

How to Work Effectively with a Virtual Assistant

Hiring a freelancer, as needed, reduces overhead costs for the business owner, especially for back office functions such as bookkeeping, administrative, and marketing support. At the same time, freelancing enables a professional to regain control of his/her time and makes it possible to achieve life/work balance.

Flexibility is the hallmark of a freelance working arrangement, for both business owners and the professional worker. But while most office support can be provided virtually, the virtual work model must meet some unique requirements to be successful. After all, a business owner is allowing someone access to proprietary and confidential information. If someone works independently and offsite, how does the business owner know that the hours billed are legitimate? How does the virtual worker know that the work performed is meeting the client's needs and expectations?

A great deal of important communication happens non-verbally. When a worker and employer do not share the same space on a regular basis, a great deal of interpersonal communication is lost. Eye contact, facial expressions, and tone of voice, all convey important messages that communicate how individuals perceive, understand, and feel about an exchange of information. Building trust is essential.

To make virtual work effective and successful, the following are suggested best practices for both parties:

- Work only with those whom you believe to be people of integrity. It's best to only consider working with referrals from trusted sources. Both parties should do a thorough vetting process. Meet the prospect in person and do reference and background checks.
- The business owner should develop a **detailed** job description that clearly defines the scope of work. Go through the job description in person with the prospective virtual worker. Ask the prospect to explain his/her process for performing the tasks and to estimate how much time it should take to accomplish each task.

Then, if it appears that you are both in alignment and have agreed upon realistic expectations:

- Sign an agreement that includes the job description; specifies the hourly rate; what is considered to be billable and unbillable time; and what the expected response time should be. The agreement should require a performance evaluation after a short period (perhaps two months) and require that the worker keep a detailed time/activity log. (There are several types of tracking software available). In certain cases, impose a weekly/monthly "cap", so that billable time is not open-ended. The freelancer's invoice should include the timesheet. It is also important to be clear about the best method of communication (phone, email, text).

Once you've entered into an agreement and the worker is engaged, it is vital that the business owner be available to answer questions and provide regular, timely, and constructive feedback, particularly at the start of the working relationship, either by telephone, or in person, not just by email or texting.

The virtual worker, by the same token, should call attention to any unanticipated issues that might arise in performing the work. This might require an amendment to the agreement, but it's imperative to iron out issues early on, to ensure a trusting and productive relationship. Effective communication is the key.

It's imperative that both parties be sensitive to and respectful of the time parameters inherent in their working relationship. The business owner should anticipate and communicate future support needs, taking into account that the freelancer has other commitments. By the same token, the freelancer should anticipate and manage his/her working schedule to be able to respond to the client's needs.

The fact is, a successful working relationship with a virtual freelancer is all about both parties being very clear about expectations, up front and in writing, and establishing open channels of communication. As the relationship develops, it will be easy to accommodate the flexibility necessary to make this model work for both parties. As with any new relationship, the more you invest in making the relationship work, the better it will be for the long haul.



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