

TIPS for hiring a housecleaner by Suzanne Bishop

So, you've decided to hire a housecleaner? Maybe you don't have the time to do the details necessary to maintain your house. Perhaps you're no longer able to climb ladders or crawl along baseboards. Whatever the reason, you've made the decision to hire some help. Now it's just a matter of calling around to find the cheapest person or company, right? Wrong!

Assess your needs.

All housecleaning is not the same. The majority of choices available do surface cleaning. You should start by determining the tasks with which you need help. Do you need one-time cleaning or regular maintenance? The whole house or certain areas? Details you can't do or just surface cleaning? The more thorough your list, the better your chances of finding a good solution.

Establish a budget.

Unless you have a large amount of discretionary income with which to work, you will need some idea of what you can spend on housecleaning help. In addition, you may need to consider the relative importance of cleaning; for example, a family member with severe asthma may make detailed cleaning a top priority. Don't make your decision based solely on hourly rates. The right decision for you may involve more than a comparison of dollars.

Gather names.

Get referrals from family, friends, the yellow pages, and the Internet. Check with your local Chambers of Commerce and Better Business Bureau. Generally it's not a good idea to hire family or friends. Be aware; housecleaning, housekeeping, maid service, and janitorial cleaning are not the same.

Schedule on-site interviews.

For best results, arrange to conduct all interviews yourself. Your impressions are important. Conduct a tour of the areas to be cleaned and specifically ask about items on your needs list. Ask about means of entry, scheduling, contracts, guarantees, extra charges, payment policies, animals, supplies, and equipment.

Inquire about who does the cleaning.

Is it one person or a team? Is it the same person each time? Will they bring children or other people? Do cleaners wear uniforms or have other means of identification? What about screening, training, and quality control? How do you communicate with the worker(s)? Do cleaners smoke on the job? Is there drug screening? Are you expected to provide meals? Tipping?

Do your homework.

One of the least understood, and yet potentially expensive, problems is the determination of who is the employer. Generally there are three cleaning situations—a person or persons working informally, an independent cleaner placed with you by an agency, and a company with employees who do the cleaning. Check with your accountant or attorney for information that will help you determine your status and obligations. If you are legally considered the employer, you may be liable for social security taxes, unemployment taxes, withholding of income taxes, and verifying the right to work.

Determine your liability.

Other potential costs are the loss of personal possessions from theft or damage and the possibility of a personal injury claim. Most homeowner or renter insurance policies have provisions for coverage in these situations. However, they also have deductibles and limits. Check with your insurance agent for the specifics of your policy. Since a bonding company will only pay for theft if there is an arrest and conviction, inquire about how the individual or company handles such claims. With breakage and damage, establish if your liability policy is primary or secondary by requesting written verification of insurance coverage from each potential cleaner. Most personal policies have a provision for coverage of "casual labor" in case of an injury. However, if you are considered the employer, you may be required to carry separate coverage.

Request a written estimate.

Estimates should be free. Each one should indicate if it is a maximum amount or an approximation.

Telephone estimates and per-room pricing rarely have a happy ending. Each estimate should list what is to be done, the cost, and the time it will take.

Ask for references.

Get several names and telephone numbers of customers that have been with the cleaner or company for at least a year. Call them! When talking with a reference, ask about quality of cleaning, dependability, behavior while in the home, breakage and damage, and any other concerns. Check with the Better Business Bureau about complaints.

Compare estimates.

You have now completed your fact-finding mission. Compare the dollar figures and estimated hours. Your cost for supplies, equipment, and/or liability coverage should be included in the comparison. You may be surprised to discover that the estimated costs are higher than simply multiplying the minimum wage by the anticipated hours. Dollar figures can be deceiving without the time it will take. The number of hours a cleaning will take is a good indication of the level of cleaning you will receive. If it's been awhile since your home was thoroughly cleaned, do not be surprised if the first cleaning requires more time and money.

Now you have all the facts you need in order to make an informed decision. Review and revise, if necessary, your budget and list of needs. It would be ideal, though rare, if one choice was a perfect fit. Weigh the information, including your thoughts and impressions, and make your choice knowing you have done your best.

