



How To Choose The Right Virtual Assistant For *YOU*

An Insider's Guide

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A report by Nicole Paull

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If you Google ‘virtual assistant,’ the sheer amount of information that comes up is overwhelming. You’re busy as it is – that’s why you’re looking for help in the first place. How are you supposed to take the time to sort through all of that?

The good news is, you don’t have to.

The not bad, but realistic, news is, you will need to devote some time to the venture to find the right match.

The great news is, I can help you get through the process efficiently – so that you have the best chance of an abundant return on investment for the time spent, in the form of targeted help that can free you up to pursue more profitable or heart-full concerns.

But before we get started, we need to make sure we’re on the same page as far as what a virtual assistant is.

Why? For one thing, if you disagree with my definition, it will save you the time of reading ten pages of information that won’t apply to you. For another, there’s been some great information and also a lot of hype in recent years about VAs. Some people would have you believe that you can engage the services of a VA, and she’ll take care of everything while you sit on a beach and log in to check emails for a few hours a week. Oh, and she’ll help you double your business while she’s at it, not to mention be available on instant demand.

Sound like a fantasy? That’s because it is.

So What Is A Virtual Assistant, Anyway?

The tongue-in-cheek answer is that it depends who you ask. Virtual Assistance is still a young industry and definitions of it abound. But since you’ve come to me, what I’ll give you here is my definition of what a Virtual Assistant (VA) is and isn’t.

A VA is a seasoned administrative professional who provides virtual, high-level, across-the-board administrative support to a select few clients in long-term, collaborative relationships. The relationship is really the key, because as a VA gets to know you and your business, that is what allows her to think ahead, to give you not just what's been asked for, but also what will be needed next...to provide real solutions and to make customized recommendations.

A VA is not providing a commodity. The service she provides is unique, because it encompasses the entire breadth of her professional experience, work style, values, and critical thinking ability.

Is A Virtual Assistant Really What You Need?

Now that you understand [what a VA is](#), it's time to determine whether that's what you really *need*. Time is the most precious resource you have and you don't want to waste it pursuing an option that wasn't appropriate in the first place.

So let's quickly go down the list:

For one thing, to avoid potential problems with the IRS (in the United States), it's crucial that you understand the difference between an employee and a subcontractor. The desire to avoid paying someone benefits is not a good reason to work with a virtual assistant; they build the cost of their benefits into their rates. If you want to tell a VA how, when or where to do her work for you, understand that you're potentially on slippery ground in the eyes of the IRS. You can read more about the IRS's definition of employee and independent contractor [here](#).

Additionally, what you really need may be a different type of professional. A Virtual Assistant is an administrative expert. If you're looking for a brand-new website, what you need is a website designer – although many VAs will be able to help you maintain your site. Or, your VA may have the specialized knowledge that *does* allow her to

create a great website from the ground up – but this will very likely be billed at a rate separate from, and higher than, her administrative rates. You probably don't call your lawyer to come over and fix a leaky water pipe, right? The same principle holds true with your Virtual Assistant – but don't hesitate to ask her for help in finding a great website designer, or marketing consultant, or accountant, or dry cleaning service who'll pick up and deliver in the city you've travelled to, or whatever it is you need.

People who aren't in a good position to work with a VA are:

- People who aren't online and who can't understand why this would work
- People with big egos, who are controlling, and/or arrogant
- People who can't let go, who have to micromanage
- People who think VAs are task-oriented, low-level employee types, rather than equals in the relationships they form with clients
- People who live in the urgent, where everything is last minute, where they procrastinate then rush to deadline, where they need people at their beck and call because the work is the driver, rather than their driving the work
- People who thrive on drama and who have to have drama surrounding them at all times.
- People who don't understand the power created in a relationship with a fantastic assistant
- People who aren't easily trusting, or have issues with trusting others
- People who aren't open to learning new ways of working and communicating
- People interested in finding cheap laborers to provide high-end assistance

Included by the permission of Stacy Brice and [AssistU](#)
For the full article, [click here](#).

Know Thyself

You may not need any help to identify specific tasks you'd like to delegate. Most people seem to find that easy to determine. (If you're not sure, though, write down everything you do for a period of two weeks, then look at the list and ask yourself whether each item truly needed *your* attention or whether it could have been handled by someone else.)

However, when you're looking for a Virtual Assistant, here is what is equally important to share: Who you are.

- Who do you help and how do you help them?
- Why are you in this particular type of business and not another? What drew you to it?
- What are the values you've built your business on?
- Would you like it if your relationship with your VA felt friendly or are you more comfortable with a more distant "feel"?
- Are you a big-picture thinker? Very detail-oriented? Or somewhere in between?
- What are your pet peeves in a working relationship?
- How would you define success in a VA/client relationship?

All of the above is important to consider and to communicate, because there are lots of VAs with the same or similar technical skills. What makes them all unique is what *else* they bring to their work. So what I'm encouraging you to do is to find someone who's a fit with the values and culture of your business, as well as a fit with your work style.

To me, core fit (values, culture, work style) may even trump skills. Skills can be learned – core essence is what it is. So if you come across a VA who seems perfect except that she's missing a skill you want – perhaps she doesn't have experience with a particular

software service you use – all other things being equal, I'd give the greater weight to culture fit.

Additionally, know that great VAs are looking for fit, too. Most work with only a handful of clients, so they want those clients to be ones they enjoy speaking with, for whom they do work that they enjoy. By being open and honest about who you are, you help them to make an initial assessment of fit, too. You'll probably get fewer responses, but they'll be the best ones.

So, I encourage you to take the time to think about who you are as a collaborative partner, before you start actively seeking assistance. It will save you time and trouble in the end.

Starting Your Search

The two organizations I consider the cream of the crop in the VA world are [AssistU](#) and the [VACOC](#) (Virtual Assistance Chamber of Commerce).

Here's why: They don't take anybody and everybody.

At AssistU, the only VAs you'll be referred to are ones who've been through AssistU's Virtual Training Program. What does that mean?

To qualify for admission, they have to have a minimum of five years of upper-level administrative experience; complete a comprehensive application, including an essay; provide professional references; and go through an interview. About half of those who apply are approved for the rigorous, 20-week training program. Approval for and completion of the program is no guarantee of graduation (not everybody in my own class passed the final exam and graduated). Further, to remain a member in good standing, eligible for referrals, an AssistU VA must commit yearly to a code of professional ethics. Some graduates go on to seek higher levels of certification from AssistU.

I hope you're getting the picture that at AssistU, a lot of the nuts-and-bolts prequalification work has already been done for you. So you can hardly go wrong by checking out AssistU's [Registry](#).

However, if you want a super-efficient VA search, check out [Registry Gold](#), in which AssistU founder Stacy Brice will work with you to determine your needs, help you word your referral request and possibly add personal comments to it, and make personalized recommendations regarding the responses you receive.

[Entry requirements to the VACOC](#) aren't quite as rigorous. However, the application process is designed to determine critical thinking ability, communication skills, and ability to follow directions – all desirable traits for any VA to possess. And Danielle Keister, the founder of the VACOC, is serious in upholding all of the standards she espouses; she's a woman of action, not just talk.

A directory of VACOC members is located [here](#).

A Word About Budget

The VAs I've been talking about generally charge in the range of \$30 to \$90 per hour, depending on experience and skills. Those who have specialized certifications or skills may charge more. A few offer pay-as-you-go plans; many, especially more experienced VAs, work only on retainer, in which the client reserves (and pre-pays for) a block of time each month.

These savvy VAs have structured their businesses for sustainability. Their reputation *is* their stock in trade. They aren't giving a lightly-made commitment when they accept a new client. There's inherent stability in working with one of these professionals. This is of benefit to you, the client.

With a VA, you have the convenience of one simple check, once a month. No payroll taxes. No equipment to purchase or office space to provide. No worker's comp or unemployment insurance.

Nevertheless, it would be foolish not to acknowledge that despite the excellent value it provides, not every business owner can afford these rates. And that's okay.

So what's to be done if you need help, but you're in the cannot-afford camp?

Well, obviously, your options will be different ones. Do still think about your side of the collaborative relationship, what you bring and what you're looking for. You still want the best possible fit given your circumstances.

You might know someone, such as a stay-at-home mom, who's just looking for a little "extra" money, who'd be willing to work for you at a lower rate. You could check out [elance](#). I don't personally know anyone who's formed a long-term partnership with a virtual assistant using elance, but that doesn't mean it's never been or can't be done.

Just be realistic. If you're paying someone \$15/hour and that person has to give up 15% of that to federal taxes (the minimum they'll have to pay on profits in the U.S. as a self-employed person, at the time of writing), don't expect the kind of commitment to your business and to ongoing education that you can very reasonably expect from someone who has structured a VA business for the long haul.

Stacy Brice, the fabulous woman who formalized virtual assistance as a profession, wanted to be able to write about outsourcing overseas in an educated way, so she tried it. She writes about her experience on her [blog](#), which you may find interesting and valuable – and not altogether what you might expect.

Also, remember, the budget of today is not necessarily the budget of tomorrow.

Interviewing

Okay, you've put together your request for a VA and hit the "Submit" button. What's next?

For the purposes of simplicity, I'm going to assume you've used either AssistU or the VACOC to power your search. You can adapt the principles I share if this is not the case.

First, the eligible VAs in those groups will be notified of your request. The ones who see good potential for fit will respond to you.

Then, the ball is back in your court. Keep in mind the kind of person you're looking for. Your first taste of the VAs who respond will be in the tone and content of their emails and websites.

- Who do you feel a connection with, just from what she's written?
- Can you tell from her response that she read your request and reviewed your website with care?
- Does she explain what her consultation process is with potential new clients? Does she even have one? (You want to look for this – the same critical thinking that's brought to bear in crafting her consultation process will be a huge asset to you later.)

Answer the two or three (four, at the most) candidates that you have the best gut-feeling about. Then relax into each one's consultation process.

Keep checking in with your gut as you speak with each one.

- Who inspires confidence?
- Whom do you most enjoy speaking with?
- Has the VA clearly explained how she works with clients?

- As you continue to speak, do you notice any incompatibilities or red flags? (Pay attention to these!)
- Is the VA exploring deeper topics during the conversation that will help to expose logistical, values-based or other divergences that could come up later? (Again, you want to look for this. A VA who's eager for business, *any* business, isn't necessarily going to make the best choice on fit – and this can absolutely affect the quality of the support you receive and the ultimate success of the relationship.)

In the end, all going well, one will stand out as THE one. At that point, go through her intake process and get ready to benefit from having a smart, experienced professional at your virtual side.

Concluding Thoughts

It is absolutely possible to form the kind of synergistic working relationship in which you, the client, feel like you've gained a second right hand and your VA genuinely enjoys working with you and puts her heart into it. I know, because I've experienced it – and this is what I wish for all of you who read this report.

I'd love to have your feedback, as well. Was the information helpful? Was there anything you found unclear? Please, [drop me a line](#) and let me know.

To your success!

