

How firms should conduct contractor interviews

Contractor interviews are very different from an interview with a candidate for a role as a permanent employee. There is no battery of psychometric tests, no second and third interviews – the client will only have an hour to assess whether or not to hire the contractor.

The contractor is going to be pitching themselves to the client – they want to sell their skills, and so professional contractors will typically be well prepared, knowing they have an hour at most to win the contract.

In that time, a client has to make a decision as to whether the contractor has the right skills, experience, attitude and personality to fit with the existing team and whether they deserve the budgeted fees.

Clients who invest time in getting the most out of the contractor interview, and don't fall into the trap of thinking they are recruiting an employee, can make more effective contractor hiring decisions.

Before the interview – preparation

The contractor has been invited to interview because their CV ticked all the boxes. The interview is a single opportunity to test that the contractor has the skills and experience they claim, plus whether they will fit in with the client's team.

Clearly every interview will be different, as every contract position is different. However, there are some key facts that a client can and should establish from an interview that will aid them in making a final decision.

What clients should find out about a contractor

Key questions for the client to think about during an interview include:

Is the contractor skilled for the position? Can they achieve what we need them to?

Can they work on their own and use their initiative?

Are they likeable and will fit into our organisation's culture?

Are they clearly focused on project delivery?

Do they have good communicate skills?

Can they offer some added value, more than the other candidates, which could help give the organisation an edge?

Do they try hard to understand the project requirements, by asking lots of questions?

Do they seem keen and a hard worker and prepared to get really stuck in?

Do they appear to be genuinely interested in the project?

Are they a positive person who will motivate others or a negative merchant of doom?

Are they a good listener?

Do they know anything about our business/organisation and the market sector?

Is the contractor commercially aware?

A good quality, professional contractor will have the same checklist to work through from their perspective, and will be trying to reassure the client about all the positive aspects on the list, and to dispel the negative.

What if the interview starts going wrong, which usually means there has been a mistake, because the contractor is totally unsuitable, or there are major personality issues? The client should stop the interview politely, but firmly, briefly explain why they don't wish to continue, and thank the contractor for their time. There is no point wasting everybody's time further for no reason.

And, because this is a business-to-business meeting, rather than an interview for a permanent employee, the client does not have to worry about any comeback over any perceived unfairness.

What sends alarm bells ringing?

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Clients are likely to be able to easily spot signs during the interview that the contractor might not be the right person for this particular contract, or that they might not fit in with the client's organisational culture. Common warning signs include:

The contractor focuses too much on how the role would be good for them rather than the client

The contractor does not really address the client's problems, and explain how their skills and experience will solve them

The contractor is being a bit 'colourful with the truth'

The contractor is a bad listener, talks too much, and doesn't directly answer questions

The contractor interrupts too much, or is just plain rude

The contractor has obviously not prepared for the interview

The contractor demonstrates a lack of commercial awareness

The contractor lacks interest in the client's organisation and project.

None of these may be a reason by itself for a client to reject a contractor out of hand, but they may be indicators that perhaps the contractor is not right for this particular contract.

Making your decision

Contractors that have long term successful contracting careers will also have good selling skills in addition to their core expertise. This is because they understand the importance of professional sales.

At the end of the interview a good contractor will normally ask for the business and attempt to close the deal, assuming of course that they want to work on the project. That's fine if the client is happy with the contractor, but clients do not have to say yes straight away.

If the client is not ready to make a decision there and then, then that's not a problem. However, clients should remember that a good contractor, even in depressed market conditions, will almost certainly have other options. So, clients should take time to deliberate over the decision, but should not prevaricate.

Once the contract offer has been made, the negotiation stage begins.

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