

How to Find ... and Keep ... the Perfect VA

If you've got a dream, you need support -- and a great way to do that is with a VA or virtual assistant, which is an assistant who works for you hourly from afar by web, email and telephone. But how do you find the one that's right for you? After hiring several -- some of whom were great, some of whom were not -- I've learned a thing or two about this process. My own VA, Lorraine Carol, has joined me in summarizing this list based on her experience as well.

- 1. Decide the type of work you want them to do.** Is it marketing oriented? Or more general? Do you want them to glide seamlessly between personal tasks like online birthday shopping and professional tasks? Your clarity will set up a clearer, easier relationship from the start. Do note that some VA's are really niched towards certain tasks, such as marketing, real estate, legal, etc..
- 2. Put together a really clear description of your needs.** Then post it on various VA sites, including
http://assistu.com/client/client_how.shtml
http://www.yourvirtualresource.com/looking_for_a_va.htm
<http://ivaa.org/RFP/index.php>
<http://www.canadianva.net/files/va-locator.html> (in Canada)
- 3. Decide how much time you'll need up front.** This amount is determined with your VA, based on the list of tasks you assign and they agree to complete. The real shortfall of many VA's is that they take on more work than they can complete without pulling all-nighters, etc.. The worst VA's I've used simply can't say no, so are unavailable when you need them, and shoddy when they do the work at hand.
- 4. Make sure they are capable of doing the work you're assigning.** One way to determine this is to check references; it helps if they've done the same tasks for someone else. On the other hand, some VA's will be doing new tasks for you they've not done before. And if they're affordably priced and willing to do some learning on their own without charging you for that time, that can work, too. Be flexible ... but don't agree to pay for training time unless your VA is learning something very specific to your business and few others.
- 5. Try a small test assignment to start.** Don't leap in with all of your work at once. Give your new VA a test project or two to work on and see how the chemistry develops. In the beginning, it's too easy to gloss over potential problems with rose-colored glasses. Make it clear this is a test run.
- 6. Look for a can-do attitude.** I've heard this complaint from some that VA's they've hired try to turn work back to them, or seem balkish about taking on tasks that weren't in the original agreement. The fact is, some VA's will rise to the occasion and happily accept all kinds of work; others won't. The success of your own VA depends entirely on what kind of business you're running. Is it an improvised affair in which the type of help you need changes all the time? Or are you looking for someone to do

repetitive tasks that are often the same? Try to be clear about that up front to find the right match for your needs.

7. **Look for a good 'listener'.** A great VA will take your emailed request and try to make sense of it before coming right back to you with multiple questions. Great VA's make your life and your job easier – not overly complicated. One VA I had (who didn't last) was constantly haranguing me to send her exact URL's on each web page I wanted her to fix instead of going into the links I described verbally. By the end of our time together I felt like I was working for her. I wouldn't be paying a VA \$30+ per hour if I had time to take care of all of this stuff myself.
8. **Make your requests crystal clear.** By the same token, you need to send requests that are as clear as you can make them. That helps your VA make things seamless for you.
9. **Try not to throw a lot of last minute work at your VA.** Unless, of course, that's how you work and you made it clear up front when you hired your VA. Most of the good VA's are tightly booked and simply can't turn around a last minute project in a moment's notice. Try to give them a feasible amount of time for response.
10. **Set up regular tasks and systems they can count on.** Then make sure you meet the agreed on deadlines. Consider even putting these agreements into writing. For instance, if your VA broadcasts your ezine every Friday, make sure they have your copy by Wednesday.
11. **Look for the proactive VA who anticipates problems.** One thing I love about my current VA is that she anticipates problems. Early on she determined that I wasn't a detail person, and that she needed to be. She knows how to manage me and my scattered work style so disasters seldom occur, simply by anticipating things that could go wrong and bringing them to my attention. This endearing trait has made me a lifelong fan of this woman.
12. **Do not become overly dependent on your VA.** Know how to do everything you request of your VA yourself ... because there will come a day when a VA can't help you for one reason or another and you'll have to go it alone. It's totally worth your time to learn Front Page or another basic web building application that does not require html knowledge, for instance, as well as your shopping cart application. You'll be glad you did when you've got a sudden deadline and no one but yourself to make things happen.
13. **Keep a manual on how to run your business.** This is something I finally learned after I'd trained several VA's on the workings of my business. My current VA and I periodically add updated information – and this serves both of us. I'm covered if something goes wrong and I have to replace her. She's covered if she forgets how something works and has to go back and relearn or re-tweak.
14. **Pay your VA when requested.** That keeps everyone happy, and breeds loyalty which could become important down the road. I've learned that

good VA's tend to attract more and more work as they go on – which they may or may not accept. The word gets out, and they get deluged. So be sure to take tender loving care of your VA if you want to stay on the short list. Their assistance is simply too important to neglect.

Suzanne Falter-Barns helps coaches, authors and speakers attract publishers, agents and the media. You can access her free database of 50 Top Media and Publishing Contacts at www.getknownnow.com. To reprint this article, please use with this bio box intact. Thanks! ©2005 Suzanne Falter-Barns LLC.

Lorraine Carol is a virtual assistant who specializes in helping coaches and entrepreneurs pump up their profiles without breaking their budgets. Does your business need a tune up? Fill out 'The Works' free questionnaire and find out at www.simplyvirtualworks.com