



Get Help Running Your Business, Virtually

By Rebecca A. Morgan
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The latest trend in outsourcing is “virtual assistance,” and it can help you be your most productive while assigning time-consuming, non-critical tasks to someone else.

It's almost midnight and there you sit, working on tasks that must get done. Maybe you don't need a full-time assistant, or don't want someone else working in your home office. Whether a business owner or a professional working for someone else, it's hard to deliver peak performance when spending time on things someone else should be doing. A Virtual Assistant (VA) can help you break that logjam.

What is Virtual Assistance?

A VA is a person running his own business, a trained administrative professional who can be your partner in your business success. He just does it remotely using technology instead of shared physical space.

How to Find Virtual Assistance

Virtual Assistants are located around the globe, with a variety of backgrounds and expertise. Professional associations offer Virtual Assistance training and certification. As with any important business decision, take the time to find a good fit. [AssistU](#) and the [International Association of Virtual Office Assistance](#) are two places to begin your search.

The Cost of Virtual Assistance

Virtual assistance does not come free, and some might think it isn't cheap, either. Most VAs work on an hourly basis, charging between \$30 and \$75 per hour. By considering it basic clerical work, one may expect to pay under \$10 per hour, but these are not your average clerks. In weighing the cost of virtual assistance, it is important to look at how much you can increase your revenues by delegating to a trusted professional the things that prevent you from focusing on other key tasks that further your business goals.

When Virtual Assistance Works Best

A few quick examples speak volumes: Andy Birol, of Cleveland's Birol Growth Consulting, advises business owners to generate higher revenues and profits by concentrating on the

things that they are good at, like to do, and are valued by customers. When he first started his business, Birol took his own advice and found competent help that freed him up to focus on his own revenue generating skills.

Birol partnered with Carolyn Berg, the owner of CyberOffice Solutions, located a four-hour drive from Cleveland. Berg supports Birol's business through database management, customer contact, follow-up calls, website maintenance, and the handling of marketing materials. She also helps with one-time projects. Birol wanted to kick off a new product line with a spectacular event at the Cleveland House of Blues. Berg worked with HOB management to coordinate the event, handle wrist bands, name tags, and marketing materials, plus worked with two of Birol's other service providers to create the kick-off presentation.

Virtual assistance companies often span several industries. Berg's client list includes a landscape consultant, hardware store owner, and Harvard professor. No two clients are alike: She keeps the calendar of the Harvard professor, while handling invoicing and other recordkeeping for the hardware store owner. Her most unusual partnership: a balloon art broker who provides independent balloon artists to various events. Berg coordinates the schedules of the independent artists, helps them manage their supplies inventory, and acts as the customer service representative.

Vicky Likens, owner of Virtually the Best, has a client who is a corporate executive with a full time assistant at work, but needs help handling her home life. Likens plans parties and vacations, does gift shopping, and even managed the pro

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cess of hiring a nanny, including screening candidates to a final four for client interview.

How to Work with Virtual Assistance

Vickie Sullivan has hired administrative support in various forms for most of the 20 years she has owned and operated Sullivan Speaker Services. She finds the VA relationship -- she works with Likens -- the most successful by far. The key distinction for Sullivan is that the VA is a fellow business owner focused on helping Sullivan's business grow, not an employee that she must figure out how to keep busy.

Sullivan appreciates having full access to Likens while paying only for actual hours used, and touts Likens' superior technical talent. There are trade-offs. Likens, located in Maryland, cannot do physical filing for Sullivan, located in Arizona. But Sullivan finds it easier to bring in occasional filing help while critical day to day assistance is provided by Liken, who Sullivan describes as her COO.

Establishing an effective relationship is crucial. Speaking separately, Birol, Berg, Sullivan, and Likens each stressed effective communication,

clear expectations, and the client seeing the VA as a partner. Attempts at micromanagement by the client will doom the relationship. Sullivan and Likens talk weekly, with most communication occurring by email. Things will fall through the cracks, but no more so than in any traditional office environment.

From the paradigm of shared space, some struggle to envision the type of work a VA can do. Berg suggests that you jot down the 10 most important administrative functions not getting done. The VA can help you define a process for how that work can be completed long distance. Once the client tastes success, other potential VA-provided services become apparent.

Not every VA is a good fit for your business, just as you may not be a good fit for every VA. The interview process is important for both of you. Matching styles, matching needs and skill sets, and having a mutual willingness to change the relationship over time as you gain experience working will make the difference between a VA that makes your business better, and one that doesn't.



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