

## INTERVIEW: Take a few tips from the contractor who overnight went from £35k to £85k

Anyone looking for an inspiring tale in the current tough economic climate could take a leaf out of veteran contractor Paul Drew's book, whose approach to contracting changed his career, and bank balance, out of all recognition. It also made him the sought-after project manager he is today.

Languishing in IT sales during the tail end of the last recession in 1996, Drew set himself a goal: to earn over £100k a year. But how would he make this happen, starting from a dead-end £35k a year job with no prospects?

As Drew explains – and aspiring contractors should take note – when the going gets tough, the tough get contracting!

Erm, what's a project manager?

"I knew that to succeed as a contractor, I had to find a niche skill that is constantly in high demand, but although I could talk the talk, I had no core IT development skills as such," admits Drew. "After doing some research, I found out that the project management methodology Prince was just starting to take off, so I booked myself onto a course."

And when an opportunity presented itself, with an [interview for a contract](#) with one of the leading IT firms, working for what was then one of the UK's largest building societies, Drew took a leap of faith. And so did the client.

"It was an ideal first contract where I was able to be effectively mentored by the client. The contract also exposed me to just about every facet of project management there is," continues Drew. "From that point on, I never looked back and my income nearly trebled."

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Paul Drew

The devil is in the detail

The measure of Drew's success is that in just over 12 years contracting he has only had one period without a contract, which was for three months immediately following the dot-com crash. So, what's the secret of his success?

"I think there were a number of reasons why I consistently managed to win new contracts, and none of those reasons are rocket science," says Drew. "The most fundamental reason was that I had a clear strategy. I knew where I wanted to be, what I wanted to earn and I tried to constantly reinvent myself to be what the market wanted in a project manager."

Drew identified a niche in the facilities management sector, and specifically project managing the commissioning of IT support systems in new facilities. And when this meant improving his skills, he invested time and money in training courses.

But, according to Drew, it is how you approach [finding and securing a contract](#) that makes the difference. "It's not necessarily about how good you are at your chosen area of expertise. It's about how good you are at winning contracts."

Winning contracts is a process

In addition to working in the public sector, such as for County Councils, Drew has worked on 15 major contracts during his career. His clients have included the leading companies in the following sectors, every one of them a household name:

- o Mobile telephony
- o Pharmaceuticals
- o Retail
- o Petrochemicals
- o Banking and finance
- o Public transport.

So, how does a contractor get to work with so many prestigious clients on major business infrastructure projects? Drew explains: "I apply a simple but effective methodology each time I start looking for a new contract. It works every time, well almost!"

- o Step 1 is [finding the contract adverts](#), and Drew started with and stays with [Jobserve](#). That's because, he says, other sites frequently duplicate adverts so time is wasted applying several times for what is basically the same job.
- o Step 2 is to contact the agent with a [tailored CV](#) and [covering letter](#), quickly followed-up with a phone call to convince the agent to put you forward for interview. Drew also tells agents he is location independent, which can often tip the balance.

- o Step 3, when the interview with the client is secured, is research, which Drew starts three days before the interview: "I try to anticipate every possible question the client might ask, identify where my experience is relevant to the client's needs and thoroughly research the client's organisation." [Ed: See [preparing for an interview](#)]
- o Step 4, the interview, is organised like a military operation with attention to detail the key factor. "I get a haircut, dress the part and have a pair of shoes I only use for interviews," says Drew. "Having been trained in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), I quickly establish rapport, maintain eye contact and use props, such as my best pen and legal pad, which I use to take notes to reassure the client and give the right impression."

### What to do when times are tough

During Drew's only involuntary break after the dot-com crash, he quickly realised that if he was to continue in contracting, he needed to get a contract, any contract. That's because, as he explains: "It's much easier to work your way up from within a contract."

But according to Drew, it paid off: "I took a pay cut of £175 per day and worked away from home in Leeds for many months. I then applied for a much better contract with the same client, and had the advantage over other contractors because I was already working successfully with the client."

Downshifting for a while may well be the only option for contractors currently facing periods without work. Drew emphasises that contractors in this position have to work on the basis that it's only temporary, until something better comes along.

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Paul Drew

### Top tips for contracting success

So, what advice does Drew have for aspiring contractors? Here are his top tips:

- o Have a strategy – know what you want to do and what you want to earn, and make it happen
- o Get good tax advice from day one; use the opportunity when you are contracting to become tax efficient
- o Save and invest some of your income; buy [property](#), pay into a [pension](#), build cash savings, buy other assets like gold and oil
- o Build a solid network and keep in touch with everyone you have worked with, because you never know when you'll need them
- o And have a good time – if you are working hard and earning lots, spend some of it on the good things in life! It's all about balance.

Drew combined his tips for investing and enjoying yourself by buying an investment property in Spain, which not only earns him an income (see [www.myspanishflat.com](http://www.myspanishflat.com)), but is also there for a ready-made holiday whenever he wants one. But he also urges a prudent approach; for instance, when buying his first property he did not mortgage himself to the limit, which proved to be a good move as interest rates later rose.

Enjoy the contracting lifestyle," concludes Drew, "and if things get tough, be flexible and persevere."

Got an interesting story to tell? If you're a contractor who has 'seen it all and done it all' and would like to share your experiences to benefit or entertain others, please [get in touch with ContractorCalculator](#).

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