



What is a Virtual Assistant?

A Virtual Assistant (VA) is a self-employed professional who provides remote administrative support to their clients on either an hourly, project-specific or ongoing basis. A VA should be called upon when you need a skilled and highly professional person to provide top-class administrative support and advice – in the same way you would call a solicitor for legal advice or an accountant for financial support.

One of the many fantastic things about a VA is that you are obtaining a higher calibre of administrative knowledge, expertise and service than you would generally find in a temp, or even an employee in many cases. Experienced VAs have spent many years working at a very high level before making the decision to go into business for themselves.

VAs are the best fit for clients who don't have the time, space, budget or large enough workload for employees, but still want and need someone to be at their right-hand; someone who can get to know them and their business, and can proactively contribute to getting things done beyond simply performing tasks. This is their chosen profession and they run legitimate, fully committed businesses.

What sort of relationship do you have with a Virtual Assistant?

Administrative tasks happen again and again and again. They are not one-off occurrences but an ongoing activity that needs to be fully understood and dealt with in order to ensure your business runs smoothly and grows profitably. It is important therefore to build an ongoing collaborative relationship with your VA. This kind of long-term collaboration will ensure that your VA develops a clear knowledge and understanding of you, your business, your objectives and your clients, and can subsequently provide you with the best possible service.

There are Personal Assistants in the corporate world who have worked with the same person for many years and this sort of long-term relationship is equally possible with a VA. The longer you work together, the more the synergy between you develops. There will be a spark and an ease of working with your VA that turns days into weeks, weeks into months and months into years.

What kind of work can you delegate to a Virtual Assistant?

How much work and what type of work you delegate will depend on the nature of your business and the level of support already available to you. Most VAs will happily take on some or all of the day-to-day tasks that take your time, attention and energy away from building your business and increasing revenue. As business owners themselves, your VA will have their own systems and processes for getting things started and helping you determine what can be delegated.

It is worth remembering that the true value of a VA lies in the ongoing collaborative relationship itself and you should consider a VA that offers a package of diverse services on an ongoing basis rather than just on a project-specific basis. This will result in your administration being dealt with in a systematic way rather than on a transactional one-off basis. That is how business owners achieve the kind of long-term results and stronger business foundations that working with a VA can bring them.

There are two main things you need to consider when deciding what your VA can do for you. These are:

The tasks of today

These are things that must be done if your business is to operate successfully. These might include appointment-making, business correspondence, bookkeeping, credit control and paying bills.

The goals of tomorrow.

These might include subscribing to and reading email newsletters that your competitors send out to assist you with your longer term marketing goals; providing a regular update of all the business news you need to know but don't have the time to seek out for yourself; or developing new systems and processes for your business that will mean better control and increased financial awareness in the future.

You may decide to just delegate the tasks of today in the first instance, but when you are looking for a VA it is always worth seeking out one that is more savvy than you initially need her to be as it will serve you well in the long run.

Is there anything that my VA can't do for me?

Absolutely! No VA, however skilled and experienced they might be, will be an expert in everything. What you need to remember is that it doesn't matter what your VA can do. What matters is what she can get done and what she can make happen for you. They can make the phone calls that find out the information you need, they can source suppliers of services they cannot perform (even if that means possibly using an alternative VA for certain tasks – often this is done through your regular VA rather than under a separate contract).

In addition, VAs cannot perform tasks such as reception duties, running errands and making cups of tea for visitors – technology will have to progress somewhat before any of these tasks can be performed remotely! If you do need a receptionist and you can't afford to hire an employee or you don't have the space then you need to consider a call answering service such as Your Call Partner at www.call-partner.co.uk quoting reference KBS02.

It is also important to remember that you shouldn't ask your VA to perform duties that you really need a different sort of professional to do. For instance, your VA might be handling your day-to-day marketing activities but wouldn't be qualified to develop your long-term marketing strategy. For that you would need a professional marketing consultant. If you expect your VA to perform at the same level as a marketing professional your expectations are totally unrealistic and you will be very disappointed.

How much should you pay for a VA?

The professional fees charged will vary from one VA to the next depending on what skills they offer, what experience they have and what sort of work they want to do. They range from as little as £12 per hour for basic administrative tasks right up to £40 per hour for more specialist services, although the market is changing and VAs are becoming much more aware of what value their services really have to their clients and their fees are starting to increase accordingly.

It is important to remember that the relationship you have with your VA will be much more strategic and the hours they work will be far less than that of a full-time employee. It will feel to you as though there are far more minutes in a VA's hour than you ever remember in an employee's hour. That is because the time you will be paying for is 100% productive with no time out for lunch breaks or gossiping with other staff members!

Most VAs will offer retainer packages in return for your commitment to pay in advance for an agreed number of hours per month. Many business owners prefer this to paying for each hour worked as it allows them to agree set hours and times when the VA will be working for them each month. It also allows a degree of flexibility within the fee structure as most VAs will offer a discount to clients who offer the commitment of a retainer package.

Business owners also need to remember that paying for the services of a VA will not only save you time and energy, it will also save you money! You only have to consider the possible cost implications of hiring an employee:

Recruitment

- Advertising
- Time interviewing
- Training

During Employment:

- Office space, furniture and IT equipment
- PAYE and National Insurance
- Administration costs
- Holiday pay
- Sick pay
- Lunch breaks and afternoon tea!

After Employment:

- Redundancy costs
- Time dealing with grievance and disciplinary procedures
- Legal costs
- Advertising and employing replacement staff

In summary, VAs represent a hugely convenient and cost-effective alternative to employees, and give clients access to a higher calibre skill level and knowledge than they might ever be able to afford in an employee.

What sort of businesses use VAs?

Hiring the services of a VA will solve the problems of most small business owners. It makes perfect sense on every level: the benefits far outweigh the cost; resources that were previously unavailable will suddenly be available; employment law will not be a consideration and no space or equipment will be required.

At some point you will discover that you simply can't continue to do it all yourself and have a great life. Something has to give! When you give work to a VA and allow them to proactively support you in reaching your goals, you free up time and energy for an abundance of other things. Those things might include:

- Growing your business
- More time with your family
- Responding to other opportunities (professional and personal)
- Balancing home and work responsibilities

Additionally, consider how valuable your time is – bring it down to the nearest pound. Whatever that number is for you, that's how much it costs you to do your administrative work and I am certain that you do it far less effectively and efficiently than a VA would. There's no financial model on the planet in which doing that makes sense.

Where do VAs work?

VAs work from their own premises, often based at home. This is one of the main benefits of using a VA as they provide their own equipment, furniture and software – in fact you don't need to provide anything except the tasks you want completed!

More and more organisations are starting to appreciate the value that remote workers can add to their business. Even employees are starting to make use of modern technological innovations and working

from home rather than dragging themselves into the office day after day. The key to remote working is communication. Most of your work together won't require anything more complicated than simply emailing, phoning or faxing each other. When necessary, however, there is a huge amount of new technology available that makes working virtually (not virtually working!) straightforward and uncomplicated.

What is the difference between an employee and a VA?

One of the greatest challenges VAs face involves changing the perception of what a VA is out there in the marketplace and what they are not: they are not an employee!

As a business owner you are probably just wanting to quickly get someone (anyone) to do the work you need doing quickly and professionally. But as a business owner looking to work with a VA, understanding the nature of your relationship is crucial to successfully working together and ensuring that your expectations are in line with each other's.

If what you want is someone who is solely dedicated to you, your business and your objectives then an employee would be the better option. If what you want is someone whose schedule you can control and who you can continually check up on then an employee would also be the better option. You might also prefer an employee if you have so much work that you really do require full-time support.

If what you want and need is the most basic secretarial support, then you might just want to work with a local temping agency.

If, on the other hand, you want the benefit of working with someone who really wants to know you, your business, your customers, and who wants to be deeply involved in your success, you'll want to work with a VA.

VAs are not employees! They are independent professionals running their own businesses. If you decide to use the services of a VA then you must understand right from the start that they are not going to be available to you eight hours a day, five days a week like an employee would be. A VA will plan their working week around all of their clients (of which you are just one). The relationship you have with your VA will be that of client and professional rather than employer and employee.

So to summarise, people work with VAs because:

- They don't have the workload for a full-time person
- There isn't the space in the office for another person
- They enjoy working by themselves and don't want the company
- They don't have to provide equipment
- They don't have the costs associated with an employee i.e. PAYE and NI, holidays, sick pay
- They don't ever have the cost or stress of having to fire an employee including tribunal costs, administration of grievance procedures etc.

If any of the above apply to you then working with a VA will certainly offer you the very best and most cost effective alternative in meeting your administrative support needs.