

Keeping your contracting skills updated

Contractors can keep their contracting skills updated by investing in training and applying the new techniques they learn on existing contracts. This will increase a contractor's 'marketability', not only making their services more attractive to new clients, but also increasing the rates they can command.

And new contractors concerned that, once they start contracting, their skills will become 'frozen', will find that by creating and implementing their own professional training programme, their skills will remain current and they will continue to secure contracts on projects requiring the latest techniques.

Contractors working in the professions, such as engineering, surveying, law and finance, are likely to have professional bodies that already require a minimum of continued professional development (CPD) each year, usually measured in hours spent on CPD-accredited training programmes. Additional complementary skills they can develop will put them ahead of the contractor competitors in the race to win the best contracts.

Why train, and what training to select?

In most contracting markets, there is a direct link between the level of expertise and capability a contractor can demonstrate in a specific skill area and their day rate. So, very simply, by investing in updating their skills, contractors are able to earn more; for highly sought after new skills, they can earn considerably more.

When determining what training to select, contractors need to have a high degree of market awareness. What's in demand this year might not be the same next year, so staying ahead of the skill curve and spotting future technology and business trends is essential.

Also, it's worth bearing in mind that contractors don't always have to gain new skills by going on training courses, as 'learning by doing' can be an effective way of acquiring a new skill. Demonstrating to a client a new competence learnt and successfully applied on the job can be done by talking them through the project and its outcomes.

Training courses, conferences and desk research

For many contractors, particularly those working in highly technical environments such as IT and engineering, the best route to learning a new skill is on a formal training course. There is real value in there being a formal outcome from the course, such as a recognised certificate or relevant qualification.

Contractors should always pay for their own training and never allow a client to pay for or subsidise training directly, as this could be used against a contractor in an [IR35](#) investigation.

There are also rules about the types of training that [contractors can claim through their limited company](#), so before paying for a training course and taking time out of fee-earning work, contractors should carefully gauge cost and potential returns carefully.

New skills can also be learned at conferences, through desk research, via online courses or through old-style practitioners' handbooks. To be credible when offering a client new skills gained via conferences and desk research, ideally a contractor should also have some additional hands-on experience.

Gain new skills on existing contracts

One highly effective method of gaining new skills, which can also include an element of formal training, conference attendance and research, is to gain a new skill on an existing contract, usually by convincing an existing client to trial a new technology or approach. For contractors, this is a win-win, because not only are new skills learnt and practical experience gained, but the contractor also gets paid for learning them.

The most effective approach to this technique is for the contractor to research a new technology or business solution in their own time and then present a business case to their client to undertake an evaluation or trial.

If this initial approach is unsuccessful, and the contractor stands to gain considerably from the trial project outcomes and new skill gained, then it may be worth investing some time outside of the day job on a client development project. Selling the business benefits of the new technology to the client, rather than saying 'hey, this is cool', could result in getting the go-ahead to complete a full trial on a paid basis.

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Do not be tempted to embellish a CV or 'blag' at interview

Many new and highly marketable skills can be picked up very quickly during the first few weeks working on a contract, and from fellow contractors. As a result, some contractors might be tempted to embellish their [CV](#) with skills and past client projects that don't exist, or 'blag' their way at client interview stage into a new contract that demands skills they do not actually have.

Contractors can get away with this for several reasons. Many agents are good recruiters but are not technical experts, and may also not follow up

references to fictional past projects. Similarly, clients may be good business managers, but may not be technical experts; indeed they may be hiring the contractor for those very skills the contractor claims to have.

But that can be very dangerous commercially, as well as being unprofessional. Contractors caught out trying this approach run the risk of being fired on the spot, are unlikely to get work from the client in the future and may even find work from the agency drying up. And if they 'screw up' a project and their deception is found out, they (or their contractor limited company) could face legal action.

However, contractors who adopt a professional approach to identifying those skills likely to give the greatest return in terms of marketability, who regularly attend training when practical and who offer their clients good business cases to commission new projects that will lead to new skills, will find their contracting skills naturally stay updated.

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