

INTERVIEW: Don't let a bad apple ruin your contracting barrel says veteran contractor

Being marched off site by security is all in a day's work for long-time contractor Jane Smith. And as her story shows, anyone who has been contracting for any length of time needs to develop the 'rhino approach' to their relationship with clients. That means developing a thick skin and charging a lot!

Because contractors are not employees, they are service providers to their end-user client, just like the company that provides the photocopiers: they have no grievance procedure and can occasionally fall foul of casual cruelty on the client's part.

Jane Smith suffered at the hands of one client where politics was in the driving seat resulting in her early [termination](#) based on false claims of misconduct: "It shook my confidence for several months after I was booted out. I even caught 'interview phobia', irrationally fearing that the same thing would happen again. Subconsciously, I made myself back-out of interviews or just mess them up – which I did for quite a while. Ultimately, you have to be sensible and put it down to experience. As the words of the song go, you have to pick yourself up, dust yourself down and start all over again."

Organisational change management

This philosophical approach, combined with her background as a change manager and stakeholder engagement specialist, did enable Jane to move on.

"I work on major change projects within large businesses and carry out the internal communications to support the process," explains Jane. "That means I tend to find myself contracting with larger companies that need business transformation and stakeholder engagement skills."

As change projects are by their very nature 'projects' and don't require ongoing management by a permanent employee, this suits Jane perfectly, as she has come to depend on the flexibility that being a contractor brings to her lifestyle.

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Jane Smith

It was whilst working on a major change project within a large business that Jane first experienced how potentially vulnerable a contractor in her position can be.

Beware client politics

"I won a high paying six-month contract, working through an agency, for a major logistics company in the Midlands," explains Jane.

Jane quickly realised that not everything was going to plan: "The client needed a change management and stakeholder engagement strategy, but senior management had not bought into the project and there was serious disquiet about the budget and the project timelines for completion. This signalled a problem, as lack of senior management support is the underlying reason that so many change programmes fail."

"I should have suspected a set-up was imminent when one of the programme's managers, who backed me in private by signing off the content of a presentation I was giving didn't support me in a steering group meeting," says Jane. "Alarm bells rang that I should have heeded but, sadly didn't. But I never expected it to happen to me too. Who would?"

Escorted from the premises

However, nothing could have prepared Jane for the brutality of her contract termination. "The programme manager invited me to his office and told me I had upset key stakeholders, but gave me no convincing supporting information. I knew that I was being stitched up because I remember the productive discussions I'd had with them. Yet, the next minute I was being marched from the building!"

If that wasn't bad enough, to add insult to injury, the client refused to pay Jane the £8,000 notice money she was owed following the five week's work she had completed. When she complained to the agency, a well-known national brand, they refused to intercede on her behalf.

Because Jane had opted out of the Conduct of Employment Agencies Regulations, the Department of Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform ([BERR](#)) would not help, nor did the Association of Professional Staffing Companies ([APSCO](#)), at that time known as ATSCo.

Undeterred, Jane got back in the contracting saddle a sadder but wiser contractor, and has been determined not to let this one bad fall off her horse ruin her positive view of the contracting lifestyle.

New business

Change management is a specialised field and you can't find an expert like Jane just by picking up the phone book. And, as most of Jane's contracts are direct with the client, she doesn't usually have the benefit of agencies doing her marketing.

"Virtually all my contracts come from referrals these days, mostly as a result of networking," explains Jane. "I've also been contracting for over ten years and this has given me a good reputation in the marketplace."

Having learned from her experience with this logistics company client, Jane is now careful to document all her interactions with clients, as recommended by the newly published [Contractors' Handbook](#). As she says, "Keeping records gives me the security of knowing that if a client ever pulled a stunt like that again I'll have audit trail of evidence to dispute any false claims of unprofessional conduct."

"It's a very sad thing to have to say, but my advice to fellow contractors is, don't assume that just because you are good at what you do, the client won't try and screw you. Having said this, she concludes, "I would still recommend the contracting lifestyle as a great way to enjoy flexibility and earn what you are worth."

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This article is based an interview with a contractor who has requested that her name be changed to maintain her anonymity.

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