



GwenGreen
creative business services



Working with a VA: a practical guide

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People usually start thinking about working with a VA when they feel stretched, frustrated, or stuck spending time on things that don't make the best use of their skills. At the same time, there's often a hesitation around cost and whether paying for support will genuinely make things easier rather than add another expense.

Used well, VA support isn't about doing more. It's about reducing wasted time, rework, and mental load so your business runs more smoothly.

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Is a VA the right kind of support for you?

Hiring a VA is often talked about as a solution to being busy. In reality, it works best when you're clear on what kind of help you actually need and what you still need to stay involved in yourself.

A VA can support you with tasks, systems, follow-up, and implementation. They can take work off your plate and make things run more smoothly. What they can't do is read your mind, make decisions for you without context, or replace your responsibility for what goes out under your business name.

There are many different types of VAs. Some focus on general administrative support, others specialise purely in areas like social media, web creation, or tech support. There are also VAs who niche by industry, working exclusively within sectors such as legal, medical, or finance. Understanding this distinction can help you look for the right kind of VA, rather than assuming one person should be able to do everything.

If you're feeling overwhelmed, stuck, or frustrated, it's worth pausing before you hire anyone and asking yourself a few honest questions.

- Are you clear on the outcome you want, even if you're not sure how to get there yet?
- Do you know which tasks are draining your time or energy?
- Are you willing to explain how you like things done and give feedback along the way?

If you're not sure what to hand over first, that's really common. I've created a separate guide to help you work out what to outsource, which you can read alongside this one.

It's also worth being aware that a VA is not the right support for every situation. If you need specialist advice or decision-making taken off your hands completely, a consultant or another professional role may be more appropriate.



How to find a VA who's a good fit

Finding a VA isn't about going with the first available person who offers the tasks you need. It's about finding someone whose way of working fits your business, your expectations, and how you make decisions.

It's also important that you feel comfortable with them as a person. You'll be giving someone access to parts of your business, your systems, and often your thinking, so feeling at ease and able to communicate openly matters just as much as skills and experience.

A good starting point is asking your existing network for recommendations and referrals. These tend to work well because you're getting first-hand insight from someone who has actually worked with the VA and can share their experience from a client perspective.

If you ask for recommendations in online networking groups, including LinkedIn and Facebook, be specific in your post. State the type of help you're looking for and the kind of business you run, so people can quickly see whether they're a good fit. Including a few key criteria in the post itself can help you get more relevant responses and reduce time spent filtering through unsuitable options.

It's also worth avoiding sharing your email address publicly in posts like this. Asking for names first and then doing your own checks allows you to stay in control of the process and follow up in a more considered way

VA agencies and freelance platforms do exist, and some people use them as a starting point. These can include UK-based businesses run by a lead VA with a small team of associates, as well as larger agencies or overseas companies offering VA support at lower hourly rates.

If you explore these options, it's helpful to understand that the person you initially speak to may not always be the person doing the work. In some cases, work is allocated to an associate or team member, and your contract is usually with the lead VA or company rather than the individual delivering the work.



How to find a VA who's a good fit

Overseas providers can also be an option, but it's worth being aware of practical considerations such as time zone differences, communication style, and where your data and content will be stored. Insurance and data protection rules may differ from those in the UK, so this is something to check if personal or sensitive information is involved.

As with any route, pay attention to how clearly people communicate, the questions they ask, and whether they take time to understand your business rather than simply offering availability.

It also helps to have a realistic budget in mind before you start looking. Rates vary widely, and it's easy to be drawn to the cheapest option. Price on its own rarely tells the full story. Experience, efficiency, and quality matter just as much as cost.



What to cover before you agree to work together

Once you've got a shortlist of possibles, and before you agree to work together, it's worth doing a bit of homework. Look at the VA's website and social media. Are they active and visible? Is their website up to date and easy to navigate? Does it include testimonials, clear contact details and pricing?

If someone's prices are clearly outside what you're willing or able to pay, it makes sense to rule them out early rather than booking a call that isn't going to go anywhere.

You're not looking for perfection here, just reassurance that they're active, established, and taking their own business seriously.

Then have a discovery call with any prospective VA. This is as much for your benefit as it is for theirs.

Think of this as a suitability conversation rather than an interview. The aim isn't to interrogate anyone, but to work out whether you can work together comfortably and professionally.

One of the most important things to establish early on is whether the VA actually does the type of work you're looking for. There are many different types of VAs, with different skills, backgrounds, and preferences. Be clear about what you want help with and ask whether this is something they regularly do.

You should expect some of the questions to come from the VA. This is a good sign. Questions about how you prefer to work, how decisions are made, and how communication usually happens show that they're thinking about how to support you properly.

You should also be clear from the outset how approvals will work. As the business owner, it's your responsibility to confirm what needs sign-off and at what stage. While most VAs would never send anything out without approval, it's still important to state this clearly, particularly for emails, websites, or any public-facing work.



What to cover before you agree to work together

Data security and compliance should be part of this conversation too. In the UK, VAs who handle personal data must be registered with the Information Commissioner's Office as data controllers. Many also hold professional indemnity insurance, and some may have additional cover such as cyber insurance or public liability insurance, depending on the nature of their work.

If you're considering working with an overseas VA, it's important to understand what regulations and protections apply to them, as these may differ from those in the UK. You can check a UK-based VA's registration on the ICO register online, and it's reasonable to ask to see a copy of a VA's insurance certificate if you need reassurance.

You should also expect to work under a contract issued by the VA. This protects both you and the VA by setting out what work will be done and what's included, how billing and payments work, confidentiality, and how either party can end the agreement if needed.

If you choose not to sign the contract but continue to work with the VA, you will usually be deemed to have accepted their terms. You can ask a VA to make changes to their contract if there's anything you're not comfortable with, but they may refuse. VAs are business owners in their own right and their contracts exist to protect their business as well as yours.

You may also have a contract you'd prefer the VA to sign. It's fine to send this over, and the VA should review it alongside their own terms, just as you should. If you need a non-disclosure agreement in place, that's also reasonable to ask for.

Pricing should be discussed before you agree to work together. Whether rates are listed on a website or shared during the call, you should be clear on what the VA charges and how they bill, including whether there are minimum commitments or retainers.



What to cover before you agree to work together

VAs can work in a variety of ways, and most offer more than one option depending on the type of support you need. Understanding how a VA structures their work is just as important as understanding their rates.

Pay-as-you-go support is often billed in arrears and can work well when you only need help occasionally or with specific tasks as they arise.

Retainers involve agreeing a set number of hours per month and are usually paid in advance, before the month starts. Any unused hours typically don't roll over, as that time has been reserved for you.

For project-based work, packages, or clearly defined tasks, it's common for payment to be split, with a percentage payable upfront before work begins and the balance due on completion. All VAs are different. Some set a minimum number of hours, while others are happy to take on ad hoc tasks that may only take an hour or two. What matters is understanding how a particular VA works and whether that fits your needs.



Setting things up properly from day one

Once you've agreed to work together, there are a few practical steps that help things run smoothly from the start. Make sure any contract is signed and any invoice requested upfront is paid, so work can begin without delay.

You'll also need to give your VA the access they need to do their job properly. This might include logins, shared folders, documents, or tools. Using secure password-sharing methods and keeping information organised saves time and avoids frustration later.

In some cases, it may be easier to add the VA as a team member within specific platforms rather than sharing logins, particularly where two-factor authentication is in place. This can reduce access issues and make ongoing work simpler.

Providing context at the outset is just as important as giving access. Sharing background information, priorities, and any existing processes helps your VA understand how your business works and what matters most.

Clear instructions are especially important at the beginning. A VA can work far more effectively when they understand what you want, how you want it done, and what "finished" looks like to you. Don't assume anything is obvious, even if it feels obvious to you.

It also helps to agree how communication will work. Be clear about how you'll stay in touch, how questions should be handled, and how often you expect updates. This will often depend on the type of support you've agreed. It's equally important to ask how the VA prefers to be contacted.

Keep in mind that most VAs work with multiple clients, so responses may not always be immediate. Agreeing expectations around response times helps avoid unnecessary frustration on either side.



Setting things up properly from day one

If you're working on a retainer, this might include regular check-ins, such as a short monthly call or written updates. If you're working on a pay-as-you-go or project basis, you may not hear much until the work is complete or there's a specific question to answer.

Finally, allow some space for a settling-in period. It can take a little time for both sides to find a rhythm, and small adjustments early on are normal.



Your role vs your VA's role

A VA is not an employee. A VA is a business owner in their own right, working alongside you to support your business.

They bring their own experience, systems, and professional responsibilities, and will usually be supporting more than one client at a time. This allows them to work efficiently and bring wider experience into your business.

The most effective working relationships treat a VA as a professional partner rather than an extra pair of hands. When trust is built and communication is clear, a VA can become a reliable and valued part of how your business operates.

While a VA may make suggestions or propose improvements to systems or processes based on their experience, this is part of working collaboratively rather than overstepping. Final decisions and accountability always sit with you as the business owner.

Respecting this professional boundary helps work flow more smoothly and makes collaboration easier for both sides.



What causes friction in VA relationships

Most friction in VA relationships doesn't come from lack of skill or effort. It usually comes from misalignment, unclear expectations, or small issues that aren't addressed early.

One of the most common causes is assumption. Expecting a VA to "just know" your preferences, tone, or priorities puts pressure on them to guess. Equally, a VA assuming something is fine without checking can lead to work being done in a way you didn't expect. Clarity at the start, and ongoing communication, reduces this significantly.

Communication itself can also be a source of friction. Too much checking-in can feel controlling and increase costs, while too little communication can leave a VA stuck or making decisions without enough context. Agreeing how and when you'll communicate, and revisiting this if needed, helps keep things balanced.

Another common issue is lack of guidance or delayed feedback. When questions go unanswered or approvals are slow, work can stall or move in the wrong direction. This isn't about constant availability, but about recognising that timely input keeps things moving smoothly.

Time and budget boundaries are another area where friction can creep in. Many VAs track their time and can provide a breakdown of how it's been spent. If you're working to a set number of hours or a monthly budget, a professional VA will usually flag when limits are approaching so you can decide whether to approve additional time, adjust priorities, or pause work. Problems tend to arise when expectations around this aren't clear.

Payment issues can also strain a relationship. VAs are businesses with their own commitments, and invoices should be paid on time and in line with agreed terms. If payment is delayed, a VA is within their rights to pause work until the issue is resolved. This isn't a punishment, it's a professional boundary.



What causes friction in VA relationships

Finally, friction often builds when concerns aren't voiced. Small irritations have a habit of becoming bigger problems if they're ignored. A healthy working relationship allows for open, respectful conversations when something isn't working as well as it could.

Most of these issues are avoidable once you know to look out for them. Awareness and early conversations make a significant difference.



Setting realistic expectations

Working with a VA works best when it's treated as a professional relationship rather than a quick fix.

A VA isn't there to take responsibility away from you. They're there to support your business, bring structure, and help you work more effectively. Clear direction, shared expectations, and mutual respect are what make that support valuable.

Not every working relationship will be the right fit, and that's ok. Sometimes, despite good intentions on both sides, ways of working don't align. Being willing to part company professionally, without blame, is part of running a business and can come from either side.

Finding the right VA can take time. But when it works, the impact is often felt beyond the tasks themselves. The right support can reduce mental load, create clarity, and make your business feel easier to manage day to day.

Getting the foundations right makes all the difference.



Closing thoughts

Working with a VA isn't about handing everything over or finding a perfect solution. It's about creating support that fits how you work, where your business is right now, and what you actually need help with.

Done well, VA support can remove friction, reduce mental load, and make your business feel calmer and more manageable. Done without clarity or communication, it can feel frustrating and expensive.

Taking the time to think things through, ask questions, and set things up properly makes a real difference. There's no rush to get it perfect from day one, but there is value in being intentional.

If you decide to work with a VA, treat it as a professional relationship built on trust, respect, and clear expectations. And if it turns out not to be the right fit, that's not a failure. It's simply part of running a business and learning what works for you.

Want to keep a copy?

You can download a PDF version of this guide using the download button in the toolbar above.

If you're still figuring out what support you actually need, you may also find my **How to decide what to outsource** guide helpful. It's designed to help you identify which tasks to hand over and where a VA can add the most value.

[Get the guide here](#)





About GwenGreen Creative Business Services

Hi, I'm Jackie. I'm a creative virtual assistant with decades of experience across admin, systems, and behind-the-scenes business support.

I work with business owners who need reliable, thoughtful support rather than a one-size-fits-all solution. My work often sits at the intersection of practical delivery and strategic thinking, helping clients untangle how things work, not just get tasks done.

Over the years, I've supported a wide range of businesses with everything from general admin and newsletters to forms, PDFs, systems, and bespoke resources. I'm known for being calm, detail-focused, and practical, and for working in a way that respects how each client operates.

This guide reflects how I approach my work. Clear expectations, professional boundaries, and realistic conversations make support far more effective for everyone involved.

If you've found this guide useful, you'll find other resources on my website that build on the same principles.



Jackie

Drop by and say hello:



virtual assistant

[vur-choo-uhl] [uh-sis-tuh-nt]

**the business asset
who takes on the
tasks you avoid**

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