

Fancy being your own recruitment agent? Not much to it, is there?

An estimated 80% of contractor contracts in the UK come via recruitment agencies and employment businesses, so agents have a huge role to play in the flexible workforce supply chain.

Whilst agencies provide contractor clients with a range of contractor management services, and ensure clients are sufficiently distanced from workers and the risks of employment liability, agents add considerably more value in ways that most contractors are simply unaware of.

Veteran recruitment consultant Ashley Cooper, of contractor and permanent IT agency [Parc Ellis](#), tells ContractorCalculator what it takes to be a successful contractor agent and stay on top of both client and contractor expectations.

Every contract, and contractor, is important

"Every contract and contractor is very important," explains Cooper, "because we are a small agency and our reputation is everything. Losing a client or contractor matters to us, so we work hard to make sure we don't."

No doubt, some old hands reading this might be slightly cynical about Cooper's claims, but the facts support them; Parc Ellis has four consultants who have in excess of 40 years experience in the sector between them. They also have a loyal band of both clients and contractors, some of whom have been on the consultants' books for over 10 years.

"Because we're not a primary supplier to one of the big contracting organisations or telcos, we don't automatically get a raft of new opportunities every day," continues Cooper. "We have to work hard at creating our own business, quite often based on market insights we get from contractors on our books."

Opportunities have to be created

Cooper cites an example of a change in the pension regulations a few years back: "When I was working for another firm, I got the heads-up from one contractor that big changes were coming from the FSA. These would require financial services firms to make some major system compliance changes that would require a very specific IT skill set to implement."

So Cooper spent three months and hundreds of phone calls finding contractors with those skill sets, tracking down the project managers at the client financial services firms and presenting them with a ready-made solution when the FSA finally introduced the regulation changes.

"It took months of effort, but we've had a couple of good years of business from the opportunity," says Cooper. "We've also kept dozens of IT contractors in well-paid contracts and built up strong credibility with a raft of new clients."

The bottom line is that without the groundwork done by a particularly perceptive agent, the contractors could have missed out on a major market opportunity and clients would not have been handed such a neat solution on a plate.

Managing contractors and their expectations

"I think because we are small we can be much more honest with contractors. I always make sure I have a pool of contractors ready before I launch a new campaign," reveals Cooper. "But I also make sure the contractors know this, that they understand that the opportunity is not firm yet, but that if it turns into a solid contract, they've got it in the bag!"

But surely, the whole question of margins can cause problems? Surprisingly no, says Cooper, as long as you are up front and transparent: "Margins generally work in two ways. You either get a rate a client will pay the contractor, and we add our margin onto that. Or the client tells us what they will pay, and we work backwards."

"The secret of success, and it's really not rocket science, is transparency," says Cooper. "Contractors always find out all the details anyway, because they work next to other contractors every day doing similar work."

"So," he continues, "Contractors soon learn who are the best agencies that not only get them work, but also ensure they are paid on invoice without having to wait 30 or 60 days. In the same way, clients soon learn which agencies most effectively manage their contractor workforce for them."

Honesty pays, honest!

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Ashley Cooper, Parc Ellis

Cooper believes he gets a lot of speculative work from clients because of his hard-worked-for reputation as a 'straight shooter' and industry expert, which include stints on the Executive Committee of the [Association of Professional Staffing Companies](#) (APSCO, formerly ATSCO) and as a member of the Web 2.0 collaboration working group UK Recruiters for Reform. Similarly, he believes that many contractors will take a punt on a contract opportunity through him because they know he is not a time waster.

"We've got a strict process we work to, getting [opt-outs](#) from the contractors first, checking identities, ensuring they have full details of the client and contract opportunity," says Cooper. "If there is any confusion from the client because, say, another agency has put the contractor forward for the same opportunity, everything we have done is recorded and dated so we all know where we stand."

So, far from the popular contractor mythology, being a successful agent is not all about sitting back, waiting for clients to offer opportunities and then simply watching while your bank balance grows as a result of a contractor's work.

Are you still sure you want to be your own contractor agent?

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