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Virtual Assistants Bring Real Value

Your administrative assistant may not be in the next room, or even the next state.

By Howard Baldwin

Summary

Small business owners must juggle their revenue-generating duties with the administrative tasks that keep the business running, whether it's marketing and computer programming or supply procurement and meeting planning. Some are opting to hire virtual assistants, people whose primary business is to do the work you don't have the time or expertise to complete.

Temporary administrative help is nothing new, but widespread broadband networks now allow you to hire virtual assistants anywhere in the world.

You may be wary about offloading work to someone you can't see, but Sue Kramer, a virtual assistant and a spokesperson for the 700-member International Virtual Assistants Association (IVAA), insists that virtual assistants can actually provide better assistance because of a desire to develop long-term professional relationships, using effective communications skills that more than compensate for not being present in the office.

"The virtual relationship is an incredibly intimate relationship," she says. "Many of our clients travel quite a bit, so communication is almost always through e-mail, phone, or instant messaging."

Hiring a virtual assistant may sound similar to going to a temporary agency, but there are differences:

- | Agencies: take a percentage of your fee and then pay the worker, can't guarantee that you'll always get the same person the next time you need help, ensure that workers have at least a minimum of training
- | Virtual assistants: get the entire payment, require you to check references yourself

Pat Jennerjohn, a certified financial planner in Oakland, California, has used Sherry Carnahan as her virtual assistant for four years. Though they've never met, Carnahan, of Total Office in Akron, Ohio, has access to pertinent files on Jennerjohn's computer, such as her clients' contact information.

For Jennerjohn, trust isn't an issue. "Sherry's bonded, and she does this same work for about 40 financial planners. Her reputation is on the line."

Carnahan sets up brokerage accounts for clients, schedules meetings, and sends out mailings; all the work Jennerjohn hates doing. "We should work at activities where we're the genius 80% of the time," she says. For the rest, "Virtual assistants should be the geniuses."

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