

# headhunter

Sometime in your career you can expect to work with a recruiter on a job search. A few basic rules will help you get the most out of the experience.

By **Cindy Waxer**

**What if** I were to ask you to put your successful career as an IT professional in the hands of a complete stranger? You'd probably think I was crazy, right? Wrong. These days, countless IT workers are retaining the services of recruitment agencies to help them land lucrative contracts.

In fact, according to a 1998 Dun & Bradstreet report, there are almost 150,000 recruitment agencies in the U.S. alone, serving no less than 1.6 million companies in search of temporary personnel.

But while today's recruitment agencies multiply, so too do IT contractors' reasonable concerns. What makes one recruitment agency superior to another? What responsibilities does a recruiter have to a contractor? How can a contractor improve his/her relationship with a recruiter? What mistakes can instantaneously place a contractor on a recruitment agency blacklist?

They're all questions that can plague the minds of even the most experienced IT professionals. So before you sign on that dotted line, read what the experts have to say about the brave new world of recruitment agencies and their IT contractors.

## RECRUITING A RECRUITER

Any recruiter can present you with a battery of skill-testing questions to assess your technical prowess. But

ask yourself this: Is that individual taking your overall career goals, soft skills and personality traits into proper consideration?

Says Matthew Williams, a branch manager of the Calgary division of Contractors Network Corp., a North American IT staffing firm: "[Recruiters] have a responsibility to do [contractors] justice by spending as much time with them as possible, understanding what it is they really want."

After all, being professionally qualified to tackle a project doesn't necessarily mean that you'll appreciate a company's corporate culture. So how can you be sure that you've found a recruiter that can offer you both personally and professionally fulfilling assignments?

For starters, find a recruiter who can relate to you and your needs. If, for example, you're more comfortable describing your objectives in tech jargon, seek a recruiter with expertise in IT.

Similarly, it's important that contractors find recruiters who are able to relate to and understand their own clients' needs. Not only does this enable recruiters to select an appropriate contractor for the job, but it provides the contractor with the information needed to get the job done right.

According to a late 1998 survey of IT contractors sponsored by Computer Action Inc., a Canadian IT contract staffing firm, 44 per cent of respondents said that they would be better prepared for their assignments if they received more detailed information on client policies and procedures.

But regardless of personality preferences and thorough job descriptions, IT contractors must always find recruiters they can trust.

"I've heard a few horror stories where the recruiting agency is taking 60 per cent [of a commission] and paying the consultant 40 per cent," says Miles

## RECRUITERS' SECRETS

Quick tips to help you work more effectively with recruiters.

- Understand that the job of a recruiter is to screen you out, not screen you in.
- Try to help the recruiter, even if it is a job you are not interested in. The name of the game is to build relationships.
- Remember that recruiters handle only between 10 to 12 per cent of jobs. Don't spend all of your time on recruiters.
- Know your goals and keep your responses short and focused on key requirements.

Atwood, a Calgary-based IT contractor.

Not to mention recruiters who make a habit of intentionally misrepresenting contractors' qualifications to clients, or worse, misinforming contractors of a particular assignment's requirements.

It's for these reasons that contractors are encouraged to run their own reference checks by researching a recruitment agency's reputation, checking out newsgroups and placing calls to colleagues.

Still, there are a couple of red flags that should immediately inform you of a recruitment agency's ill intentions. Experts say that the most obvious of these is if an agency requests that you sign an exclusivity agreement, preventing you from working with competing outsourcing firms. After all, the purpose of a recruitment agency is to enhance, not control, your career.

"It is actually a bad thing for [recruiters] to suggest, 'Just deal with me.' That is just putting all your eggs in one basket and you should not do that," said Laurie Marr, president of The Marr Roy Group Inc., a Mississauga,

Ont.-based IT recruitment agency.

Nor should contractors make the mistake of thinking that recruiters are without standards of their own. It's for this reason that contractors should invest as much time and energy as possible to create a top-notch résumé.

"Some people seem to think that a one-page or a two-page résumé is enough. But companies don't seem to like those as much," said Greta Weerheim, a Toronto-based IT contractor.

Instead, experts suggest that résumés should feature a quick summary of your job highlights, along with detailed accounts of your professional experience, education, volunteer work, general interests and references.

And how should you behave during an initial interview with a potential recruiter? Dress professionally — yet comfortably, offer a firm handshake, listen intently, and most of all, be on a first-name basis with your résumé.

Warns Atwood, "Know your résumé, know what you've done, because you could get questions thrown at you."

Still, memorizing your résumé word-

for-word is meaningless if it's chock full of embellishments. Sure, the world of IT contractors is highly competitive. But padding your résumé with untruths, no matter how minor, is like buying a one-way ticket to the unemployment line.

"We just trashed him, took him right out of the system, threw away his résumé. That's it — no second chance," said Marr, in reference to a recent encounter with a contractor who thought he'd try fudging his qualifications.

Experts recommend that the best way to make the most of a recruiter-contractor relationship is to view it as a mutually beneficial venture. Sure, recruiters are professionally required to accurately represent your qualifications and the needs of their clients. But ultimately, it's up to you, the contractor, to control your career and ensure that you're receiving assignments that are both challenging and full of growth opportunities.

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## Mistakes to avoid

Ever wonder why some IT contractors land top-notch assignments while others languish on recruitment agency blacklists? Here are some mistakes to avoid:

### ■ The Numbers Game

So you like to play hardball with recruiters when it comes to negotiating assignment fees? Well beware. While waiting for the big bucks could prove profitable, it could also adversely affect your overall marketability. Says Greta Weerheim, an IT contractor: "You're better off to hold out for the extra \$10 or \$20 an hour if you can afford to be off [work] for a month or so. But if you're off for longer than that, then it starts becoming suspect."

### ■ Playing The Field

He might be a great recruiter but does professional loyalty require you to close the door on competing staffing agencies? Not at all. But be careful you don't burn bridges by promising one too many recruiters your time, energy and technical services. Advises Ryan Sutton, human resources manager of the Ottawa branch of Professional Computer Consultants Group Ltd., a systems integration consulting firm: "If [contractors] can concentrate on one or two jobs at a time, it'll benefit them down the road."

### ■ Too Much Attitude

There's nothing wrong with being in high-demand. And no-one can blame you for being selective. But turning down assignment after assignment is bound to turn off your recruiter. Especially if your roster of excuses includes, 'My dog ate my laptop.' After all, no IT professional, regardless of technical skills, is indispensable. "There's always someone else who will take that job, even if they

have lesser or greater skills than you," says Miles Atwood, an IT contractor.

### ■ What Have You Done For Me Lately?

Looking to expand your career growth opportunities? Or perhaps you're interested in gaining some remedial training on an emerging technology. Well don't only depend on a recruiter. Instead, it's up to you to ensure that your work is mentally stimulating and that you're continually enhancing your technical skills. Says Laurie Marr, president of The Marr Roy Group Inc.: "[Clients] are coming to me and paying me to find them a particular expertise, so [recruiters] don't get to do career growth advising... a client is going to pay us to find them somebody with A, B, C skills and that's what we have to produce."

### ■ Lose, Fast With The Facts

Hey, what's the big deal if I pad my résumé with a few fictitious projects here and there? Well dishonesty doesn't float in today's IT world. Unless, of course, you wish to be permanently blacklisted. Warns Matthew Williams, branch manager of the Calgary division of Contractors Network Corp.: "There is a certain honour and credibility amongst IT professionals so people must represent themselves accurately."

### ■ Not Knowing The Package

That graphic designer may have done a great job on your résumé, but if you don't know what it says, you can kiss potential assignments goodbye. So before you meet with that recruiter or chief executive officer, be sure you familiarize yourself with your credentials.

— **Cindy Waxer**