



## How to Choose a Virtual Assistant

### Your 10-Step Guide to Finding the Perfect Fit

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As a savvy business owner, you know you can't do everything yourself. Whether you are capable or not, you understand that your time is most intelligently focused on activities that grow your business and generate revenue. And these days, outsourcing your administrative work to a Virtual Assistant (or VA) makes it very easy to get just the amount of support you need without the expense of costly in-house staff.

Virtual Assistants are independent administrative professionals who partner with clients in ongoing collaborative business relationships. But how do you find a highly skilled, truly qualified Virtual Assistant? Below are some practical points to consider and questions to ask as you go about the selection process.

#### 1. Website.

Since Virtual Assistants operate virtually, it's important they have an online presence. A website can yield critical clues as to the VA's competence and professionalism. As you look through the website, ask yourself:

Does it present a polished, credible business image?

- ▶ Is there an abundance of informative content?
- ▶ Is the concept clearly explained?
- ▶ Is it organized well and easy to navigate?
- ▶ Is it well-written and coherent?
- ▶ Is there a solid command of grammar, spelling and punctuation?

If the VA's site is littered with misspelling, improperly structured sentencings and incorrect punctuation, don't expect that she (most VAs are women) is going to provide you with any greater skill or attention to detail should you decide to work with her.

And if it looks like she put little thought, time or money into presenting her business image, or had her 14 year old kid brother throw it together one Sunday, chances are she isn't serious about her business, and is not going to put any more care into the work she does for you.

#### 2. Consultation.

You naturally want to find a Virtual Assistant you can work with well, and whose personality and style is compatible with yours. You also want to gain some insight into whether this is a person offering the skills, service and expertise you need.

Once you find a site that instills confidence, have a conversation with that Virtual Assistant. Most Virtual Assistants offer a complimentary consultation, and all it takes is a simple email or phone call to schedule one.

In making initial contact, some things to note include:

- ▶ Does she respond to your inquiries in a timely manner?
- ▶ Does she answer the phone professionally?
- ▶ Are there kids and noise in the background?

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- ▶ Is she on time for the call?
- ▶ Does she seem prepared or unexpectedly flustered?
- ▶ Does she follow-through exactly as promised?

### 3. Finesse.

How well the Virtual Assistant guides you through the consultation process can tell you a lot about what it will be like to work with her.

Not only do you want a Virtual Assistant who is masterfully skilled and can provide superior service, but you also want someone who demonstrates excellent business sense, especially since she will be instrumental in helping you in your business.

During the consultation, some things the Virtual Assistant should cover with you include:

- ▶ A clear overview of how she works with clients;
- ▶ What her processes are;
- ▶ What services she provides (and doesn't provide); and
- ▶ What her values and expectations are for working together.

### 4. Personal & Professional Traits.

Listen for the cues that tell you this is someone you can rely on and form an excellent business relationship with. How smartly the VA handles her business is going to directly correlate with how well she handles your work. Some things you should pay attention to include:

- ▶ Does she appropriately take the lead in guiding you through the consultation?

- ▶ Is she confident and articulate?
- ▶ Does she inspire feelings of trust?
- ▶ Do you feel a good connection?
- ▶ Does she interrupt often or listen carefully when you speak?
- ▶ Does she exhibit interest and curiosity about your business?
- ▶ Does she ask smart, purposeful questions?

### 5. Experience.

Understand that the single-most important qualification of a Virtual Assistant is extensive administrative experience. From this level of experience, she is expected to possess the superior skills, training and business knowledge that are the hallmark of a truly qualified Virtual Assistant.

However, this is an unregulated industry, and while the veterans among us work to promote and maintain high standards, the Internet has nonetheless attracted a certain segment of individuals who have little to no qualifications or only entry-level skill sets that do not equip them to meet your very real and important business needs.

Asking the prospective Virtual Assistant some of these questions will help you discern the difference:

- ▶ What was your experience prior to opening your Virtual Assistant practice?
- ▶ What positions have you held?
- ▶ How many years administrative experience do you have?
- ▶ How would you rate your skill level (you might ask this in reference to certain skills or software competencies relative to the services you need)?

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- ▶ How would you characterize your level of understanding with regard to business principles and operations?

Look for a Virtual Assistant who has worked in upper-level positions such as administrative assistant, executive assistant, office manager, legal secretary, legal assistant, paralegal, supervisor, manager, etc. Virtual Assistants whose only experience was in receptionist or clerical roles are not commonly going to have high-level skills and competencies.

Keep in mind that Virtual Assistants are independent professionals, not employees. Just as you would not ask an accountant, attorney or any other service professional for their resume, it is inappropriate to ask a Virtual Assistant for theirs, and the request would be considered ill-mannered. However, they should be prepared to discuss in a consultation with you their skill levels and qualifications as described above.

### 6. Training & Certification.

The highest form of qualification, and what Virtual Assistants are expected to have before entering the profession, is a minimum of five years upper-level administrative experience. Our training ground is the real (non-virtual) business world. If you are a business owner needing competent support from someone who can hit the ground running and take the reins as your administrative expert, you should expect no less.

Don't put too much stock in certification. Virtual Assistance does have a few legitimate professional associations and training programs, but

these are intended for business--not skills--training. Where certifications are offered, they can be somewhat subjective and misleading, and many of the veteran Virtual Assistants who established the profession and created the standards have been in business longer than these programs have existed.

Additionally, there has been a proliferation in recent years of disreputable and unqualified opportunists willing to "certify" anyone who will pay. In this industry right now, letters behind a Virtual Assistant's name mean very little. However, two credentials you can count on to stand for quality, excellence and high standards are AssistU training and Virtual Assistance Chamber of Commerce membership.

### 7. The Business.

Look for a Virtual Assistant who is actually IN business. If a VA only freelances or dabbles in this work on the side, her lack of commitment or focus can definitely cause you many unnecessary headaches, wasted time and an all-around unsatisfactory experience. This can manifest in longer turn-around times, lack of continuity, poor communication, conflicting commitments, interrupted work schedules, and long or inconvenient periods of unavailability.

Virtual Assistants who are in this business as their chosen profession typically have well-honed systems, processes and offerings, and are in a position to more truly serve client needs and expectations well. Look for someone who:

- ▶ is confident;
- ▶ has her business solidly in place;

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- ▶ doesn't require training or hand-holding;
- ▶ is someone you can place your trust in; and
- ▶ can be depended on for expert support and guidance in laying strong administrative foundations

Some important facts to obtain include:

- ▶ How long has she been in business?
- ▶ Is she in full-time or part-time practice?
- ▶ Does she view her business as a chosen profession she is committed to for the long-term?
- ▶ Or is it a part-time side-job or hobby?
- ▶ Does she have well-thought out policies and business standards that will support you in working and communicating together effectively?

### 8. Testimonials.

A successful, experienced Virtual Assistant will have plenty of testimonials on her website from past and current clients. She should also be able to provide you with contact information of satisfied clients who are willing to speak with you about their perceptions and experiences in working with her.

### 9. The Owner.

Many Virtual Assistants provide an "About the Owner" page in their website as a way to share important aspects of themselves with prospective clients. It's intended to provide you with a view into their personal ethics, belief systems, personality and goals. This information can be helpful in determining whether you share similar values and want to talk with the VA further. Since you will

be choosing each other, make an equal effort to get to know the VA by reading that page.

### 10. Pricing.

Virtual Assistant rates average between \$35 - \$65 per hour.

Virtual Assistance is not the type of service you want to price shop. Certainly, we all want to get the best price and pay the least amount possible. But we've all heard the saying "you get what you pay for" and this is very true in the Virtual Assistance industry as well.

Think about your own profession. You know you aren't the cheapest, and you wouldn't want to be. You know that expertise and quality comes at a price, but the value of that caliber of service extends far beyond mere dollars, and, in turn, saves your clients money.

You know this. And the same is true with Virtual Assistance.

You will find Virtual Assistants who charge very little--so little, in fact, that they can't possibly be running a profitable, sustainable practice, one that's going to be around long enough for you to depend on.

Inappropriately low rates also signal a lack of business sense, which most often translates to poor quality, and lack of skill and experience. The consequence of hiring a Virtual Assistant who falls in this category is that your investment in her is unstable and ever at risk.



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Virtual Assistants who don't price their services profitably do not stay in business long. In their last gasps, many end up taking on a side-job or more clients than they can handle just to break even, becoming overwhelmed in the process. For you, this means they are less available, and their service and quality of work suffers.

You want ability. You want someone you can work with well. You want great customer service. And you want someone who's going to stick around. So look for quality and value--it's an investment that will literally put money back in your pocket.

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*About the Author: Danielle Keister is founding member of the Virtual Assistance Chamber of Commerce. To hire a Virtual Assistant or for more information on Virtual Assistance, as well as to join the forum and download **FREE** business tools and resources, visit the VACOC website at <http://www.virtualassistantnetworking.com>. You may print this article for personal use or republish it online only if it is left unaltered and in its entirety, including bylines, links and author information. Contact the author for any other permissions.*

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