WORKING WITH LAWYERS AND ACCOUNTANTS ON A BUDGET

Where to find free and low-cost help, when it's worth paying, and how to get the most from every hour.

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AT A GLANCE

- You don't need a big law firm. Many founders start with **free clinics, small business centers and flat-fee services**.
- Pay for professional help on **high-stakes items**: ownership agreements, leases, investment documents, taxes and anything you don't understand.
- Prepare questions and documents before every meeting. It saves money.

Why it matters

A small legal or tax mistake can become expensive later: a bad lease, a missing contractor agreement, or a missed tax filing. A few hours of the right help early is usually much cheaper than fixing problems.

Free and low-cost help

Source	What they offer
Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs)	Free advising, including business setup and finances
SCORE	Free mentors, many with legal or accounting backgrounds
Law school clinics	Free legal help from supervised students, often for small businesses and nonprofits
Local bar associations	Lawyer referral services, sometimes with low-cost first consultations
Community and immigrant-serving organizations	Legal and tax help, sometimes in several languages
IRS Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA)	Free tax help for qualifying people, including some self-employed filers
Chambers of commerce	Introductions to trusted local professionals

When to pay a professional

- **Lawyer:** co-founder agreements, investment documents, leases, buying or selling a business, IP, disputes, and immigration questions
- **Accountant or CPA:** choosing your structure for tax purposes, setting up books, payroll taxes, tax returns, and preparing financial statements for investors or lenders

Ways to keep costs down

1. **Ask about flat fees** for standard work, like forming an LLC or reviewing a lease.
2. **Prepare.** Send documents ahead and write a list of questions.
3. **Bundle questions** into one meeting.
4. **Ask what you can do yourself.** Many will let you handle simple steps.
5. **Get estimates in writing** before work begins.

> EXAMPLE
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> **Lina** used a free SBDC advisor to choose her structure and build her first budget. She paid a lawyer a flat fee to review her bakery lease. The lawyer caught a personal guarantee with no end date and negotiated it down to two years. That one review saved her far more than it cost.

Choosing the right person

- Look for experience with **small businesses in your industry**.
- Ask how they **bill** and who will do the work.
- Make sure you can **understand them**. If they speak in jargon, ask them to explain in plain language, or find someone else.
- Check licenses with your state bar or state accountancy board.

Common mistakes

- **Skipping professional review on big documents.**
- **Using a friend who practices a different kind of law.**
- **Showing up unprepared** and paying for the lawyer's time to organize your documents.
- **Not asking about cost upfront.**

Your checklist

☐ Find your nearest SBDC or SCORE chapter
☐ List your legal and tax questions
☐ Identify which items need paid professional review
☐ Ask two professionals for flat-fee quotes
☐ Prepare documents before each meeting

Key words, explained

Word	What it means
CPA	Certified public accountant: a licensed accountant.
Flat fee	One set price for a defined piece of work.
Retainer	Money paid upfront to a lawyer, drawn down as they work.
Engagement letter	A written agreement describing the work and fees.

Where to go next

- **B-09 Contracts Every New Business Needs**
- **B-14 Business Taxes: What You Owe and When**
- **S-08 Finding Mentors and Building a Network From Zero**

IMPORTANT
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