

Keeping your skills updated

Introduction

One concern potential first time contractors have before entering the market is how to keep their skills updated once they have crossed to the other side.

Some are put off contracting because they believe that once they do, their skill set will become frozen and they will eventually become redundant.

This could not be further from the truth, and is one of the many [myths of contracting](#).

This article examines the issue of keeping skills updated whilst contracting.

Skills and rates

Rates are entirely driven by the demand for a certain skill. If an employer requires a contractor for some obscure skill that only a few people in the world have then it is likely that they will have to pay a premium for it.

It might not just be one skill that is in demand, but many years experience with it, and perhaps even combined with specific business knowledge.

Typically the newer skills pay better than the older skills. So keeping your skills fresh is of paramount importance.

Training and the catch-22

Some firms hire contractors because they do not have the skills internally. They pay premiums for people with extensive experience using the desired skill.

In severe skill droughts some firms will consider contractors who have only been on a training course for the skill, but this is very rare.

So, the common catch 22 appears: If you don't have the skill you cannot get a contract, but if you can't get a contract then you cannot get the experience.

Let's examine some of the ways contractors overcome this.

Getting the experience

There are 3 ways of overcoming the catch 22:

- o Practice the new skills on an existing contract
- o Go on a training course and get a new contract using the skill.
- o Learn the skill and embellish your CV saying you have the experience.

The first technique is the most common. The second rarely results in being hired for a new contract for that skill, unless it is very rare. The third technique is actually quite common so we can't pretend it does not happen and will discuss it later.

Skill awareness

It is important to become aware of new skills on the horizon and to gain a high level overview of them. Often that extra small piece of knowledge, as opposed to nothing at all, will mean you will get the opportunity as opposed to someone else.

Conferences:

As opposed to training courses, these can be very valuable. They give you a good high level overview of many subjects in a short space of time.

The Web:

Web articles are ideal for printing off and reading on the journey between home and the client.

Other contractors:

Often you will find yourself at client sites that have other contractors using the newer skills. They can be a great resource for helping you get up to speed during your self training period.

1. Getting experience on an existing contract

Convincing an existing client to use new technologies is by far the best way of obtaining experience with new skills. Not only do you get real experience of new technologies, but you also get paid for learning them!

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Make sure your existing clients become aware of new technologies, and convince them that you should undertake an evaluation project to assess the benefits of using them.

If clients are not prepared to pay for an evaluation project then the next best thing is to spend time outside of work building an evaluation project yourself. Then try and sell the features and benefits of using the new technologies to the client in the hope that they will then ask you to continue – whilst being paid of course!

You'll need to put your best sales hat on to land yourself this kind task!

Ensure that you do not look like you are trying to force new technologies onto a client just so it goes on your CV. Firstly you would be being most unprofessional and secondly, any manager worth his salt will spot it a mile off.

Do a proper sell on it. Remember... need... feature... benefit... instead of 'hey doesn't this look cool'.

Once you get buy in to use the new technologies it can go on your CV and you officially have experience.

2. Training courses

Training courses can be a good way of kick starting a new skill, but rarely will you get hired just because you've been on a course.

Also, if you are currently in a contract then taking time out for a long training course can be costly due to loss of income.

Careful consideration needs to be made as to whether the monetary investment in a course will pay off.

3. Embellishing your CV:

Whilst this practice is unethical, it is quite common, so there is no point trying to pretend that it isn't used.

The technique tends to involve learning enough of the skill to actually do the job, and then embellishing the CV to indicate that you obtained experience elsewhere. Once the contractor then starts the position then no one is really the wiser.

Ironically, on a CV these embellishments are often in phrases like 'Built a prototype in XYZ to evaluate the technology benefits.'

Contractors get away with this kind of behaviour for the following reasons:

- o Agents are skilled in sales, not in evaluating the technical capabilities of contractors.
- o References are rarely chased, and when they are the agent rarely goes into detail about specific skills.
- o Some interviews are with managers who are skilled in management, and not technology. Because they don't have the skills they are hiring you for they cannot quiz you to find out if you know them well or not.
- o If the contractor is not skilled enough they can get fired on the spot, so the risk to the client is minimal.

If you do decide to go down this route then ensure that you do not over extend your claimed knowledge and experience. There is no point fooling others and yourself into a position and then getting fired!

Conclusion

Ensure you are aware of new skills on the market.

Teach yourself the new skills at home, or go on training courses.

Try to introduce the new skills to the existing client, ensuring you have good commercial reasons backing up your arguments.

Treat each contract as a stepping stone to the next one.

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