# **An Excerpt from:**

# Harbour, Sarita**. “**How Your Small Business Can Effectively Use a Virtual Assistant.” *The Hartford, Smalbiz Ahead,* updated 27 August 2019, <https://sba.thehartford.com/managing-employees/using-virtual-assistant/>*.*

# **How Your Small Business Can Effectively Use a Virtual Assistant**

One of the first things to tackle when you want to improve productivity as a small business owner involves effectively delegating duties you don’t need to do yourself. And with so many tasks required to run (and hopefully grow) a business, getting good help is critical. Not all business owners, however, want or need the cost and commitment of a full-time staff. For many productive small business owners, virtual assistants (VAs) can shoulder the burden of regularly required tasks, freeing up time to work on activities that grow their businesses.

If you’re looking to get more done right away but don’t have the budget or desire to take on new employees, consider hiring one—or more—virtual assistants. Here’s the lowdown on why you should get a VA, what they can do for you, where to find one, how much they may charge, as well as what to watch out for.

## What is a Virtual Assistant? VA Basics

A VA works in a different location from your own business, usually in either their own home or office, and may even live in a different country. Thus, your working relationship is “virtual,” meaning you communicate via phone and/or computer.

A VA most often works as a freelancer or independent contractor, and often operates as a small business owner or solopreneur themselves. Many of these assistants provide administrative or secretarial-type services.

Note: This article covers human VAs, not to be confused with the increasingly popular digital VAs such as Alexa and Siri.

## Types of Tasks a Virtual Assistant Can Perform for You

VAs perform a variety of tasks for small businesses of all sizes, ranging from daily, repetitive tasks to more specialized activities and projects, such as creating and maintaining websites and carrying out online marketing campaigns. Of course, the types of tasks you plan on having your VA cover will determine the skill level needed—and affect how much you pay them.

A VA could help with any of the following tasks:

* Scheduling appointments
* Making travel plans
* Completing event planning tasks
* Responding to and/or managing email
* Entering data for customer orders
* Updating databases
* Proofreading and/or editing documents
* Responding to customers via phone or email
* Making follow-up calls to sales prospects
* Bookkeeping/accounting/invoicing
* Creating and scheduling social media postings
* Creating and scheduling blog posts, including research and internal linking
* Finding and editing images for social media posts and blog posts
* Creating, scheduling and maintaining digital marketing assets like newsletters and email lists
* Creating and updating your website

Mike Catania, founder of Tallahassee, Florida, coupon syndicator [Promotioncode.com](https://www.promotioncode.org/), has been using VAs since 2010. Today, Catania continues to use a VA despite having hired 11 full-time employees and four seasonal employees, and the VA completes jobs that technology just can’t handle.

“There are a lot of different tasks that I use [my VA] for, but they all have one thing in common,” Catania says. “They’re extremely repetitive but can’t be performed by a computer.” One example: gathering coupon-collection tips for his writer to package into an article. “Before that, she was verifying the customer service phone numbers for the 20,000 merchants with which we work,” he explains.

Dr. Mary Barbera of [Barbera Behavior Consulting LLC](http://marybarbera.com/) is a behavior analyst. The solopreneur has used several VAs to help with her business, and not just for highly repetitive tasks. Her lead VA essentially acts as her online business manager, while a second VA carries out tasks related to customer support, data entry and scheduling, using a group communication and project management app called [Asana](https://asana.com/).

“My VAs not only draft emails for my sales funnels and set them up in the contact management system,” says Barbera, who uses Infusionsoft, “but they also help me keep track of email open rates and conversions.” Barbera meets virtually each week with her VAs to discuss current priorities.

## How a Virtual Assistant Can Help A Small Business

Virtual assistants help businesses in several ways. Using a VA offers three main benefits to business owners: more time, expanded skill sets and bandwidth to grow.

### Virtual Assistants Save Time

Hiring a VA helps small businesses save time, because—as Catania’s example shows—an assistant can complete repetitive, time-consuming tasks that don’t require a business owner’s personal attention.

Brad Chandler, CEO of [Express Homebuyers](http://www.expresshomebuyers.com/), a home-buying company that purchases and renovates homes, can attest to this. He explains, “One of our VAs does admin-type work, mainly turning on and off utilities on homes that we buy and sell.” He adds that his remaining VAs follow up with leads for potential home sellers via the phone.

### Virtual Assistants Provide Expanded Skills and Experience

VAs may also offer businesses access to skill sets that they or their current permanent staff don’t personally have. Barbera’s VAs add marketing experience to her business, carrying out ongoing online marketing campaigns and helping with new product launches.

“With the help of VAs, my email list tripled last year from 3,500 to 10,000,” Barbera explains. “And I launched two online courses for autism professionals and gung-ho parents, which have already been sold to participants from 40 different countries.”

### Virtual Assistants Help Businesses Grow Without Additional Full-Time Staff

VAs are especially useful when you’re growing but aren’t quite ready to hire an employee, says Diane DiResta, author, founder and CEO of [DiResta Communications, Inc.](https://www.diresta.com/), a New York City-based consultancy serving business leaders who deliver high stakes presentations.

“A VA allows you to grow at your own pace,” DiResta, who hired her VA 10 years ago, explains. “[My VA] has helped me tremendously.”

Another big benefit to working with a virtual assistant is that many operate as independent contractors, so you don’t pay for the insurance, payroll taxes or retirement benefits that normally go along with hiring a part-time or full-time employee.

A final bonus, points out Chandler, is that they don’t take up costly office space.

## How a Virtual Assistant Could Fit into Your Business

Hiring a VA should help your business, not hinder it.

“I think one of the secrets of being a good business owner is to focus on the work that only you can do and to farm the rest out to other employees, whether in-person or virtual,” says Catania. “Use VAs to open up your schedule, so you can do just that.”

It helps to have some idea of how an assistant would fit into your business, what tasks they could do and how you would manage them. Before taking the VA plunge, ask yourself these questions:

1. What tasks am I currently responsible for that anyone could do?
2. What tasks/projects need to be done for my business that none of my current team members know how to do?
3. What is the most immediate task/project a VA could take on as soon as they’re hired?
4. What could I do to grow the business if a VA was handling some of this work?
5. How do I want to manage my VA (e.g., via Skype, email or phone)?

Use your answers to guide you in adding a VA to your team.