



scrubbing up

Employing a house cleaner needs a professional approach.

words Vicki Holder picture istock

Resene
Paper Doll

Whether you're working long hours, want more time for leisure and family, or are just sick of scrubbing showers, hiring a cleaner can be a blessing. But before you let someone loose on your carpets, consider exactly what you want to achieve.

That's the advice of Katrina Adams of Absolute Domestics, who says her clients have hugely different expectations and requirements.

Many people are just after the basic service, she says, which is getting someone to clean the bathrooms, mop and vacuum floors with a bit of dusting thrown in. "They're happy to wipe their own bench-tops, clean the oven and tidy. Then there are those who want someone to do just about everything, to arrange the sheets on the bed, put on the washing, hang it out, bring it indoors and iron."

Lisa Kennedy from Domestic & Service Personnel, says her agency has three levels of cleaning services – cleaner, house keeper and house manager. You pay according to the variety of duties and level of responsibility. These days a cleaning service can be customised to suit your needs depending on the size of the house, the style of furnishings you have, the number of accessories, children and pets you have and many other variables, says Rod Leonard of @Your Request. A person needs to work out which level of cleaning and care suits their needs, lifestyle and budget.

Lisa Kennedy gets people to list the number of bedrooms, bathrooms and living areas to work out the hours involved. She enquires about pets as some cleaners have allergies. Then she determines whether it's a cleaner, house keeper or manager they require.

Hiring direct lets you stay in charge. On the downside, if cleaners quit, you have to find a replacement yourself. You must also remember, you are an employer and have tax

and accounting responsibilities. If there are problems, you must deal with them yourself.

Going through an agency is slightly more expensive. There are advantages, however. As a rule, agency cleaners have had proper training. Some, including Absolute Domestic, provide a fill-in service when your cleaner is sick or on holiday. If you're not happy with the service, you can ask for a replacement. Most agencies offer a guarantee period of several weeks and some agencies also have public liability insurance for their cleaners.

References are important, Katrina says. "We get a minimum of four for anybody who comes to us. One or two people can lie, but

wrong. Homeowner Justine Morrison recalls the time when a key she'd given her cleaner was stolen along with other clients' keys, an address book and alarm codes of homes where the cleaner worked. Justine suggests homeowners advise their cleaners not to write down the code or identify the key with names and/or addresses.

It's human nature to be nosy. If you leave piles of papers and bills around, you give the cleaner a chance to take a peek. Put those confidential documents away.

Some cleaners are employees. Others own their own franchise and have more of an incentive to do a great job, says Ross Leonard. "If you employ someone from a

"Cleaners know how to clean, but everyone's expectations are different."

it would be unusual for four. All our cleaners are trusted to work independently. That's important when they are responsible for people's keys. If you're employing privately, you need to do the same. But often people don't have the time or inclination to follow up more than one reference."

Before Lisa Kennedy employs anybody, she phones to check if they have any police or traffic convictions. Those employing cleaners privately should do the same.

Homeowner Mary Bell learned this lesson a few years ago when her long-time, trusted cleaner brought her sister-in-law along – suddenly half the cash from a school fundraiser sausage sizzle disappeared. Mary's son copped the blame at first. Finally, the cleaner was confronted with certain proof of guilt and the money was eventually returned. They were lucky.

Security is a big issue if you're out or working when the cleaner visits. Even if cleaners are trustworthy, things can go

franchise, you know you'll always have the same person turn up for the job."

Before the first clean, Absolute Domestic encourages clients to meet with the cleaner, to walk them through room by room and discuss what they want done. "Homes these days vary so much. There are so many beautiful surfaces. You need to instruct your cleaner on how you like those surfaces to be cleaned. Cleaners know how to clean, but everyone's expectations are different."

Some cleaners will bring their own cleaning products while others will use yours. Many people prefer non-toxic, environmentally friendly products.

Once you have found your cleaner, communication is the key to making the relationship work. Stories abound where non-English speaking cleaners struggle to understand their client's wishes and vice versa. Make sure you are clear from the start. Katrina provides checklists of jobs to do in columns to leave no room for misinterpretation. **H**