

Ask SCORE

I own a small, successful plumbing business. Since the beginning seven years ago, my wife, who was at home with our young children, did the bookkeeping. Now that the kids are in school, she's planning to go back to work full-time in her field of training, psychology. We're not large enough to need a full-time bookkeeper, so I'm considering outsourcing. Any tips you can offer?

Outsourcing is a common practice in today's business world, but it's not only the domain of large companies. Small business owners use outsourcing for a variety of reasons—to handle work overflows, receive specific expertise in a new or unfamiliar area such as marketing or IT, or take on routine administrative tasks that are taking up too much of their time and attention.

The decision to outsource certain functions requires a professional approach, particularly since the small business owner may be understandably leery about relinquishing control over a task that he or she has handled from the outset. Developing a successful long-term relationship with an outsourcing partner requires effort on both sides. It's important to treat it like a partnership, because that's what it really is. A vendor who supplies a vital service for your business is like part of your staff, so you should go through a similar interviewing and reference checking process before you “hire” them.

Using outside service providers who have experience working with your particular type of business is important. You'll also want someone with the technology and expertise to deliver cutting-edge services.

Be sure to ask detailed questions about the service you will receive and your access to someone who can answer questions and solve problems as they arise. For most small business owners, this kind of accessibility and service are top priorities. If the firm you are considering won't be available when something goes wrong, look elsewhere.

Also ask your candidate firms for current and past clients who received services of a scope similar to what you're seeking. If possible, ask for clients similar to yours to properly gauge how well the company understands your needs. And, always meet with the service provider's leadership as well as the people who will be working directly with you. You don't want to have any doubts about their ability to handle what may be critical tasks for your business.

The “go-to” resource for help is the Outsourcing Institute, the world's largest professional community dedicated solely to outsourcing. The Institute's website, www.outsourcing.com, provides a wealth of information about outsourcing trends, articles on securing IT and business processing services, and tips for ensuring your outsourcing partner delivers the level of performance you want.

This column is brought to you by the Merrimack Valley Chapter of SCORE, with more than 50 current and former business executives available to provide free, confidential, one-on-one business counseling and training workshops for area businesses. Call 603-666-7561 or visit www.score-manchester.org for information on counseling,

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Have a question you'd like answered in this column? E-mail it to info@score199.mv.com, with "Ask SCORE" in the subject line.