

How to find a contract: guide for UK contractors

Finding and securing a contract in the contracting market is very different to the job search associated with full time employment. In this guide we highlight the differences and describe best practices to secure a lucrative contract.

The best strategy for finding contracts

Finding contract work requires a different approach than searching for a full time job. The wrong strategy could mean long unpaid gaps between contracts and [negotiating a contract rate](#) lower than perhaps what you could achieve (the money going to the agent rather than you!)

Applying the correct strategy for finding contract work will ensure your periods between contracts are minimal, if any, and that you are earning the market contract rate.

Differences between contract search and full time job search

In contracting there is typically no more than one interview and the decision to hire is normally made within a week of the interview. There is little, if any, candidate testing by the client other than questions asked at the interview.

In permanent employment there can be many interviews - up to five or six, sometimes more. The turnaround time from first interview to offer can be months. There can also be many candidate tests which the prospective employer will ask you to do.

There are a few motivating factors behind these differences:

The decision to hire a contractor is typically made a few weeks before they are needed and they are normally required to start work 'yesterday'. This shorter lead time means that finding a contract should be a quicker as you should not have to wait so long as the hiring process plays out.

There are no employment protection rights for contractors, so if the client thinks you are not up to scratch they simply [terminate your contract](#). In permanent employment getting rid of incompetent staff can be more difficult with lots of legislative procedures to follow. Suffice to say, employers are extra careful to make sure they make good hiring decisions.

Things to be aware of when looking for a contract

The decision to hire a contractor will be done in the majority of cases after one interview. In high demand areas you could be offered the position on the spot.

Sometimes contractors are hired without being interviewed purely on the trusted recommendation of another contractor.

Whilst a surprising fact, many clients will not even ask you to prove that you know what you claim to know – sit a test etc. If clients discover you have been overly colourful with the truth they will simply fire you.

References with previous contract clients are rarely followed up.

Initial telephone interviews are common after which you will have one interview.

Clients will typically want you to be available to start work 'yesterday' or within one week, two weeks at the latest.

Initial preparation

Before you start searching for a contract you need to:

Write a great CV that highlights your skills and experience as a contractor - this will help you find a more lucrative contract)

Establish your contractor rate. This will stop you wasting your time with contracts that pay too little and make your contract hunt a smoother process.

These contractor guides explain exactly how to do this:

[Writing the killer CV](#)

[Determining the contract rate for your skills when entering the contract market](#)

[Comparison of hourly and daily contract rates](#)

After completing these you will be ready to hit the market.

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First steps when looking for a contract

You should send your CV to all the agencies so that you are entered into their database. Agents make use of huge databases of contractors when they are attempting to match someone to a position.

The list of agencies can be found on [Jobserve](#). Jobserve also offer a service whereby you can load your **contractor CV** to their site which is then distributed to all agencies.

Plan to do this one month before you start contracting. It can take a few weeks for your CV to be entered into all the major agency databases.

Daily activities for securing a contract

Having prepared to enter the contract market, following the daily schedule below will ensure you are optimising your job search activities:

Morning:

Call agencies that you made applications to yesterday afternoon.

Chase up any other positions to which you have applied and have not yet spoken to the agent about.

Search the job web sites for suitable positions that have been added since yesterday.

Send off **email applications**.

Afternoon:

Call agencies that you made applications to in the morning.

Chase up any other positions to which you have applied and have not yet spoken to the agent about.

Search the job web sites for suitable positions that have been added since you last looked.

Send off email applications.

Unfortunately, the contract search process can be quite dull and often frustrating. So, the sooner you get a position the better. Following the advice below will help you fine tune your process and get you a position quickly:

Locating positions – using on line job boards:

All contracts are advertised on the internet. Whilst there are many on line job boards the main ones are:

[Jobserve](#)

[CWJobs](#)

[Monster](#)

Often an agency will post the same position on all three boards.

The main jobs boards have a free alerts facility whereby you are automatically sent an email when a new job is advertised that matches specified criteria, for example "C# Developer London". You can set up multiple alerts with different criteria.

Targeting your application to specific contracts

It is likely that you will be applying for different roles that might focus on different aspects of your skill set. To give yourself the best chance of success you need to target your application accordingly. You need to:

Re write / target your CV to match the skills required for a particular contract

Write a targeted email for the position.

Writing many different versions of your CV can be time consuming to start with, but you'll soon build up a collection of different versions. For example one might paint the picture of you being a great 'C# Programmer', and another might focus you on being a 'Project Manager'. You may find the following articles useful from our CV Centre:

[Why a generalised CV does not work](#)

[How to write the killer CV](#)

[How to target your CV](#)

Your email needs to tell the agent exactly what they want to hear and not look like a mass spam email to multiple agencies. We explain how to write one in

“
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Age of advertisements / positions

Contracts get taken quickly and your efforts are better focused on chasing contracts that are more recently advertised.

When you first hit the market you can apply for older positions to play catch up, but then after that you will only be applying for anything added in the past day.

The main contract job web sites have a facility in their search to filter out anything older than a specified time.

The importance of chasing contract positions

You decrease your chances of securing a contract considerably if all you do is send off emails to agents and wait for the phone to ring. Making contract applications is not like tennis where you wait for the agent to hit the ball back. You need to keep hitting plenty of balls over the net until they notice you! Saying that, think more of targeted missiles than a complete bombardment approach.

If you are only one of a few who are applying for the position then they might phone you. If they have plenty of applications then your email might not even get read. Other seasoned contractors will be phoning the agents shortly after sending them emails to ensure they get their CV at the top of the pile for review. If you don't also do this you are one step behind the competition.

Thus, you need to chase them on the phone.

Most contractor agents work ridiculously hard and will be difficult to get hold off. Even if you leave a message requesting that they call you back they are unlikely to. Whilst this might appear rude it isn't anything intentionally done to upset contractors. It is just the way the industry works. Agents would rather spend more time chasing new business than speaking to every contractor who applies for a position.

If they don't call back then ring them again.

Making lots of telephone calls to chase business is very time consuming. It is therefore important to make optimum use of your time, and that means filtering out time wasting activities.

It is advisable to keep notes of how many times and dates when you have tried to speak to agents about positions so that you develop a good sense of when to count your losses and move onto the next position.

How to avoid fake contractor job adverts

Although it is illegal agents will place fake job advertisements which you can end up chasing. They do this for a few reasons:

Phishing for leads. Candidates then phone them up and they try and establish where they are leaving and the name of their current boss.

They might have a new contracts coming up and want to be more ready than the competition to pounce.

They want to enter lots of contractor CVs into their database.

The first option is the most common and chasing fake jobs can be a real pain. You'll learn soon enough how to spot these though.

Contract to permanent type advertisements

Some advertisements will state that the client is looking for someone to potentially take up a permanent position with them after a short term contract.

There are a whole host of reasons for the client using this strategy. The most common being that everyone with the skills they are after are selling them at a premium in the contract market.

If you are looking for your first contract then these can help get you to the top of the candidates list, especially if you indicate to the agent that you would certainly consider an offer to go permie again. Whether you then accept that offer is of course another subject entirely.

If you have been contracting for a few years and have no intention of going permie again then these types of advertisements are best put at the bottom of your prospects pile. There are plenty of first timers who will appear more attractive to the client.

More information

For more information about becoming a contractor see our article [Starting Contracting - Steps to become a contractor](#)

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