

## HOW TO CHOOSE A VIRTUAL ASSISTANT

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Small and start-up businesses are increasingly looking to outsource work to ensure they can deliver for clients as well as support growth of the business. It's not unusual to do this for niche areas but many businesses are now seeking to use Virtual Assistants more and more to provide 'hands-on' support for their businesses. Demand for virtual services has been rising steeply as businesses discover the range of benefits and flexibility of using virtual support. The profession, however, is unregulated and some people are setting up thinking they can make easy money without the skills, experience, systems, processes or even insurance to support businesses effectively. So, how can you tell the difference between virtual assistance that will help your business grow and that which may do more harm than good? Here are some useful tips about what you need to know, and what you should check, when considering taking on virtual support.

### UNDERSTANDING WHAT VAS DO

A Virtual Assistant is someone who can provide a range of services to support businesses. They work remotely, from their own office using their own equipment. A reputable Virtual Assistant will have invested in their business, with a professional looking website and business cards, and be a member of one or more of the representative bodies, reflecting their commitment to upholding quality standards. The experience and expertise of Virtual Assistants varies widely so research is essential to ensure that you can match the needs of the business against the skills of the Virtual Assistant.

A virtual office provides all the benefits of a physical office without the additional staffing, equipment or location costs. There are many benefits to using a reputable Virtual Assistant:

- You don't take them onto your books as an employee so there is no employer liability in terms of paying an annual salary, National Insurance, holiday or sick pay.
- They can provide flexible resource to support your business as and when you need it so you only pay for the time you use.
- They provide a safety net for growth - you can take on more work knowing that you can access extra resource if you need it.
- Business owners can sometimes get caught in a trap of spending time on non-fee billing tasks. By using a Virtual Assistant business owners can ensure that day-to-day tasks are managed enabling them to focusing on growing the business.
- The right skills and expertise to do a job can save you the time, money and hassle of doing it yourself.
- As Virtual Assistants work from their own office you don't have the cost, disruption or hassle of having to sort out desk space or equipment.

In general, Virtual Assistants charge between £18 and £25 per hour for their time, although some charge more. Typical services provided by a Virtual Assistant include:

- **Typing** - of correspondence, legal documents and contracts, minutes, mail shots, dissertations, manuscripts, CVs, transcription (from tapes or digital files).
- **Travel arrangements** - scheduling itineraries, booking car hire, flights, train travel and accommodation; providing maps, directions and briefing information.
- **Internet research** - research and reports of findings and recommendations.

- **Diary management** - planning of business meetings and conference calls; providing helpful reminders for important dates.
- **Business liaison** - call minder service, message taking, filtering emails, and contacts database management. Essential support for anyone who is regularly out of the office or needs to carve out time for client work.
- **Administrative project support** - coordinating projects from printing of stationery to event management.
- **Personal life management** - planning and organising grand celebrations, theatre bookings, restaurant reservations, receptions, invitations, Christmas card distribution, holidays, weekend breaks, collate quotes for home/car insurance renewal, research that special product or gift, organise cleaner, gardener, handyman etc.

#### HOW TO FIND A REPUTABLE VA

Listings of Virtual Assistants are available via online search facilities on the websites of a number of governing bodies:

- **The International Association of Virtual Assistants** - [www.iava.org.uk](http://www.iava.org.uk)
- **The Society of Virtual Assistants** [www.scottishvirtualassistants.co.uk](http://www.scottishvirtualassistants.co.uk)
- **International Association of Virtual Office Assistants** - [www.iavoa.com](http://www.iavoa.com)
- **Alliance of UK Virtual Assistants** [www.allianceofukvirtualassistants.org.uk](http://www.allianceofukvirtualassistants.org.uk)

The information to check before employing the services of a Virtual Assistant

Virtual Assistants vary in their expertise and experience. Any reputable Virtual Assistant should, however, be able to demonstrate how they adhere to the highest standards in terms of professionalism and quality. The following list will help you to make an informed decision about whether the prospective Virtual Assistant adheres to those standards and would be able to meet the needs of your business.

Can they:

- provide references/testimonials for previous work?
- prove they have the relevant skills for the support you need?
- demonstrate a track record of training and development, keeping up-to-date with relevant knowledge and use of technology?
- prove that they have personal indemnity insurance?
- outline the procedures and systems they have in place to protect client confidentiality?
- prove that they are registered with the Data Protection Act?
- provide proof of membership of the relevant professional bodies
- demonstrate their commitment to ongoing study and training and keeping their skills up-to-date
- outline a transparent system for recording timesheets and billing
- provide, and commit to, a contract outlining activity, timescales and costs for the work.

Whatever your business needs, virtual support can be hugely valuable - keeping costs down while helping you to deliver for clients. Cheapest is not always best, however, so it is worth investing the time to do some research, as well as asking probing questions of anyone you are considering contracting with, to ensure your virtual assistance is a help rather than a hindrance.