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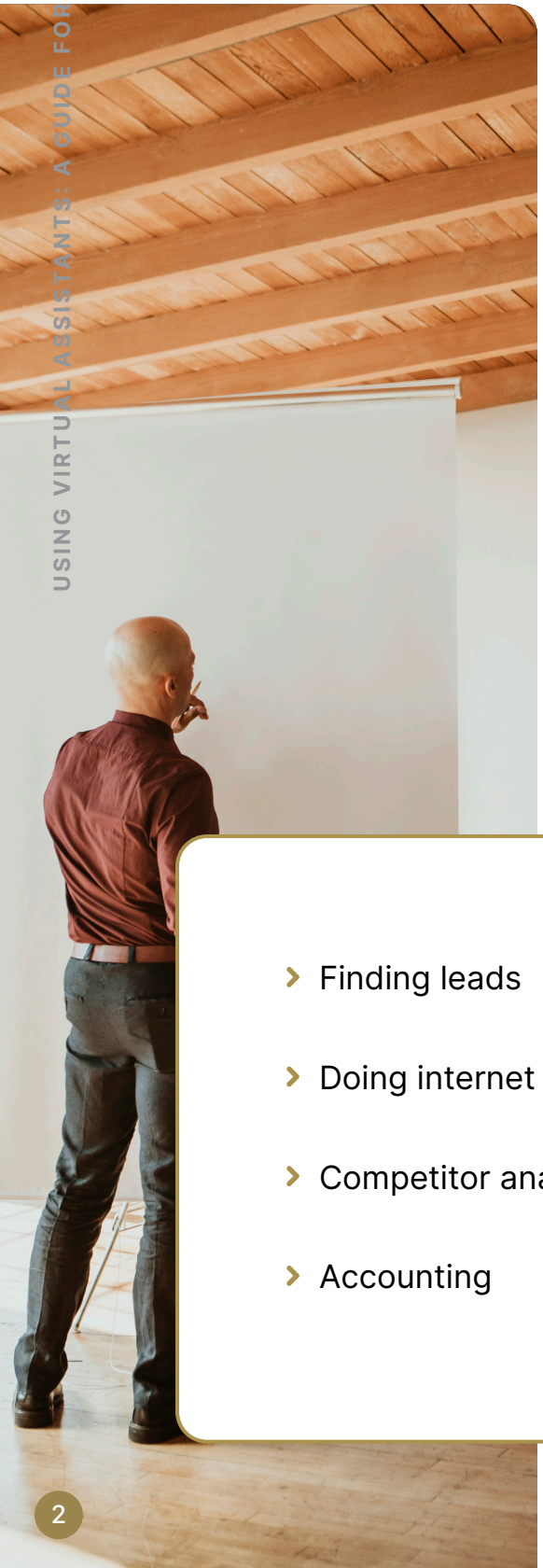
Using Virtual Assistants

A GUIDE FOR SMALL CONSULTANCIES

Introduction



If done well, hiring a VA will help you save hours of your life. The value you generate for your company probably only comes from about 50% of your work, much of the rest could be outsourced to someone else. A VA is typically a freelance person who lives in a country where the average wage is quite low, but skills can be quite high. They give assistance remotely. They often work for several clients and do any standardised tasks that typically fall under the headings 'admin' and 'research' such as:

- Finding leads
- Doing internet research
- Competitor analysis
- Accounting
- Social media updates
- Editing podcasts & videos
- Managing calendars
- Responding to standard emails

They are usually paid by the hour, ranging from £3 an hour (typically lower skilled, based in India or Pakistan through an online platform) to £35 (typically higher skilled, UK or US based, through an agency). In the middle is a huge range of services, intermediaries and locations. There isn't a direct correlation between quality and price though.

Small businesses that are making less than my £200K per year example probably need to adjust their scope a little – I'm not advocating £25 per hour as a standard wage for a VA.

Payment

There are multiple payment methods pay a VA or their agency: PayPal charges around 3.5% of the transaction and also applies currency conversion fees. TransferWise and Azimo are lower cost alternatives. Platforms like UpWork, Amazon Turk and Fiverr have their own payment platforms. Dealing directly with a VA or agency, you will often asked to pay between 50-100% of payment upfront.

Which countries should I look at?

It depends on how important English is to you. Obviously, for good English look for VAs from English-speaking countries. I've had great success hiring VAs from UK, USA, Macedonia, Malaysia, Pakistan, India and the Phillipines. People also speak highly of Ukraine and Bulgaria

How to use a VA?

First identify the tasks they can do. Most VAs will do exactly what you tell them, but won't be useful on high discretionary tasks. The following will allow you to know the tasks to start with and how long each task should take:

01

Over a fortnight record in a spreadsheet every single task you do in your working day and how long each one takes

02

Categorise each task: High discretion vs. low discretion; Repeating vs. Unique; Revenue generating vs. admin

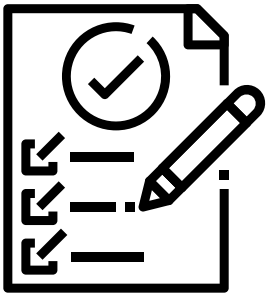
03

Low discretion, repeating, admin tasks are those that can be easily outsourced.

04

Some other work e.g. low discretion, repeating, but revenue generating, may be outsourcable with some training.

What should I get a VA to do?



Next, specify your requirements. Think:

a. What skills do you want them to have? What are your priorities?

b. What personality strengths do you want them to have?

c. How quickly do you want them to respond?

d. Should they be part of a bigger team (safer if, for example, they get ill)?

e. Is time-zone important to you?

f. Do they need to speak to people (i.e. have great language skills)

g. Do you need 24/7 support?

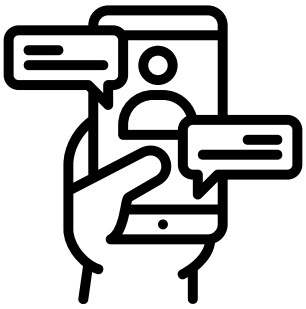
Finding a VA

I would suggest experimenting with a platform and then seeking to build a relationship with them directly. These saves the VA up to 30% in the cut a platform takes. Typically, I'd recommend trying a few VAs on a platform such as Fiverr, Freeup, Truelancer, Crème de la Crème, and then if you are happy with the work, asking them to connect with you on LinkedIn or simply searching their username to make direct contact. If you'd like to go direct to an agency of reputable VA ask for a referral on Facebook Groups (e.g. nomad-specific groups, virtual assistant groups, or groups within your niche).

When searching a platform, you can narrow down by any number of criteria including price, feedback and location. If you prefer to post a general advert (which most platforms allow) it's worth stating 'when applying please start the message with the work LITE so I know you have read this' as you will get hundreds of people who haven't read your advert.

Generally, experiment with a few people on small, low risk tasks, and then slowly narrow down and you build familiarity and trust.

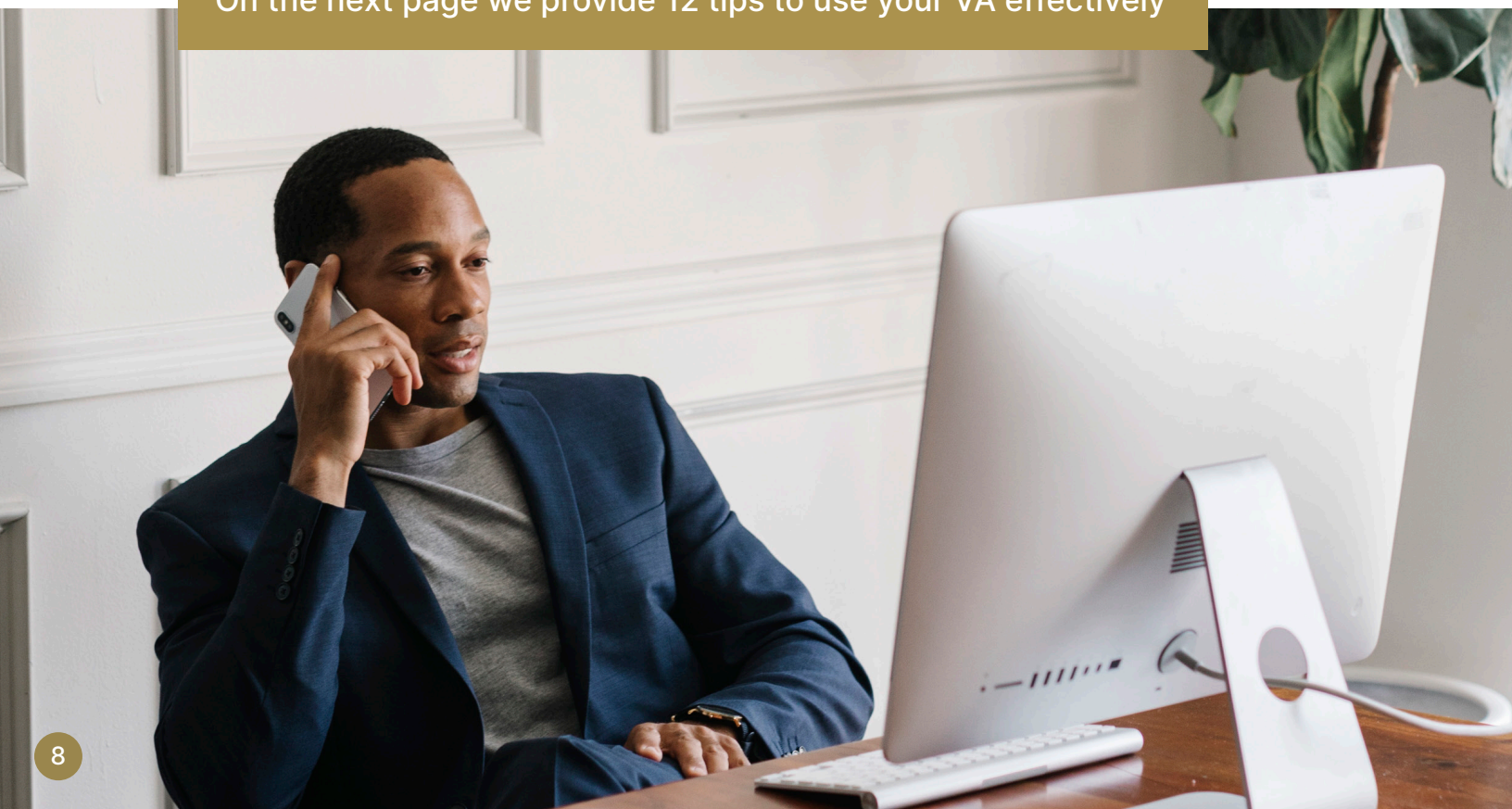
How should I onboard my VA?



Please don't think that you can just tell your VA what you want and then blame them if things go wrong. VAs need training, and you need to be open about this with them.

If they are bright and enthusiastic, you can train them up in all kinds of specialist things that you may not have thought they could do. So, put time aside every week for planning, managing and training. It helps to give them the big picture. I would suggest, initially at least, having a period with them at the beginning and end of every day that your VA is working.

On the next page we provide 12 tips to use your VA effectively



- A virtual assistant is not mind-reader: tell them exactly what you expect, what you want and how you want it done. When giving instructions ask “Does that make sense?”.
- Set and document some ground rules: how to track their time; How often they should be working for you; Hours per day; Timesheets; Payment terms; Notice for time off etc.
- When you write instructions, use bullet points or numbering. Get them to do the same when asking questions.
- Get your VA to document the steps in each task so that if you change VAs it is recorded.
- If something is complex, use a video to illustrate (TinyTake is good for this) – combine the link in your instructions.
- Don’t micro-manage. A good VA will have initiative, don’t squash it! Let them make decisions and give feedback.
- If trust is an issue for you, go back to your systems
- Ask VAs to try and word questions so you can give a Yes/No answer.
- Set them up on a company email (e.g. assistant@consultingmastered.com). If you have several VAs use an inbox sharing tool like Front or Loop.
- Respect them. Pay promptly and be generous with extras or tips on days that are special to them. Remember they need time off. Get to know them.
- Use an NDA if you wish (though it is likely to be unenforceable!)
- Use a time management tool if trust is an issue: Timely and Toggl are recommended.