



How to win the contracts you want

In the competitive world of contracting, long-term success will ultimately depend on the contractor's understanding of the sector and their ability to adapt to its specific requirements. In this guide, we look at some of the ways you can maximise your chances of success.

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Craft your CV

The contracting world moves quickly, and with little time to spend on long interview processes, clients and agents will often short-list candidates based on their CV alone. This means that you can have the right skills, experience and recommendations, but unless your CV makes an impact, chances are you won't get an interview. As a contractor, a stand out CV is your primary marketing tool and will also form the basis for your other marketing activities, so it's worth investing time in getting it right.



Customise

This is the number one rule for contractor CVs and involves tailoring the content to target the specific requirements of each job. Remember, contracting involves matching specific skills to specific requirements, so your CV should clearly demonstrate that you have the following:

- The required skills for the work
- Experience of applying the required skills
- Benefited previous clients using those skills effectively

One of the main differences between contracting and full time employment is the importance placed on individual personality. While it's not uncommon for full time employees to search for a candidate who fits their specific company 'culture', this is less important when hiring a contractor, who will usually be hired for a fixed-term project on the basis of their key skills and experience.

Clients hiring contractors will be less interested in personal information such as hobbies, interests and career aspirations; cutting out this information will also help the client or agency to find the key content they're looking for. On average, **clients and agencies spend less than 20 seconds looking at each CV**, so in order to grab their attention, the front page of your CV should include the following.

- **Profile** Your profile should be 3-4 lines that summarise your skills and work history. This is your 'introduction' to the client, so it needs to stand out. Always fine-tune your profile to match the key requirements of each brief, paying particular attention to your job title; remember, as a contractor you get to decide what your professional title should be, not the client.
- **Expertise** Instead of listing generic skills, your expertise should be industry specific, such as knowledge of procedure or technical proficiency with equipment and software. You can also include membership of professional bodies in this section.
- **Achievements** This allows you to draw the client's attention to any instances where you have made a significant impact; worked on a high profile contract for a prestigious client, or achieved accolades and industry recognition.
- **Employment History and Education.** These sections can go on the following pages of your CV. Keep the information concise, taking care to avoid repetition and to highlight compatibility with the current contract's requirements.

Presentation:

Check your CV for clarity and readability, paying attention to fonts, paragraphs, alignment and grammar. Avoid using pictures or unusual fonts as they are distracting and can become distorted in digital format. If you want to provide examples of your work, include a link to your LinkedIn profile or online portfolio.

You can download our CV template for contractors [here](#), or get more tips on [preparing a killer CV](#).

Excel at the Interview

Not all contracts require interviews, especially if you're working through an agency, but the nature of fixed-term work means that you should prepare to be interviewed on a regular basis. Developing your interview technique will help you to feel prepared and confident when pitching for a contract.



Know your CV:

It might sound obvious, but having a solid recall of your CV is essential when attending an interview. The interviewer will use your CV as the basis for further questions, often asking you to elaborate in more detail. When working on a succession of contracts, it might become difficult to recall the details of each one. Keeping the first page of your CV focused and concise allows you to direct the client's attention to the content you're most familiar with. You can also take a copy of your CV as a reference, although you should try to avoid 'studying' it in the interview.

Do your research:

Researching your client will help you to formulate relevant questions at interview about the likely requirements of a project. Knowing up-to-date information about your client and how they operate will also let them know you are prepared and 'project ready'.

Stand out for the right reasons:

This isn't the time to try out those purple snakeskin boots or to regale the interviewer with anecdotes about your time in India. Contracting is essentially a conservative business where clients want assurances that you can do the job; they want to minimise risk by putting the contract into a safe and experienced pair of hands.

Pitch perfect:

Being clear, concise and direct will give the client a good indication of your working style and show that you are focused. Your pitch should demonstrate why you are the right person for the job, based on specific examples of your previous experience. This will indicate your unique 'fit' for a project, while demonstrating that you have worked effectively on similar projects will reassure the client that you can hit the ground running.

Be confident, but don't oversell:

While it's important for a contractor to impress the client with their strengths, overselling yourself can have the adverse effect. People who are genuinely confident in their ability tend to demonstrate this through their actions and knowledge rather than through meaningless rhetoric. For example, instead of saying "I adapt well to challenges," you could specify an instance where you used this ability to your advantage, translating rhetoric in to meaningful real-life experience.

Listen before speaking:

Being positive and enthusiastic about a project is desirable, but the contractor shouldn't let their enthusiasm take them off course. It's important to stay focused on what the client is asking or telling you, so listen carefully when they speak and don't interrupt. **Paraphrasing and summarising** what the client has said when you answer them is an extremely effective interview technique. It not only demonstrates that you have listened carefully and understood what is required; the fact that you are indirectly affirming what the client has said has the psychological effect of suggesting client-contractor compatibility.

You can find more information on contractor interviews [here](#).

LinkedIn & Social Media Networking

With approximately 3 billion users, LinkedIn is the world's number one business networking site, that's why creating a LinkedIn profile should be at the top of any contractor's 'to do' list.



Your profile:

Think of your LinkedIn profile as your online, interactive CV. Using the information from your CV as the basis for your profile, you can also upload your digital portfolio, allowing potential clients to view samples of your work. Pay particular attention to your headline, which should clearly and concisely communicate your value to the employer with relevant information, such as your job title, industry and years of experience.

- **E.g. 1:** Award-winning marketing consultant with 15 years' experience in the international food and beverage industry.
- **E.g. 2:** Linux contractor with extensive experience of IBM Unix/AIX based servers. Works with SAN, NAS and Enterprise Backup Software to ensure high availability and recovery of servers.

Search Tool:

According to data published by LinkedIn, recruiters use LinkedIn's powerful search feature to find contractors for specific rolls. By clicking **Advanced** beside the search bar, contractors can find specific professionals, companies and jobs related to their field of interest. This should give you a good indication of the **key words and phrases** to incorporate into your profile to ensure the content is optimised for recruitment searches.

Connect & Follow:

Just enter your email to sync your contacts with LinkedIn. Use the **My Network** section to get back in touch with old colleagues and anyone else you might think is worth having in your professional network. You can also follow relevant companies on LinkedIn so that their news and jobs will come up in your news feed.

Jobs:

LinkedIn will recommend specific jobs to you based on your current information. Contractors should take the time to fill out the optional **job preferences** to get better-tailored job listings, especially if they work in a niche market or work remotely, as LinkedIn recommends jobs based on criteria such as location.

Groups and interests:

A great way to meet new professionals to connect with is to join groups based on your interests or current profession. You can participate in discussions, often gaining valuable insights into your field of work. LinkedIn also has a publishing platform where you can share your own articles with thousands of readers, SlideShare for sharing presentations and info-graphics, and Lynda, LinkedIn's educational platform, for **developing your skills**. Joining groups can also be a great way of learning about industry events where you can take the opportunity to **network in person**.

Facebook:

There's growing evidence to suggest that when it comes to getting jobs, referrals and word of mouth endorsements can give candidates the edge. Companies and agencies are frequently adding '**refer a friend**' to their recruitment campaigns, realising that the address books of their tried and trusted employees are a likely source of reliable new talent. Facebook is an excellent tool for staying in contact with friends who might also be old colleagues, you can also join interest groups, follow businesses to get their news in your feed, and **create a business page** for yourself that's a good alternative to a fully-fledged website. Business pages also help to keep your personal and professional content separate, which you should always keep in mind when posting your personal opinions and photographs.

Twitter:

Twitter is a microblog site for posting real time status updates and breaking news. The updates or 'tweets' can be a maximum of 280 characters, making twitter a good tool for concise bulletins that link in to articles or general content on other sites. Use the hashtags (#) to follow conversations and topics that interest you, or add them to keywords in your own tweets so that these become searchable by other users.

For contractors working in the creative and media industries, **Instagram, Pinterest and Vimeo** are excellent platforms for communicating visual ideas and showcasing your photographs, designs and documentaries.

Used properly, **social media platforms** are an excellent way of connecting with industry professionals in order to grow your contacts and promote yourself. They're also essential for staying ahead of the curve with emerging trends, news and industry events.

Improving your Skills

Unlike full time employment where an employee can reasonably expect to receive training that will progress their career and increases their salaries, contractors do not have the same opportunities to develop their skills on the job. Contractors will usually be hired on the basis of their tried and tested skills only, and with fixed-term contracts, there's no opportunity to climb the company ladder.



As a contractor, you must take charge of your own career advancement. This means taking the opportunity to develop your skills and learn new ones in your own time. Luckily, the nature of contracting gives you some flexibility to do this, and seeking out your own training opportunities means that you don't have to wait until your employer decides to invest in you, or compete for training with another employee.

Career investment:

Contractors should view training as an investment; improving your skills increases your marketability and allows you to negotiate a higher rate. There are many ways you can fit training around your schedule, whether it's between contracts, budgeting for a short course, or using your evenings productively when you find yourself working away from home.

Take the time to research what kind of training would benefit you before investing your time and money. Research will allow you to anticipate the demand for specific skills in your industry, as well as identifying possible niche skills that fewer people possess. For Engineers and IT contractors, formal **CPD** or technical software courses held by accrediting bodies may be of more value than online courses and seminars.

Some of the best websites for online courses are:

- [Udemy](#)
- [Open University](#)
- [Treehouse](#)
- [Ted Talks](#)
- [Skillshare](#)
- [Lynda](#)
- [Future Learn](#)

Develop your soft skills:

Contractors who work in more collaborative industries might also consider developing their soft skills, such as courses in **communication, presenting, psychology or negotiation**. While the benefit of such courses might not be immediately quantifiable, these skills can improve your performance on the job, where your actions speak louder than certificates.

Cost and claiming tax relief:

There are many free resources you can use to improve your skills, however if you invest in a training course, make sure you pay for it, and not your client, as this could go against a contractor in an **IR35 investigation**. Clients working through limited companies might be able to claim back some training costs as tax-deductible expenses.

When costs qualify:

According to HMRC rules, the general criteria for claiming tax relief on training courses requires the training to be relevant to the work you do. The course should enhance your existing skills, helping you to perform better to the advantage of the company. You'll also be able to claim for any associated costs, such as travelling expenses and accommodation.

You can read more about HMRC's official view on claiming training costs against your company's profits [here](#).

When costs don't qualify:

You won't be able to claim for taking a university degree course or a residential course where you're learning a new skill that isn't immediately relevant to the services you offer. In this instance, you may be able to pay the fees through the company and claim it as a **capital expense**, but you won't be able to claim tax relief.

For the difference between **revenue** and **capital expenditure** see [here](#).

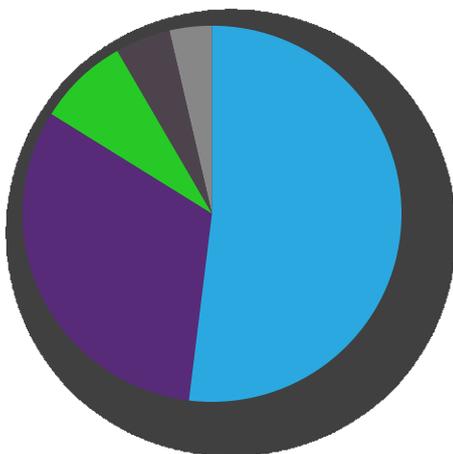
Choosing an Agency

Over 50% of all contractors choose to work via an agency rather than sourcing work directly from the client. Recruitment agencies offer the contractor a number of benefits that should be carefully considered, depending on your experience, the industry you work within and whether the contract is with a public or private sector client.

What to consider when choosing to work via an agency.

- Most clients prefer to outsource the recruitment of contractors to agencies, this means that agencies will have a much **wider network** of clients who the contractor would not otherwise have access to. Try to choose an agency that specialises in your industry.
- An agency will deal with all contract-related issues (between you and them, and the agency and client). This can help minimise **risk** to the contractor; however, it's still worth seeking specialist IR35 advice before signing anything. For further information read our [IR35 guide](#).
- Agencies provide contractors with effective **credit control**. They will deal with invoicing clients and chasing any overdue payments on the contractor's behalf. Some agencies offer a PAYE option to the contractor and will also guarantee payment if the client defaults, providing the contractor with a safety net.
- Agencies usually have access to **high value clients** and **expertise in negotiating** the best rates.
- Agencies will **market your CV** for suitable contract roles when they arise, so you don't have to spend valuable time searching for new contracts and cold calling clients. This can ensure a steady flow of work with fewer gaps between contracts, providing the contractor with **greater stability**.

You can read more on the benefits on contracting through an agency [here](#).



Agency	52.1%
Direct	31.8%
Consultancy	7.9%
Collaboration	3.5%
Other	4.7%

Budgeting & Money Management

As a contractor, knowing how to manage your funds will be a major factor in determining your long-term success. By keeping your finances in good order and seeking the advice of a **specialist accountant**, contractors can maintain peace of mind, allowing them to set **competitive rates**, focus on their work and enjoy the many benefits of a contracting lifestyle.



Whether you have your own limited company or work through an umbrella company, in order to budget effectively, you'll need to start tracking your expenditure. Your accountant should provide you with a client portal to keep track of your incoming funds and how much you need to keep aside for taxes (for limited company directors). A good rule of thumb is to **keep your personal and private accounts separate**, and there's a wide range of software designed to help with budgeting, including:

- **You Need A Budget (YNAB): YNAB**
- **Idealo**
- **Pennies**
- **Mint**

Factoring in tax:

If you're paid via an umbrella company or agency PAYE, your tax and NI will be automatically deducted at source. For contractors operating through a limited company, the following deductions should be taken into consideration when budgeting.

- Corporation tax – usually paid once a year*
- Income tax via a Pay As You Earn (PAYE) payroll – usually paid monthly**
- Employee's National Insurance Contributions (NICs) – usually paid monthly via PAYE
- Employer's National Insurance Contributions – usually paid quarterly
- Value Added Tax (VAT) collected on behalf of the government – usually paid quarterly, or annually

*Contractors should remember to deduct their **allowable business expenses** to offset their corporation tax. A company tax return and personal self-assessment tax return must be submitted annually, usually completed by an accountant

On IR35 exempt contracts, you will receive **dividends. The dividends are taxed in bands that align with the income tax bands

Time off: Sickness, holiday and time between contracts

Unless you're working under an umbrella company, contractors aren't entitled to employment benefits such as statutory sick pay and holiday pay, so you should do some basic calculations to factor these into your budget and allow for contingency funds. Contractors should have a minimum three to six month cash buffer to cover their personal and business costs in case they can't find work, or can't work due to short-term illness or family emergencies. Contractors can choose to buy a specialist **income protection policy** that will provide an income if they have an accident or long-term medical condition.

Be aware:

If you work through a limited company, you should avoid accepting any employment benefits offered by the client as this could go against you in an IR35 investigation.

To find out more about ways you can maximise your chances of winning the contracts you want, speak to a member of our team on 0203 642 8679, or get in touch by filling out our **ContractingWise contact form**.

