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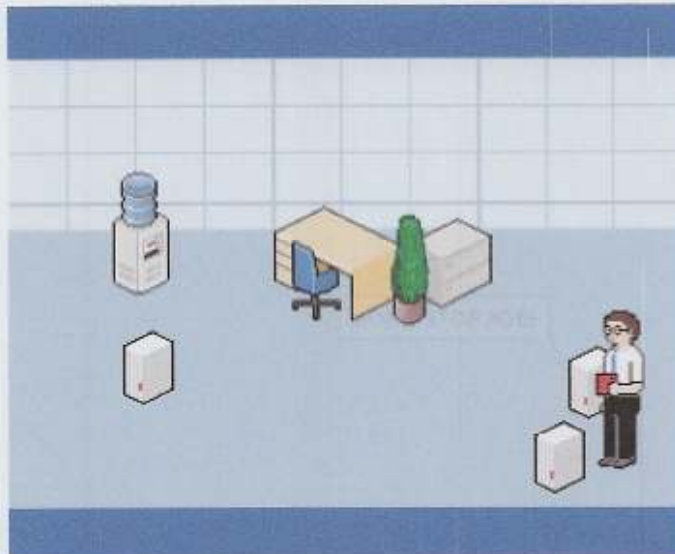
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## I Could Have Hired a VA

By Jennifer Schiff  
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Wendy Y. Bailey, the founder and president of [Brilliance In Action Coaching and Consulting](#), is a typical sole proprietor, used to doing everything on her own. But when her business started to boom, "it became very clear that I couldn't do it all myself," she says. "But I wasn't in a position to hire a full-time person. Hiring a virtual assistant just made sense for me. I'm a personal and business coach, so I'm comfortable with the whole idea of virtual support."



Indeed for many small business owners, hiring a virtual assistant may be the perfect solution to managing a growing list of responsibilities that they do not have the time or inclination to do.

### What is a VA?

While some people may think of virtual assistants as outsourced administrative assistants (and many are), VAs are actually small business owners themselves who offer a variety of talents and skills to other small business owners. There are VAs who are marketing and/or communication experts; VAs who specialize in human resources; VAs who can help you with Web design, development and maintenance; VAs who can manage your bookkeeping with QuickBooks or other such software, as well as VAs who handle correspondence, scheduling and billing. If you need something done that can be done virtually, there's a virtual assistant out there who can do it — and do it for much less than it would cost you to hire a full-time person in house.

Because they are independent contractors, virtual assistants have their own equipment and office space, pay their own taxes, and they charge only for time spent on task. Now consider the cost of full-time employees who require salaries, benefits, equipment, office space and tax outlays, all of which can easily add up to a lot of money.

"What's really good about this type of a relationship is that regardless of whether a business

owner needs support on an ongoing basis or just for one specific project, virtual assistants partner with owners to help them succeed and build an ongoing relationship for future projects," says [Debbie Tester](#), the president of the [International Virtual Assistants Association \(IVAA\)](#) — and a VA in her own right.

### **Where to Find a VA**

Small business attorney and e-commerce entrepreneur [Nina Kaufman](#) first heard about VAs through a class she attended. One of the speakers was a woman named Stacy Brice, the founder and president of [Assist University](#), a resource site for people who want to find or become a VA.

Impressed with what she heard, Kaufman contacted AssistU, filled out a project proposal, and waited for virtual assistants to respond. While she ultimately received about 30 proposals, the first one she received, from a VA in Texas, turned out to be the winner. The two have been working together for more than two years now, and Kaufman even invited her VA to attend her wedding this past summer.

In addition to AssistU, which puts all VA candidates through a comprehensive, 20-week training program and prides itself on the high standards and integrity of its VAs, the IVAA provides an international virtual assistant directory of more than 700 members. AssistU and IVAA do not charge a fee to business owners looking for VAs.

### **How to Find the Right VA for You**

All VAs who work with AssistU and IVAA adhere to a strong code of ethics. Which VA is right for you, just like finding the right employee or mate, depends mostly on chemistry. However, before you even interview prospective VAs, make sure that your project proposal spells out all your requirements: the nature of the project; what is required; how long you think it should take; qualities, skills and resources you are looking for; whatever is important to you. Then carefully read the VAs' cover letters and check out their Web sites. If you like what you see, arrange a phone interview.

The key, say both IVAA's Tester and Dawn Goldberg, the chief operating officer at AssistU and a former VA, is communication — and setting expectations right at the beginning of the relationship.

"I can't stress communication skills enough," says Tester. "Saying what you want, being able to let go of the project and let the VA get it done is critical." And be sure to ask questions, she says.

Some good basic questions Tester recommends are: What kind of hours do you work? Do you prefer to communicate by phone, e-mail, instant message or a combination? (Everyone in this article stressed the importance of a weekly phone call, even if the call is only for half an hour.) What kind of hardware and software do you use? (Almost all VAs have high-speed Internet connections and a home office that's well equipped.) That last one is particularly important since you will most likely be sending documents back and forth.

"It's really important that the business owner explain his or her requirements as clearly as possible to make sure both parties are on the same channel and have a very clear picture of expectations in the relationship and how to work together," she says. Virtual assistants should likewise ask the business owner questions — and once hired keep track of their time and provide a weekly status report.

### **How Much Do VAs Cost?**

Depending on where they are located, their type and level of expertise and what you want them to do, VAs typically charge between \$35 and \$70 an hour, with most in the \$45 - \$50 range. However, there are highly specialized VAs — with a wealth of experience in a particular niche — who can charge \$100 or more.

When you are negotiating with a VA, decide what type of pay structure is best for you/your business. Are you more comfortable paying someone hourly? Do you prefer to pay on a project basis? Or do you have several tasks that require a set number of hours per month, in which case you may want to pay your VA a monthly retainer.

"The common fee structure that you'll see if you talk with AssistU VAs is a retainer rate and a pay-as-you-go rate," explains Goldberg. "While there's not a strict standard minimum, I'd say that a business owner who is serious about his or her business, should hire a VA for no less than 10 hours a month, because only then can the VA really get a feel for the business and help the client be a success."

That's exactly what Kaufman did. "I had a rough sense of the number of hours I might need each month given the kinds of tasks I was prepared to hand off," she says. Kaufman's VA required a minimum retainer for 10 hours a month, which Kaufman happily committed to. "And I don't think I've ever gone below it."

### **Get Back to Business**

"Virtual assistants relieve the business owner of doing those things that he or she a) doesn't want to do, b) is not very good at, and c) just doesn't have the time to do properly," says Goldberg. "So the small business owner can concentrate on the things that really make him or her excited about being a business owner, not spending three hours entering receipts every week."

By hiring a virtual assistant, small business owners have a reliable, cost-effective way to take care of those tasks they know need to get done but don't want or have the skills to do themselves. Moreover, a good virtual assistant will partner with you, share your passion and help you to achieve your goals. They can also be wonderful networking tools, putting their clients in touch with other VAs with different skill sets.

"The pluses of having a VA are that you have someone who's a part of your team, who's invested in your success and helping you to get things done," says Bailey, who credits her two VAs with helping her to expand her coaching business and to be successful. "I don't know of a downside."

*Jennifer Lonoff Schiff writes about business and technology and contributes to [SmallBusinessComputing.com](http://SmallBusinessComputing.com).*

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