



Tips for finding bookkeepers for Small and Medium Sized businesses (SMEs)

Are you looking for a bookkeeper and don't know where to start and don't know what the options are?

As a small or medium sized business owner, finding a competent bookkeeper can present significant challenges because:

- You will most likely only need someone part time
- Nine times out of ten you will want the bookkeeper to work at your offices
- You will expect someone excellent for the best possible price, and wouldn't it be great if they could do management accounts monthly as well
- You know that anyone not registered with either the HMRC or their accounting Institute is carrying out a criminal act

Most of the major recruitment players are less than ideal as they don't specialise in part time bookkeepers. You also know that their approach is simply to aggregate the CVs of those candidates who happen to have walked into their offices that week. They forward them and let you make the choice, without any sort of technical vetting. This won't do, so you would probably look at the following options:

1. Use the tried and trusted bookkeeper you have been using for ages (if they are still around)
2. If they can't do it you ask around your colleagues or Chartered Accountant to see if they know anyone who is available and trustworthy.
3. Put up an advert online on sites such as Gumtree, Monster etc and attempt to find one yourself.

If you do have a trusted bookkeeper and they are free, you should continue to use them and then go back to the large pile of work on your desk, delighted that there is one less thing to do - until they leave that is.

If this trusted person is too now busy to take you on, you may decide to quickly ring around your office to see if there is anybody else up to the job. If they are you will need to get some sort of assurance that they are technically skilled and properly referenced.

If you have drawn a blank on these two, you now face the horror of choosing between doing the bookkeeping yourself or spending hours or days selecting and interviewing.

Does the following sound familiar? You might put an advert in Gumtree, Monster or any of the numerous web based recruitment sites describing in perfect detail precisely the skills and experience of the successful candidate.

Over the next three weeks you receive between 100 and 800 responses of varying quality, from the completely unskilled gentleman currently working in McDonalds, to the frankly bizarre and inappropriate approaches taken by some to attract your attention. (One application I received featured a photo of the applicant's dog!)

As a conservative example, let's say there are 300 applications. Among these CVs and covering letters there may be a couple of candidates who might actually be able to do the work. How long will it take to dig them out? In my experience there will be 50 CVs that look OK, 30 that look pretty good and 220 which can be immediately deleted. Once you've deleted those 220, you read in detail the 30 that appear to be encouraging. The clock is ticking, you have achieved nothing and your business may need your

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attention on more urgent matters at this stage. When you get back to the CVs the challenge now is to try and ascertain which of them are over-representing the applicants' skills and experience.

Once you have broken these 30 down into 12 then you will need to find the time, quickly since the VAT return is due any day now, to interview all of the above to try and determine which ones are actually any good.

At the end of this process, you are just about ready to pick the best one, according to their personality and the experience mentioned on their CV, when someone calls you and says they have found a bookkeeper at £18 per hour. This appears to be an absolute bargain!

However, how technically competent or reliable is this person or anyone you bring on board? How on earth do you know that they are not going to deliver a bunch of garbage to you monthly and your Chartered Accountant (CA) at the year end? At this point the CA may have to do all the bookkeeping again, or at the very least make significant adjustments which will be expensive.

So, how best to mitigate these risks?

One option is to use a resource that prequalifies bookkeepers and provides them part-time either remotely or at your office. Taking up this kind of service can offer long-term benefits so long as you use a reputable company that:

- will technically test all the candidates in advance
- provides the bookkeeper with monthly checklists to ensure all the essentials have been completed each month (or quarter)
- can provide cover in cases of absenteeism or departure
- ensures the bookkeepers have the correct registration

If you have any horror stories or thoughts on the above you would like to share please feel free to email them to ben@acuityassociates.co.uk.

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