

Would you be better off hiring an accountant?

When are the tax savings that an expert can make for you worth the cost of paying for their expertise? Sam Dunn helps you decide

Blurring figures? Check. Glazed eyes? Check. Hot prickling sensation on the back of your neck in the early hours? Check. Hmm, you must be self-employed and crunching your own numbers.

So what's the cure? Many people choose to throw money at the problem and hire an accountant - and, in fact, a good accountant will almost certainly recoup the cost of the work they do for you in the efficiencies they make in your financial affairs.

But how much should an accountant cost? Basic book-keeping and sorting simple tax affairs shouldn't set you back more than £200 or £300 a year, says Chas Roy-Chowdhury, head of taxation at the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants. However, if your affairs are more complicated, it can end up costing you four or five times that sum.

So should you go for it? First, if you're hopeless with percentages, tax and money, it's a no-brainer. Second, much depends on the amount of money flowing through your business, and how much accounting work you expect - or want - to do yourself.

So be honest with yourself about this. First, just how complicated are your affairs? Are you doing the best for yourself in terms of knowing your way around the system? Do you hate admin or do you revel in it? Should you fire yourself and hire an accountant? ... Only you know the answer to that question.

How to find yourself a good bean-counter

Let's face it (and without being rude), accountants are 10-a-penny and it shouldn't be hard to find one. The tough bit is finding an accountant you like and trust.

1. Locating an accountant

Like many professional services, start with a personal recommendation. Or try searching by location and specialism on the websites of either ACCA or the Institute of Chartered Accountants at iceaw.co.uk)

2. Cast your net wider

If those routes don't produce an accountant you like, there are other industry websites that can help you locate a firm of accountants. For example, choose-your-accountant.co.uk lets you outline your requirements and then secures different quotes. Or try the Yellow Pages.

3. Make a few calls

Once you have a list of three or four, call each to explain your circumstances and ask for a free half-hour consultation.

4. It's about chemistry

Don't just go for costs; pick the accountant with whom you feel most comfortable.