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virtual reality

WHEN IT COMES TO GETTING HELP, BUSINESS OWNERS ARE FINDING IT PAYS TO GO VIRTUAL.

BY LAURA TIFFANY

ABOUT two years after starting her organization business, SOS, Cara Brook was feeling burnt out, spending more time at her computer than with clients. She knew some entrepreneurs who used virtual assistants, and she decided it was the best way to get help for her home-based business.

"One of the things I was stuck on initially was how I was going to find the money for something like this," says Brook, who projects 2008 sales of more than \$100,000 for her Stamford, Connecticut-based firm. "But paying somebody about \$35 an hour to do some administrative tasks frees me up to charge \$125 an hour for what I do."

Brook pays a retainer and buys her virtual assistant's time in blocks of hours. Her assistant—who happens to live in the same town, though they've only met a couple of times—helps Brook, 37, with contact management, bookkeeping, e-mail newsletters and research.

Tawnya Sutherland, a virtual assistant and the founder of the Virtual Assistant Networking As-

Hiring a virtual assistant has helped Cara Brook stay organized—and under budget.

sociation (vanetworking.com), says being able to delegate tasks isn't the only benefit of having a virtual assistant. They're less expensive than employees and can offer specialized skills. "One business could have a couple of virtual assistants—someone who does administrative work and someone who does marketing," she says. "Now they've got people who are niche instead of one in-house employee who knows a little bit about [everything]."

You can find virtual assistants on Sutherland's site or at ivaa.org, the website for the International Virtual Assistant Association, where Brook found

her assistant. Once you find potential candidates, heed Sutherland's advice to make a perfect match:

▲ **DECIDE IF YOU WANT SOMEONE** in your time zone or someone who can work while you're still snoozing.

▲ **LOOK FOR SEVERAL YEARS OF EXPERIENCE** as a virtual assistant and as a corporate administrative employee.

▲ **MAKE SURE THE VIRTUAL ASSISTANT'S WEBSITE** is professional and free of errors.

▲ **DO YOUR DUE DILIGENCE** by checking references.

▲ **ASK ABOUT HIS OR HER PREFERRED** communication method to ensure it meshes with yours.

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