.77/hour Desk, chair, computer, supplies
\$.32/hour Holiday pay
\$.06/hour Placing a help wanted ad in the paper
\$.10/hour Your time spent interviewing candidates
\$.03/hour Profile test
\$.08/hour Payroll processing
\$ 3.06/hour Office rent (based on \$500/month rent)
\$20.11/hour Total cost

Your \$13/hour employee just became a \$20/hour employee plus you have greater liabilities and you still have to manage her and replace her if she doesn't work out, thus go through that whole process again.

A virtual assistant should be set up as an independent contractor ð never an employee. You don't want to be held liable later on for her office not being ergonomically friendly or for her developing carpletunnel syndrome. If you use a virtual staffing agency, check with them first to be sure the admin they assign you is set up as a contractor or at least an employee of the agency ð not an employee of your company. Hiring the virtual as an independent contractor is also what gets you out of paying all the taxes, health insurance, and so on.

A virtual can save money in other areas as well. How much does it cost you to maintain office footage, a computer, a phone line or two, a refrigerator, a microwave, a desk, electricity, heat, air conditioning, and parking for your regular employees? With a virtual, you don't need any of those things - he or she supplies his or her own.

The fee for a virtual usually depends upon the area of the country where he or she is located and their area(s) of expertise. Virtuals charge between \$15 and \$75 per hour. But, you only pay for the time he or she actually spends working on your tasks. Others still may agree to a flat fee based upon individual project requirements.

Either way, you come out ahead.

http://www.graphic-design.com/DTG/Business/virtual_assistant.html