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## TAXWATCH

# Time is on your side -- but not for long

## Tax deadline nears but there's still time, even if you need professional help

By [Andrea Coombes](#), MarketWatch

Last update: 3:02 p.m. EDT March 16, 2008

**SAN FRANCISCO (MarketWatch) -- Haven't filed your tax return yet and hoping to find an expert to help you? It's still possible to find a tax preparer, but your options narrow the longer you wait.**

After about April 1, "it starts getting more difficult to find [a preparer] with available time to take on a new person," said Cynthia Jeanguenat, an enrolled agent in Virginia Beach, Va. (Enrolled agents are tax preparers who are licensed to represent taxpayers before the Internal Revenue Service.)

Mass-market tax-preparation firms H&R Block and Jackson Hewitt say they take new customers as late as April 15.



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But waiting until the last minute isn't exactly tax-savvy. The more complex your return, the more important it is to find someone with relevant experience and that gets more difficult the longer you delay. Plus, you may scramble at the last minute to find missing documents, forcing you to file late or file an amended return.

There are plenty of return preparers from which to choose. Be sure to ask which professional organization they belong to, how many years of experience they have and whether they've got experience with your particular situation.

"If you're a dentist looking for someone to do your business and individual return, then if somebody has a large book of dentists they're not going to be researching everything," said Mary Canning, dean of the school of taxation and the school of accounting at Golden Gate University in San Francisco. Canning is also an enrolled agent.

That expertise can mean a lower tax bill, thanks to less time needed to complete your return, plus knowledge of valuable tax perks you may otherwise miss.

### Different designations

Return preparers offer a range of expertise and certifications. For instance, certified public accountants can deal with complex tax situations and with businesses' general accounting needs. Many, but not all, work on individuals' returns. Enrolled agents usually handle individual and some business returns, and their authority to represent taxpayers at the IRS could come in handy should an audit come your way.

CPAs must have a college degree, pass an exam and maintain continuing education credits, and they can represent taxpayers in an audit, according to the National Association of Tax Professionals. Enrolled agents must pass a tax exam administered by the IRS, undergo a background check and maintain continuing education credits. They can

represent taxpayers at the IRS. [For more information on these and other types of preparers, see this NATP brochure \(PDF\).](#)

Return preparers at Jackson Hewitt have a minimum of 72 hours of in-house training. At H&R Block, the minimum is 100 hours. Both companies also employ enrolled agents and certified public accountants -- H&R Block said about 5,000 of its 90,000 tax professionals are enrolled agents -- but there's no guarantee you'll get access to one if you wait until the last minute.

Do you need a professional with a particular degree? Preparers with the minimum training can competently handle basic returns, but their training likely emphasizes reading IRS publications, Canning said. A CPA, enrolled agent or "someone with a master's degree in tax would also be reading the [tax] code, the regulations and cases," so they may know more about legal tax-reduction strategies.

Also, find a preparer with whom you like to work. "Whoever does your return, you need to have some trust in them," said Barbara Steinmetz, a certified financial planner and enrolled agent in San Mateo, Calif.

There is another way: You can tap the expertise embedded in do-it-yourself software and online products. "I insist on doing my family's tax returns," said Leo Martinez, a professor of tax policy and insurance law at Hastings College of Law in San Francisco. "I refuse to pay someone who knows less than I do a couple hundred dollars an hour. As a consequence, I'm a devoted user of TurboTax."

### **Pay up**

You can buy a software program for less than \$100. If you want to consult with a tax preparer in person, fees vary widely by locale and by the complexity of your tax situation. Having your paperwork and receipts well-organized can save money, as the preparer spends less time hunting for information. Also, when talking to preparers, let them know you're well-organized -- that may encourage them to take you as a new client, even late in the season.

The mass-market chains often charge by the form, while independent experts usually charge by the hour. Expect to pay at least \$150 an hour to get your taxes done, Canning said, though, again, fees will vary widely.

An H&R Block office and a Jackson Hewitt office, both in San Francisco, said a taxpayer filing as head-of-household with a dependent child, a mortgage, and one W-2, would likely pay about \$180 to \$300 for a tax filing. Taxpayers won't know the exact fee until the work is done, but you can walk away at that point without paying (and without having filed your taxes).

Consumer advocates warn taxpayers to think twice before purchasing pricey products, such as "refund anticipation loans," pitched at some mass-market offices.

These professional organizations let you search online for experts in your area: National Association of Tax Professionals ([natptax.com](http://natptax.com)), National Association of Enrolled Agents ([naea.org](http://naea.org)), and American Institute of Certified Public Accountants ([aicpa.org](http://aicpa.org)).

### **Free services**

Low- and moderate-income folks should look for free tax-preparation services in their area. For instance, in the San Francisco Bay area, experienced accountants and lawyers volunteer at Tax-Aid ([tax-aid.org](http://tax-aid.org)) to provide free tax services for families with incomes less than \$42,000. For similar programs nationwide, visit the National Community Tax Coalition ([tax-coalition.org](http://tax-coalition.org)).

Also, AARP offers assistance at its Tax-Aide centers ([aarp.org/money/taxaide](http://aarp.org/money/taxaide)).

The IRS VITA program offers free help with basic tax returns to moderate-income people (generally, those with

incomes less than \$40,000). For a site near you, call the IRS at 800-829-1040, press 1, and then press 5 for an operator. ■

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