

How engineers should start out in contracting

While the market for high-technology contracting is stable and growing in almost all areas in the teeth of the slowing British economy, few areas of contracting see as much demand as engineering.

According to the Colchester-based job board [Jobserve](#), demand for contracting engineers routinely rises by 100-150% each month, as more projects get up and running that require skilled and experienced engineers.

Further, according to the [UK Engineering Council](#), there is a constant shortage of at least 25% of skilled engineers for any given project that is under way.

Engineers Need Experience

But unlike IT contractors, who can often get started right out of school, engineers who go contracting should probably get at least a few years of experience under their belts before starting up as contractors, says John Sadler, chief of Business Development at the Alderley Edge, Cheshire-based [Astec Services Ltd.](#) which specialises in recruiting engineers for the nuclear energy and oil and gas industries.

What is SQEP?

"We need 'SQEP' qualified personnel," says Sadler, "and the lack of a sufficient number of them is one of our greatest challenges." 'SQEP' stands for "Suitably Qualified & Experienced Personnel," a benchmark developed by the Stevenage, Herts-based [Institute of Engineering and Technology](#). The term SQEP is used to denote the status of an employee as being competent to handle work which assures public safety. A competence – job matrix is used to determine competence requirements for each job against which staff are assessed. This is nothing like an exam that you can pass. A hard look is taken at what you've done and how you do it.

"In the nuclear industry, for example," Sadler explains, "a SQEP assessment takes the form of a formal interview where the line manager reviews performance according to the plan. The engineer is then added to an internal register and in this context it is the skills, courses attended and experience in a CV that makes someone SQEP. In the area of safety case authorship this is particularly important to maintain levels of safety in safety critical industries such as nuclear and oil & gas. In a wider sense, we look at a CV to assess if in our judgement an engineer is SQEP for a particular task. This makes it important to be able to communicate the SQEPness of a candidate on page 1 of the CV, by including a short profile, key skills and achievements, a summary job history and qualifications."

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Of course, not all areas of engineering require SQEP qualifications, but they almost all do involve safety in some form or another, and so the prospective contractors need to be able to show solid proof that their work is reliable.

Organisation and Communication Skills

But being able to show experience is not the only skill that is important to contractors in engineering, Sadler points out. "Engineers who become contractors need to improve their organisational skills. They need to be prepared to handle time sheets, accounts, to keep track of different job possibilities...it's all rather a different skill from what they have prepared for at the university."

Engineers in contracting also need good communication and marketing skills, Sadler adds, because they need to adapt to different types of clients and to sell their abilities. One area engineers seem to lack such skills in is in [CV writing](#), Sadler complains.

“ Engineers in contracting need good communications and marketing skills ”

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"Engineers often don't grasp the concept behind how CVs market their skills, and we are shocked by many of the ones submitted to us."

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