

Hiring a Virtual Assistant

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How to get help when you don't want employees in your home office

By Paul and Sarah Edwards | [Entrepreneur's StartUps - May 2004](#)

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Q: I started my home based business six months ago. I don't want an employee in my home, but I already have too much administrative work to handle. How do virtual assistants work? What should I look for in a virtual assistant, and where can I find one?

A: Virtual assistants (VAs) work from their own premises and provide personal and office support services, such as general administrative tasks; making customer contacts; writing reports; editing documents; sending out marketing materials; handling thank-you notes, gifts and follow-up letters; setting up and maintaining databases; handling billing and bookkeeping; and updating Web sites.

Some VAs even help clients manage their personal lives, doing such tasks as arranging for pet-sitting, calling the plumber, scheduling doctor's appointments, planning an upcoming family reunion, or coordinating a move.

A VA may be in your local area or anywhere across the county-after all, he or she communicates with you via e-mail, phone, fax and IM. By using software like Symantec's pcAnywhere, you and your VA can even access one another's computers, or you can jointly coordinate work tasks via software housed on Web sites.

The typical background to look for in a VA would include experience as an administrative or executive assistant, office manager or customer service rep. But because the kind of work VAs do varies, you also want to look for someone who has experience in doing the specific tasks you need help with. Since you'll want a VA with good problem-solving skills who can communicate well and be counted on to get things done, consider working with someone on a time-limited project first to see how that goes before entering a long-term relationship.

VAs usually charge a higher hourly or daily rate than other office-support professionals because they do more complex tasks. Expect to pay \$30 to \$45 per hour or more. Find VAs through two professional organizations: [Virtual Assistance U](#) and the [International Virtual Assistants Association](#).

If you can't find an assistant to do the full range of tasks you need, or if a VA is too pricey, here are a few lower-cost options to consider:

- **Use other business services.** While these businesses charge more than you would pay an employee, using outside services for tasks like marketing or Web development can still save you money since you pay only for the service you need when you need it.
- **Try barter or exchange services.** Bartering is the cashless exchange of services in which you offer your services in return for someone else's. This is a great way to keep costs down or get assistance you couldn't otherwise afford. Consider joining a barter club that will link you with other service people who want to barter. Barter clubs keep a credit balance for you so when you provide a service to one member, you get credit to receive services from any other member. There is usually a startup fee involved. Find these clubs through search engines.

The IRS considers any business service you get through bartering to be income, but the business services you provide through bartering are deductible as business expenses. So keep records of your exchanges and claim values that represent actual market rates.

- **Get help from family members.** Asking family members to help with simple tasks in your home office, like filing and cleaning, can be a good way for them to be part of your business while keeping your costs down. You can ask for volunteers or offer a wage. And hiring your children actually has a tax advantage. Your child's salary is a deductible business expense, and his or her earnings are taxed at a much lower rate than yours. Below a certain amount each year, there is no tax on their earnings.
- **Call on clients and suppliers.** Sometimes you can use or buy the services of other companies you're working with. These companies may be happy to let you purchase services from them like mailings, word processing or duplicating to help offset their overhead. Or they may be willing to let you use their company services without an additional charge or as part of your fee.