



Hiring Office Help

by Nina Winans

My husband and I ran our business successfully for years with little or no office staff. Our office was in our home, we returned clients' calls and met with them at night or on the weekends, and we used outside payroll and bookkeeping services. I was responsible for most of the office work, and when we moved the office out of our house, it was harder to find enough time for routine day-to-day office tasks. As the business grew, I also needed to concentrate more on managing things. When I realized I had more to do and less time to do it in, I began to think about hiring office help.

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If you're in a similar situation — and many builders are — there are many reasons to hire an office employee.

Skills. One of the most compelling reasons is to make up for skills you don't have. For example, if you're struggling to introduce computers into your office, hiring someone who's already familiar with word processing and accounting programs will save you hours of poring over software manuals. You may still want to learn to work with these programs yourself, but a computer-literate office employee will give you a head start.

But whether you use a computer keyboard or a typewriter, a skilled typist can save lots of time and tedium by preparing letters, proposals, contracts, and specs in a fraction of the time it takes most builders who still use the hunt and peck typing method. The same is true for filing and copying documents, checking invoices for errors, and pulling numbers off time sheets. All of these tasks can easily be taken over by someone else without a lot of training time. The result is more time for you to tend to your clients' and employees' needs.

Efficiency. An office employee can also improve efficiency. Well qualified, experienced office managers have spent much of their working lives taking care of the kind of tasks that drive builders who would rather be out in the field crazy — filing, billing, typing, and copying. In our case, we were able to discontinue our use of an outside payroll and bookkeeping service by hiring and training an office employee who could perform

these functions on the computer in our office. Before that, we had to transfer our crew's hours from their time sheets to the forms supplied by the payroll service, then transfer the same numbers to our job-cost system. We performed similar double work when going through check stubs for both job-costing and the out-of-house bookkeeper. The computer eliminated all of that duplication of effort, and because someone else does the data entry, I now have more time to spend honing my managerial skills and building the business. Having these functions performed in the office also makes it easier for us to keep an eye on the bottom line and retrieve important job information when we need it.

Quality of life. Office help frees time and that improves your quality of life. Many builders put in many more hours each day than they realize, often staying up late taking care of office odds and ends, and dealing with clients at odd hours. Having someone else in the office who can screen phone calls and perform some of the detail work will help you maintain normal working hours and give you back some of the personal time you've been spending on business.

Part-Time or Full-Time?

Many builders can start by hiring part-time office help. This reduces the cost as well as the training time, and is often the best arrangement for the employee as well. Our first office employee spent 20 hours a week helping out with simple tasks like filing, copying, and typing. This made an immediate difference in preparing estimates, for example, because we could just turn over the handwritten takeoffs to have them typed up into final presentation form, a job that previously took several hours.

Depending on the size of your company, however, you may want to jump right in with a full-time person, especially one who is highly skilled. After one false start, we eventually found someone who very quickly took responsibility for the bookkeeping and learned to use our computer software. She also learned about how we did business and helped us get through busy times in a variety of ways. For example, when we were bidding on insurance work from the Oakland Hills fire, we had to prepare several

dozen 25-page estimates. Our employee soon had the process down to a science and increased her typing speed to boot.

Cost

There are costs attached to hiring office help. If you're reasonably profitable, you should be able to absorb the additional overhead of adding an employee to your office staff. If money is tight however, part-time help is the most prudent way to start. Hiring a high-school or college student can also save money, since they are just entering the job market and don't command high wages. One problem, of course, is that a student who's just looking for a way to earn money might not be as committed to the job as a more experienced employee. This can lead to problems with tardiness and general attitude, but it can still work in the short term. And I know of at least one situation where a college student developed a real interest in the work and the construction business and decided to make a career out of it.

The other cost incurred is the time it takes to train a new employee. When I first hired office help, I had no real idea of how I would introduce the employee to our office systems. It has worked out okay, but I recommend better planning. Make a list of the kinds of tasks you need help with, then prioritize it according to degree of difficulty and importance to the company. Plan to spend some time helping the employee get acquainted with where everything is kept in the office, how phone calls and paper work should be handled, and who the people you do business with are. The more time you put in up front, the better off you'll be in the long run.

Speaking of the long run, the cost in both time and money of an office employee may very well be reduced over time. You'll still have to pay an extra salary, but if you've hired the right person, you may find that your business is running more smoothly, and therefore, more profitably. If the billing starts to get done on time, for example, or if you are able to spend more time selling jobs, you may find that office help can pay for itself. ■

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