The First-Timer’s Guide to Hiring

A VIRTUAL ASSISTANT

BY NICK LOPER

virtualassistantassistant.com
1. Know Thyself

2. Know Your Requirements

3. How to Write the Perfect Virtual Assistant Job Description

4. How to Post Your Job

5. How to Thin Out the Herd

6. How to Ask for Trial Tasks

7. How to Interview a Virtual Assistant

8. You’re Hired!
Let me give a quick background.

I was overwhelmed with work and was getting burned out with the day-to-day operation of the business. This was a bad sign because I normally loved my work and hated the fact it was starting to control my life (and not the other way around).

I knew I needed help, but the thought of hiring someone was too stressful.

Where would they work?

What would my tax and payroll filing requirements be?

Would I have to provide equipment?

Or benefits?

It was about that time I discovered virtual assistants, and it felt like a whole new world opened up to me. I could get the help I needed, without the administrative headaches of a local employee.

Although there will always be bumps in the road (I’ll try and help you avoid them!), a VA was a perfect solution for me, and I think it can be for you too.

Like most solopreneurs, the biggest challenge was letting go.

I had this fear that if I hired a VA to help me, they were eventually going to steal my ideas and put me out of business. Completely unfounded and unrealistic? Yes, but it was something I was afraid of.

I’ve since realized that competitors will always be there, and that your VA isn’t going to be one of them. (They have a different mindset, but if you’re still worried about it, ask them to sign a non-compete agreement.)

I was also afraid they wouldn’t do a good job and screw things up. And it’s true; they probably won’t do as good a job as you at certain tasks. But there are probably some they’ll do even better, and I’m positive you can find some time-consuming projects that will be worthwhile to offload.

Every sole proprietor reaches a ceiling, where it’s impossible to do more business without additional help.
For some people, that’s fine and they’re happy working up to that ceiling. But if you’re reading this, I’m guessing you’re not happy with that ceiling and want to do something about it.

The first secret to successfully working with a virtual assistant is to know yourself. Specifically:

- What are you good at?
- What are you not-so-good at?
- What do you enjoy doing?
- What tasks drive you crazy?
- What do you need to do to grow your business?
- What would you do if you only had more time?

Take the time to answer these questions. Understanding your own strengths and weaknesses is an important step before you hire a VA. I would create a list:

| Love: Writing content, talking to clients, making videos |
| Hate: Accounting, database maintenance, research |

Your answers will probably look a little different from mine, but you should really write them down because we’re going to use them in Part 2, Know Your Requirements.
Now that you’ve analyzed what you like to do, what you’re good at, and what you need to do, it’s time to figure out how to **unload everything else**.

I mean why spend your precious time doing the stuff you hate and are terrible at?

For me it was valuable to spend a week or two tracking how I spent my time. I wrote down each activity and the amount of time I spent on it.

Try it for a day; you might be surprised with the results.

**Here’s a sample list:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading and responding to personal email</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading and responding to customer email</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research for blog post</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing blog post</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Updating Twitter and Facebook</td>
<td>5 minutes ... and then it turned into 30 minutes...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to the gym</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design new ad banner</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing daily website maintenance</td>
<td>1.5 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing keyword research</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone call with prospective client</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bookkeeping</td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The next step is to determine which of these tasks you can outsource. In the most extreme cases, I’ve seen people outsource **everything on that list** aside from going to the gym. (And I’m sure some people wish they could outsource that too!)

It might be tempting to try and go big and aim for the **promised land** of the *4-Hour Work Week* right out of the gate, but I would caution against that. It’s all about baby steps. If this is going to be your first time working with a VA, let’s start small.

From that list, choose a handful of tasks you’d like your VA to get off your plate. For example, maybe you start with:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blog research</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog writing</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily website maintenance</td>
<td>1.5 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keyword research</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Now that you have a general idea of what your VA will be doing and how much time it should take them, it’s also a good time to start thinking about your other requirements:

- Does your VA need to be at work at the same time you are?
- Do they need to be a native English speaker?
- Are there specific skills they should already have, or will you provide training?
- What is your budget?

In Part 3, we’ll examine how to turn your requirements into an attention-getting job listing.

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**A Word on Budget: How Much Should You Pay a VA?**

The virtual assistant industry is a diverse and growing marketplace of companies and freelancers, and because of this, you will find a huge spectrum of prices.

In general, the old rule of “you get what you pay for” still applies, but that’s not to say there aren’t any high-value bargain-basement VAs out there.

Despite what some other websites will tell you, you’re unlikely to find quality workers for $3 an hour in any part of the world. That said, do you need to pay some professional $40 an hour to get good results? Probably not.

My advice: **Pay a fair wage** and move on. Overseas that will be between $6 and $12 an hour; in the US, about $10 to $25 an hour.

One age-old business rule that definitely applies is to simply **hire the best talent you can afford**.

If you underpay your VA, how motivated are they going to be to go the extra mile and really help you? If your business-model allows for it, you might also consider an incentive plan to reward strong performance.
The perfect VA job description is one that covers all your requirements AND shows some personality. We’ve all read through job listings that sound like they were written by a machine:

*The ideal candidate has a master’s degree in accounting and 3-5 years experience in corporate tax audits. We seek a team player with strong interpersonal skills... blah blahblah.*

If that doesn’t sound like a cool job to you, it probably won’t sound like a cool job to your prospective hires either.

Here’s what I posted when I was looking for new VA:

*I’m looking for a dedicated virtual assistant for a (hopefully) long-term engagement. I envision this being a full-time position.*

*You are a super-savvy Internet user who loves Excel and gets more excited than anyone probably should when discussing spreadsheets. You know the best sites to gather information and are an organizational whiz. You are a quick learner and work well without constant supervision.*

*You find ways to make the routine and mundane exciting. You are a master of efficiency and a guru of productivity. You speak and write English well, and are available to work full-time for the foreseeable future, with at least a few hrs overlap with US Pacific time 7am-5pm. You’re comfortable with social media and genuinely care about customers.*

*An interest in shoes and fashion is a plus, as is experience with AdWords. You’ll be doing daily website maintenance and marketing for a growing shoe shopping website.*

*If this is you, please apply with your resume and references. I will review the applications and probably ask the strongest contenders to submit a few trial tasks before moving to interview stage.*
There are several advantages of doing it this way.

First, by **showing some personality** in your ad, you can expect to get some personality in your responses.

By using some **slang and idioms**, you can gauge each respondent’s grasp of your English.

If you **give a hint of what the VA will be working on**, you can get more qualified responses. I got several applicants (all female) exclaiming how much they love shoes and how this sounded like a dream job.

And finally, when you give **specific instructions**, you can immediately weed out those who do not follow them. I asked for a resume and references, yet a few applicants neglected to include those in their reply.

Go ahead and craft your perfect help-wanted ad that lets your personality shine through. In Part 4, I’ll show you where to post it to get the most qualified applicants.
There are a few different places you can post your virtual assistant job.

First, you’ll have to make the decision of whether you’d like to work with a freelance / solo-operator VA, or hire help through a third-party service.

I’ve used both and have had success with each model. In general, the advantages of hiring a freelancer include:

- Lower rates, OR more talent for your buck.
- Perhaps a closer match to your specific requirements.
- Opportunity to screen candidates, conduct interviews, and be 100% in charge of the hiring process.
- Perhaps greater opportunity to build a long-term relationship.

On the downside:

- It’s more work upfront.
- If your VA doesn’t work out or quits, it’s on you to find a replacement.
- You’re 100% in charge of training, management, oversight, and payment.
- Generally, freelancers are working from home, which could bring up data security or reliability issues (especially in countries with poor infrastructure).

Freelance Virtual Assistants

My go-to resources for finding freelance VAs are Upwork (the company formed when the giant freelance marketplaces of Elance and oDesk combined) and Onlinejobs.ph, which is a jobs board for virtual workers in the Philippines.

Upwork

Upwork has transparent feedback systems in place, and offers fraud protection and dispute resolution for employers. You can post your job (it’s free) to get a broad range of applicants, and even invite those with promising profiles to apply.

I should note that this platform is primarily known for short-term hires or one-off projects, but I’ve actually had my best success in finding long-term people here. I worked with one Upwork VA for over 2 years!
Besides, for freelancers who are used to hustling for work every week, the prospect of having even 5-10 hours a week “spoken for” can make your listing very attractive.

For Upwork, the process is very easy. From the homepage, just select the Get Started button and follow the step-by-step instructions.

You’ll be asked to create an account if you don’t already have one. It’s totally free to join and post a project.

Once you’re in, you’ll come to the “Post a Job” screen. Simply input your virtual assistant job information from Part 3 and you’ll begin getting qualified applications right away.
OnlineJobs.ph

To get started with OnlineJobs.ph, choose the **Post a Job** button.

You’ll be prompted to create a free account if you don’t already have one. The catch with OnlineJobs is that while you can post your job for free, they charge **$49/month** if you want to actually be able to contact your applicants.
The OnlineJobs platform is more focused on long-term virtual employment of either half-time (20 hours a week) or full-time (40 hours a week). If you don’t imagine having that much work initially, you can still use the site, but understand your virtual assistant will probably be most loyal to the employer who gives them the most hours.

Keep in mind this is exclusively for workers in the Philippines, which has become an outsourcing hot spot for their combination of English language education and affordable wages.

When I’m in recruiting mode, I sign up for the paid membership account until I fill my position and then I cancel it.

With either platform, you’ll probably start getting applications within minutes of posting your ad. Part 5 addresses how to narrow down your choices.

**Virtual Assistant Companies**

In addition to hiring freelance VAs, I’ve had the chance to work with and trial dozens of virtual assistant companies. There are some distinct advantages to working through a third-party company, including:

- Someone else has done most of the candidate screening legwork for you.
- They generally have some management infrastructure and quality assurance guidelines in place.
- If your VA doesn’t work out, gets sick, quits, or gets promoted, they’ll help source a replacement for you.
- They usually have a call-center type of office with security, dedicated power supply, and Internet connections (as opposed to a home-office).
- You may have on-demand access to a team of people with different areas of expertise.

Take a look at the current list of top-rated virtual assistant companies, as decided by more than 1500 user reviews.

You have a huge variety of options in terms of geography and budget, but there are a couple things to keep in mind when evaluating these different companies.

Before you sign up, share your job description and approximate hourly requirement. Ask if you can interview the candidates they have on staff who might be a good fit. (Several companies will even offer a short free trial period so you can test them out.)

Ask questions to your point of contact that are important to you. What happens when my VA is sick or leaves the company? Will I have a dedicated assistant, or will a team of different people handle my tasks?

And finally, many companies offer exclusive discounts for Virtual Assistant Assistant readers so make sure let them know that’s where you found them.
This is where the hiring process really starts to get interesting.

If you’ve gone the freelance route, you probably have a dozen or more virtual assistant applicants by now. It’s time to thin out the herd, and for this, you sometimes have to be ruthless.

Didn’t include a personal reply? Gone.
Didn’t follow directions? Gone.
Zero earnings history or feedback? Gone.
4 Page Resume for a $6/hr job? Gone.
Application says “strong English skills” but is filled with typos and misspellings? Gone.

You get the idea.

In my job post I specifically asked for a “super-savvy Internet user,” so I had no qualms about immediately rejecting candidates who applied with a Hotmail email address. Sorry if I just offended any remaining Hotmail users.

On Upwork, you may have some applications from individuals and some from big companies. I would treat them the same, understanding the pros and cons of each from the previous section.

I like to assign each applicant a letter grade (A, B, C, D, F) based on first impressions of their cover letter and profile. Then I’ll move ahead to the next step with my “A” candidates.
How to Ask for Trial Tasks

Now that you’ve narrowed down your list of applicants, it’s time for a performance test.

You wouldn’t buy a car without taking it for a test drive first, right?

Ask each of your remaining candidates if they will be willing to work through an hour or two of trial tasks. Most will agree to this as long as your trial isn’t outrageously long or complex.

Here’s how to create your performance test. Do some work as you normally would, but as you’re working, create a set of instructions for your candidates. You can write these out or even record a screencast video with a tool like Jing or Screencast-o-Matic.

I recommend 2-3 different tasks to see how they do in different areas.

For example, you might ask for:

- One online research task
- One spreadsheet task
- One writing sample

Most recently, I also included instructions to contact me via Skype if anything was unclear related to the trial tasks. I was surprised that most candidates preferred to feel their way through the tasks on their own – even if it meant missing the point entirely and not following the directions – rather than ask me for clarification. Only one VA contacted me via Skype, and she got the job.

As a best practice, ask each virtual assistant candidate for the same tasks, so you can compare the results to the others and to your own work.

When judging the results, look for accuracy and attention to detail. Is this person someone who, with a little training, could be a valuable asset to your team?

These trial tasks will help you narrow down the field a little more before you move to Part 7, Interviews.
I think interviewing is an important step in hiring a virtual assistant. You’re about to let someone into your life and your business, so it only makes sense to get to know them a little bit first.

You’ll get a sense for how they speak (Are they confident, shy? How is their English?), how they think, and how seriously they are taking this opportunity.

For a lot of people, this might be your first interview on the other side of the table. It’s nice to be in the position to be asking the questions, but it can be stressful too.

I suggest using Skype to conduct your interviews. The call quality is generally pretty good, and if you and your candidate have webcams, you can even see each other during the call which is really helpful since a large part of communication is non-verbal.

The best interviews play out like a dialogue, rather than an interrogation. I like to give the candidate ample time to ask questions of their own, as well as give a little background about myself and my company.

You can find dozens of websites with sample interview questions, but here are some of my favorites. (Some may not apply directly to you, depending on the type of VA you’re interviewing.)

- Tell me about yourself. What’s your background?
- Out of all the jobs on Elance, what attracted you to this one?
- Of the sample tasks, which did you like best and why?
- How would you market this product / this website / this service?
- In your work history, what kind of work are you most proud of?
- If you have a question and I’m not available, what would you do?
- What keeps you motivated?

I would try to keep the interview around 15-20 minutes. You’re not trying to hire a new chairman of the board.

It’s also important to keep realistic expectations. You’re not hiring a rocket scientist or a smooth-talking salesperson, and in many cases your candidates will be answering your questions in a second language. Just try and get a gauge for who they are, their enthusiasm, and their ability to learn quickly and follow directions.
Once you decide on the winning candidate, you can negotiate your terms in the Upwork system, remembering that the platform takes a 10% cut.

With OnlineJobs, you’ll be responsible for paying your assistant directly. The most common payment method is PayPal on the 1st and 15th of the month, but you’re free to negotiate your own terms. I just wouldn’t pre-pay for work in advance.

The exception to that is with virtual assistant companies, where you’ll generally pre-pay for a bucket of hours or a month of assistance service.

I’ve found it worthwhile to set-up a two-week trial period to see how things work out in real life. After that, you can simply edit the terms of your agreement and continue working with your new virtual assistant!

A Final Word of Caution:

Some candidates will try and sweet-talk you into hiring them outside of the Upwork system. They’ll offer a slightly lower price because they can avoid paying the Upwork fee.

I know because I fell for it.

This gentleman seemed like a stand-up guy, a real professional, and I trusted him and hired him outside of Upwork (it was Elance at the time). Turns out he was a real professional scam artist. He didn’t deliver the results he promised, and wouldn’t return my phone calls and emails. It was a terrible experience and cost me a few thousand dollars and a lot of headache.

And the worst part was I had no recourse. Even though I found him through Elance, I didn’t qualify for any of their buyer protections because the job wasn’t on their books.

So don’t make my mistake: Use the system and sleep easy.
What Did You Think?

Was this worth reading or was it a waste of time? Please let me know what you liked and didn’t like about the ebook so I can improve it in future editions.

Thanks!

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Got Questions?

I’m here to help! Let’s set up a quick call to jump-start your outsourcing efforts.

This one-on-one strategy-session with me is to answer any questions you have about the material in this ebook, on the VirtualAssistantAssistant.com site, or on outsourcing in general.

No sales pitch, no upsells, no strings attached.

(You’d be surprised what we can cover in just 10-15 minutes!)

Use this link to schedule a time that works for you: https://clarity.fm/nickloper