

Tips for long term successful contracting

Introduction

There's more to a successful contract than getting your timesheets signed. If you're in it for the long haul and want to build lasting financial security, then you'll need to strike a balance between a range of needs – both yours and the needs of your clients.

As well as getting paid, you should aim to end your contracts in a stronger position than when you started them. Your financial future should be that bit more secure. Your clients should be satisfied, and you should have earned their trust, respect and loyalty. Your career should have moved forward and your knowledge and skills should have progressed.

A successful contract should be a definitive step forward into a better future for you and your clients, and not just a way to pay the bills today.

Tips for a successful contract

Deliver. Deliver. Deliver.

You may be the life and soul of the party. You may be charging less than everyone else on the team. But if you're not coming up with the goods, your client will soon learn to live without you. Under promise and over deliver whenever you can.

Build your relationship with the client.

If you've taken care of the Three D's above, then the next most important factor in the success of your contract will be how much trust and respect the client has for you as a person. Getting that all important contract renewal or that crucial glowing reference might be a lot easier with a client who you've been having lunch with every week than with a client who can barely remember your name. You need to create the impression that you care about the client, and particularly care about making the boss look good.

Don't charge too much.

Decisions about who to extend and who to let go often come down to money. Never underestimate the influence the bean counters can have over those sorts of decisions. You may be feeling like the cat that got the cream after your last renegotiation, but long-term success requires a sustainable commercial relationship. If they can't afford you, or don't think you offer enough value to justify your fees, then you should plan for short stay.

Don't charge too little.

There are two good reasons why you should try to charge what you believe you're worth, and no less:

On long-term contracts, you need to earn enough to ensure you stick with it to the end of the project. You're not doing the client any favours by under-pricing yourself and increasing the odds of getting a better offer.

How much you charge sends out a clear message about how much you think you're worth. Charge too little, and you could end up losing the respect of your client and being marginalised into a role that's too junior for you, which could hurt your career prospects.

Communicate your achievements.

Informally communicate achievements to the client on a regular basis, perhaps over lunch. Every once in a blue moon, go a step further and put on a "show and tell" for your client. Make it tangible and as easy to understand as possible. Let them see where their money went. If you have been delivering, this will help to reinforce their perception of the value you bring to them. This can be especially effective in the weeks before your contract is due to expire. Blow your own trumpet as no one is going to blow it for you.

Make time for learning.

The only sustainable way to remain competitive is to get better at what you do. Learning is a crucial part of every contractor's professional career, and if you neglect it, you will fall behind and you and your clients will suffer. You should aim to end every contract better at your job than when you started.

Don't burn yourself out.

Some project teams end up working the same kind of hours as film stars. But unlike film stars, contractors don't earn so much money that we can afford to take a year off in between projects to recuperate. Chances are, when one contract ends, you'll be back at work in a new contract within a month. To succeed in the long term, you need to work at a sustainable pace and take care of yourself mentally and physically.

Network with other contractors.

Flowers aren't stupid. They go to great lengths to attract bees because they know they will distribute their pollen. It's a good idea to make friends with the other contractors you work with because a personal recommendation from a respected consultant can hold a lot of sway with potential clients. Staying in touch with others is how a vast majority of long term contractors secure positions.

Network with other permanent staff.

Chances are you'll be working alongside permanent staff, and you'll probably get paid more than them. It is important not to alienate them and ensure they are on your side. Your current permanent co workers turn into managers in the long term or often go contracting themselves.

Enjoy it.

If you have to force yourself to go into work every day, then that's probably not sustainable in the long term. People who love their jobs tend to have no trouble succeeding in them. If market demand for your skills is high and you can sell yourself well then you should have no trouble securing the attractive

contracts.

Good luck in your contracting.

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