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Help! A Guide To Finding Top Household Staff

and how to get the best work from your nanny, gardener, maid or driver. Hint: Good business practices work in the home, too.

By Amber Cyphers | Illustrations by Peter Horjus

IT'S BEEN A LONG WEEK. You've been busy with a million things at work—not to mention trying to maintain a semblance of social life. Finally it's Friday, and you have the whole weekend to look forward to, a whole two days of . . . cleaning, running errands, doing laundry, yard maintenance and paying bills. Then there's your daughter's art class Saturday morning, and soccer practice Saturday afternoon, and isn't it someone's birthday on Sunday? You spend the weekend in a whirlwind of keeping up, only to finish just in time to . . . go back to work on Monday. You need to hire help.



Pop Goes the Bubble?

Morning coffee and play time at the Brickyard Café.

Most people look for domestic help in one of four ways: They use an agency, ask friends and acquaintances for referrals, look through local business listings, or place a help-wanted ad. Any of these methods can work, but there are some things to consider. If you decide to hire someone through an ad, get references and check them thoroughly. There are plenty of honest, reliable workers out there—make sure they're the ones you hire.

Personal referrals can be an excellent source, since they offer a proven track record and may require less research. If you have extensive staffing needs, an agency may be your best bet; it will do the footwork for you.

While people are generally careful when hiring a nanny or personal assistant, they may be less inclined to go through a lengthy interview process for a gardener or cleaning service. Still, using an agency can save a lot of work and provide an extra degree of security. The process is fairly straightforward. A client calls the agency with a staffing request, giving requirements and preferences. The agency reviews its available applicants, searching for the best match, provides the client with a list of names and profiles, then sets up interviews. The client makes the final decision. Typically, salary and benefits are negotiated between the client and applicant, with the agency taking a fixed fee or percentage of the annual salary agreed upon.

"The advantage of going through an agency is that everybody is legal, everybody has references and experience, and all references have been checked," says Dorian Rowsell, owner of Albright Domestic Staffing. She started her business five years ago, after a bad experience with a housekeeper, and she's made it one of the top domestic staff referral services in North County. Rowsell offers referral services for staff ranging from nannies to estate managers to elder-care providers, carefully screening all applicants. Albright will even run a criminal report on a prospective employee, if requested, checking for a history of DUIs, theft, battery, child abuse or elder abuse.

Ideally, an agency will offer a trial period during which the applicant works for the client in order to determine whether it is a good match. Also, look for an agency that offers a guarantee. This is a good indication of the agency's experience and confidence in its screening process.

If you prefer to find your own help, make sure you do your research. Talk to other people who use household help, call agencies in the area, and look on-line. You'll need to have a clear idea of the pay and benefits you want to offer, what specific tasks you want done and what you can reasonably expect from the person you hire.

Unless your needs are very simple, you may need to hire more than one person. Don't expect a maid to cook for you and do the gardening. A personal assistant shouldn't be expected to double as a nanny. Provide a clear list of duties before hiring a candidate, and stick to it. If you find you need to add additional duties, renegotiate.

live-in versus live-out

Only about 10 percent of all household workers live in, and for good reason. Rowsell notes that when someone lives where they work, they're on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If you require live-in staff, keep in mind that pay and benefits will be higher. You'll need to consider paid vacations, health insurance, sick leave and so on. Set a reasonable schedule that requires no more than 45-55 hours of work per week—with occasional exceptions. This makes it easier to maintain professional boundaries and avoid burnout.

taxes

Broadly speaking, if you manage what a worker does and how he or she does it, the IRS considers that person your employee, making you liable for taxes. There are some rules of thumb—if you paid any household employee \$1,400 or more in the last year, you must pay FICA taxes. If you have paid a total of \$1,000 or more to household employees in the last quarter, you must pay unemployment taxes on the first \$7,000 in wages per employee.

“Most people will go to an outside professional—at least at first,” says Brogan Duffy, CPA. “These things have become high-profile since Zoe Baird [who was nominated to become U.S. attorney general in 1993, until it was discovered she had broken employment laws when hiring a nanny]. You may not get caught, but if you do, you could be in a fair amount of trouble—and liable for back taxes, interest and penalties. It’s not worth risking.”

Of course, state and federal regulations are different, and from there it just gets more complicated. Have a look at IRS Publication 15A, *Employers’ Supplemental Tax Guide*, for more information. Then consult a tax professional. Don’t mess around with the IRS. Do you really want to lose that political appointment just because you haven’t filed a 1099 for the housekeeper in the past five years?

negotiating pay & benefits

Do your research. Ask applicants for a salary history. Call referral agencies and ask what the average pay is for the work you’re requiring. Ask your friends what they pay their household staff. Do an online search. Then ask applicants what pay and benefits they expect, and start negotiating. They may accept slightly less pay in exchange for guaranteed perks.

dealing with problems

If you’ve screened your applicants carefully, set clear guidelines and kept to them, you should have few problems. But if something does crop up, handle it right away. And handle it privately. You’ll get a much better result from pulling someone aside and calmly explaining the problem and how you would like it taken care of than from waiting until you explode in front of 50 guests at your fund-raising party.

things to remember

“Set the rules from day one,” says Rowsell. “Walk new staff through their duties step by step, giving detailed instructions and a clear outline of what you expect.” Then take the time to find out what they expect, and make sure you both agree. Set a work schedule and keep to it. Yes, there will be times when you’ll need hired help to work longer or later, but compensate them accordingly—and say “thank you” when it’s warranted. A little appreciation goes a long way.

“There are several basic guidelines that I use when dealing with household staff,” says Cyr. “I respect them. I give them clear expectations as to how I want them to interact with my children or work in my house when it comes to the parameters of personal space. I map out the limits of their role when it comes to discipline. And I try to be flexible.

The people you hire to work for you are professionals, whether they work in your home or your office. They deserve respect for the work they do. Keep the boundaries clear, and don’t forget we’re all human, and we sometimes make mistakes. Remember that a nanny is not your children’s punching bag, a maid is not your errand service, and a personal assistant is not your therapist. Pay your employees decently and treat them with consideration, and they’ll keep your life running smoothly.

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Resources:

Loving Nannies
1635 Haydn Drive
Cardiff, CA 92007
800-682-8154
lovingnannies.com

Albright Domestic Staffing
858-792-7740, 858-792-8870 (fax)
3790 Via de la Valle, Suite 122
Del Mar, CA 92014

Chadwick Village Staffing
858-756-4226, 800-667-4409
16236 San Dieguito Road, Building 1,
Suite 16
Rancho Santa Fe, CA 92067
domesticstaffing.com

A World Class Cleaning Service
858-566-4543
9540 Compass Point Drive South
San Diego, CA 92126
aworldclasscleaningservice.com

Dust Bunnies of San Diego
858-569-4065
9473 Podell Avenue
San Diego, CA 92123
dustbunniesofsd.com

Village Transportation
858-459-2470
7815 Bellakaren Place
La Jolla, CA 92037

La Costa Limousine
888-299-5466
858-756-5466
2770 Loker Avenue
Carlsbad, California 92008
lacostalimo.com