

# Smart Move for Your Home Business: Hiring a Virtual Assistant

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Six months after Tamara Schumer, of Fairfax, Va., opened her home-based window-treatment business in 2016, it took off. "I was fortunate," says Schumer, owner of Budget Blinds of Arlington & Alexandria. "But it was very stressful trying to handle customer service, scheduling, follow-up, orders, sales — all of that on my own."

So she decided to hire a couple of virtual assistants to help handle some of her business matters from their homes. What a relief that turned out to be.

I needed somebody to answer my phone and my emails," Schumer says. "I have an answering service, but they were very impersonal. I wanted to teach someone enough about the business, so they could help me screen the calls and qualify the opportunities."

Schumer contracted [FlexProfessionals](https://www.flexprofessionalsllc.com/) (<https://www.flexprofessionalsllc.com/>), a recruiting and staffing firm for the Boston and Washington, D.C., areas, who hired a woman to be her virtual office manager.

"She answers the phone, schedules and protects me from myself," Schumer says. "If I answer the phone, I'm always saying 'yes' to the customer and overscheduling myself. She handles customer service issues and reorders, so I can really focus on the revenue generation. It has been hugely helpful."

Next, Schumer added a remote part-time bookkeeper to the fold. Although Schumer was formerly an administrative vice president at M & T Bank, handling the accounting nitty-gritty, she hates those kinds of tasks and wanted to offload them.

"This is my second career, and I wanted to have fun with my work. I'm spending money to have these women support me, but it's enabling me to focus on the sales," Schumer says.

## Hiring an Assistant So You Can Focus on Priorities

If you have a [home business](https://www.nextavenue.org/how-to-build-a-home-business-support-group/) (<https://www.nextavenue.org/how-to-build-a-home-business-support-group/>), or plan to start one, hiring one or more part-time virtual assistants can give you, too, more time to focus on what you want to be doing and what you're best at.

"Our phone rings daily with calls from small businesses, many of whom are solopreneurs, stressing as their businesses take off," says Gwenn Rosener, partner and co-founder of FlexProfessionals. "Some are running around with their hair on fire, trying to juggle everything from accounting to marketing to tax filing and not doing any of it well. Some are locked in paralysis; they have so much to do they can't figure what to focus on, how to take a step forward."

In fact, one thing entrepreneurs I interview frequently tell me is that when they look back at what they would've done differently launching their businesses, they wish they'd delegated tasks sooner.

But getting yourself to do this is tough.

As someone who runs a media business from home, writing books and articles and public speaking, I get it. Asking and paying for help can be a psychological and financial quandary. It's easy to get into the superman or



superwoman mindset that only you can do what needs to get done.

Moreover, uneven revenue streams (especially in the early days of a business) can make it hard to justify the cost.

## A Smart Investment

But experts say one or more virtual assistants can be a smart investment.

"As an entrepreneur, your most valuable resources are your time and attention. It's best to save your time and attention for activities that are really central to your value proposition," says Daniel Forbes, an associate professor at the Carlson School of Management University of Minnesota and a senior editor on the [EIX Editorial Board](https://eiexchange.com/) (https://eiexchange.com/) of the Schulze School of Entrepreneurship at the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis. (Full disclosure: The Schulze Foundation is a funder of Next Avenue.)

Most likely, Forbes says, the activities you'll want to concentrate on yourself are ones regarding your product or service and your customers.

"It's less likely they will involve administrative tasks like bookkeeping or shipping," says Forbes. "Letting go of those less-central activities can give you more time to focus on your mission-critical tasks."

Plus, he notes, farming out some jobs can let you take advantage of others' skills and passions. "You can let them do it and reap the rewards of their proficiency and expertise," says Forbes.

Just ask Crissie Agnew, who works roughly 30 hours a week as an accounting manager for two clients, including LRZ Consulting, an accounting and bookkeeping company the owner runs from home.

Agnew has the chops for the job. Prior to returning to work in May after a caregiving break, she'd held director-level roles at Host Marriott and MedImmune as a manager for external financial reporting and technical accounting.

Hiring a virtual assistant doesn't have to break the bank.

According to Rosener, general back office support such as an administrative or operations assistant might cost \$25 to \$35 per hour; bookkeepers usually start around \$30 per hour and accountants with an accounting degree and/or a CPA go for about \$40 to \$50 per hour. A controller runs \$50 to \$60 per hour and a chief financial officer costs \$70 per hour or more, Rosener says.

If you use a firm like Rosener's, the rates would also include a fee that covers recruiting and vetting candidates for the position and managing the billing and payroll for the contractors.

## 4 Tips for Hiring a Virtual Assistant

Here are four tips for hiring and working with a virtual assistant:

**1. Do an MRI on your daily duties.** Write them all down, including the mundane e-mail correspondence, buying office supplies and creating and executing sales pitches and presentations.

If a task doesn't produce revenue, chances are it can be done by someone else.

**2. Tap into your professional and personal networks to find prospective candidates.** Screening resumés, interviewing and onboarding an assistant can be a time zap. A reliable referral from a colleague or friend can be an easy way to find one.

To streamline the process, though, you might also consider posting a position on your industry association site or reaching out to staffing agencies such as [Boldy](https://boldly.com/) (https://boldly.com/), [FlexProfessionals](https://flexprofessionals.com/), [Work at Home Vintage Experts](https://workathomevintage.com/) (https://wahve.com/) (WAHVE), [FlexJobs.com](https://flexjobs.com/) (https://flexjobs.com/), [Remote.co](https://remote.co/) (https://remote.co/) and [We Work Remotely](https://weworkremotely.com/) (https://weworkremotely.com/).

You can also post a virtual job opening on social media platforms, like Twitter or a Facebook industry group.

Another route is to post your opening on sites like [RatRaceRebellion](https://ratracerebellion.com/contact) (https://ratracerebellion.com/contact) (if it passes their review).

**3. Write a sharp job description.** Be transparent about what duties the job entails and what it's like working with you — your management style or work style. This requires a serious self-review, but it's critical to provide a realistic job picture.

Remember: hiring a motivated part-time employee depends on communicating what you can offer, too, such as intriguing projects or growth and development opportunities.

**4. Build trust.** That's vitally important, says Maria Cindea, of Vienna, Va., who works virtually as a part-time accountant for four businesses.

"Some of my clients had a hard time letting go, I noticed. But little by little, more came to me," Cindea says. "When they would drop something in my lap, I picked up the ball and went with it. A lot of it is about building trust. Now, I'm like their family member."

As a small business operator, Schumer wholeheartedly agrees.

"You can't be a control freak and afraid they can't do [the job] well enough," Schumer says. "You have to get over yourself. You have to have a little faith that if you show them and teach them, it will only benefit you."

If you keep trying to do everything yourself, Schumer adds, you're just going to be going in circles and running yourself ragged. "But if you get somebody to help you, it will give you the opportunity to do other things. It's lovely."