



Breaking into Government IT Contracting

BY DAVID DICK | *Fellow*

When I was preparing my transition from employment in Belgium to employment in northern Virginia, friends encouraged me to look at opportunities as an information technology (IT) contractor for the federal government, which relies on contractors to design and deliver IT solutions. For this reason, many companies that build and sell IT systems have entered the lucrative market of outsourcing employees.

SINCE MAY 2005, I have been employed by four contracting companies and worked at several government agencies. When I started working as a contractor, I discovered that very little is written about the ins and outs of contracting. What I learned came from friends and associates, and their advice helped me understand how to be successful.

Getting Hired

Whenever I post my résumé on a popular employment website, I am bombarded with phone calls and emails from recruiters who search a variety of employment sites for technical writers that match the job descriptions of their clients.

Common titles used in the company name of a recruiter are “Consulting,” “Technologies,” “Services,” “Group,” “Staffing,” and “Consultants.” Another type of recruiter is called a “headhunter,” a highly specialized job recruiter who locates the right candidates to fill open positions for corporate clients. Charging substantial fees, headhunters earn their wages by working to benefit both the client and the job seeker.

Recruiters are interested in skills, familiarity with tools, security clearances, and certifications relevant to the job. Although important to your job searches, recruiters are not interested in achievements, accomplishments, published papers, and titles.

A telephone interview with a recruiter consists of four questions: number of years of experience, familiarity with tools, salary expectations, and whether there is a need for medical and dental insurance. This is what their clients want to know and responses help to filter candidates. In turn, I ask for a job description, the client for whom they are recruiting, the location (i.e., city and state), and the duration of the contract so that I can filter them from *my* list.

Additionally, recruiters prefer candidates with active security clearances, such as “Secret” and “Top Secret,” because they expedite a candidate’s assignment to a project. However, it’s unrealistic to expect candidates to have active clearances because clearances are downgrad-

ed and revoked when access is no longer required (i.e., when a project or contract is over).

Some recruiters and headhunters have been helpful in finding employment, but the majority of them only want my résumé to include a request for proposal (RFP). I always ask how my résumé will be used because I don’t want it to be included in an RFP without my knowledge and consent.

Getting Paid

Contracting companies make their money by billing clients (by the hour) for the use of contractors. The more

hours billed, the more money the company earns.

If contractors do not bill enough hours, they will not earn enough money to cover their salaries; so they are told by management. A contractor is expected to be 100 percent billable to a project. A contractor out of the office for vacations and holidays is not billing enough hours because the hours cannot be charged to the client. For this reason, contractors without enough billable hours must find projects for which they can bill their time in whatever capacity possible (e.g., proposal writing or take meeting minutes for requirements gathering sessions).

Traditionally, when contractors were not assigned to a project they sat on “the bench.” While on the bench, they continued to receive a salary, reported for work at the corporate office, searched for new projects, and performed a myriad of tasks. That’s how it used to be, but not any more. Nowadays, companies put contractors on Leave Without Pay and send them home. While home, contractors apply for open positions and consult a human resources representative about upcoming placement opportunities.

What does this mean for technical writers? Contracting companies prefer technical writers who have multiple skills because of the billing opportunities to sell a candidate with two or more skills (e.g., business analysis, configuration management, trainer, and requirements analysis). There are only so many user guides and help files to be written, but there is always a need to gather requirements for new systems, to train users, to test software, and to take meeting minutes. These collateral jobs will enhance your skills and prepare you to transition into other opportunities later.

Training and Professional Development

Collateral jobs will enhance your skills and your value, but do not overlook opportunities to learn new skills. When I renewed my STC membership for 2010, I chose the Gold Membership so that I could take advantage of the certificate programs and online training. I also enrolled in a project management certificate program offered by a community college.



Because of the transient nature of contracting, contracting companies rarely pay for certification programs or specialized training on specific tools and technologies. There is simply too great of a risk that a contractor will quickly leave the company for better opportunities. Instead of formal classroom training by accredited institutions, contracting companies offer online training from training vendors. A site license offers a library of canned training courses for a fraction of the cost of classroom training. However, the course certificates earned through these vendors are not recognized by colleges and universities and, therefore, are not transferable.

Your success depends on taking responsibility for your training and professional development. A résumé that demonstrates ongoing professional and skills development is attractive to recruiters, and ensures that you have marketable skills for future employment opportunities.

Job Security

A consequence of contracting is that employment is only ensured for the length of the contract, which can be one to five years with several extensions. That is not to say that contractors are not terminated for cause (e.g., poor performance, falsifying a timesheet, conflicts of interest), budget cutbacks, or at the discretion of the client—it happens all the time.

The U.S. government requires contracts to be renewed and new companies to be allowed to bid on the work. If the incumbent loses the “re-compete,” the contractors are

on their own to find new employment. The winner of the contract may offer to retain the entire staff to ensure continuity of business or only selected individuals as chosen by the client. Sometimes the wages and benefits are the same or slightly better, and sometimes less.

On occasion, a client will convert contractor positions to permanent hires (*Federal Computer Week*, 2009). Contractors filling a position that is scheduled for conversion will be asked to submit their résumés for consideration. Contractors seeking employment stability and better benefits will eagerly accept opportunities to convert to a government position. Contracting companies wince whenever they lose staff under these conditions because it is a loss of revenue. For this reason, contractors strive to establish strong social networks. There’s nothing unethical about this because it contributes to good contractor/client relationships, which is what contracting companies emphasize.

Performance Appraisals

I cannot overemphasize the importance of a solid rapport with the client. The client has significant input about a contractor’s performance and can influence the contractor’s retention should the contract be awarded to another company.

A contracting company is obliged to show the client that it has set objectives and performance metrics for employees, such as creating new processes, writing operating procedures, and learning new skills. However,



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setting calendar-dependent objectives in January to be fulfilled by December is an ineffective measurement, since the impermanence of contract assignments raises the likelihood that someone may not still be employed 11 months later. Contractors work on projects, and the client is only concerned that work is performed efficiently and professionally; therefore, project- or contract-based measurements would be more appropriate.

I know many contractors who worked countless hours of overtime, were on-call 24/7, delivered work products ahead of schedule, overcame unrealistic deadlines, and were praised by the client—only to be surprised that their pay raise was 2 percent and that they were not entitled to a bonus. What happened?

Pay raises and bonuses are stipulated in the contract and planned in the annual budget. If the contract does not specify bonuses, then there are no bonuses paid even if individuals deserve it. If the contract offers awards for delivering early, the contracting company—and not the people who actually did the work—receives the money. Bonuses are paid to individuals who win new business, and the amount is proportional to the revenue the new business brings to the contracting company.

Promotion and Advancement

Advancement is a way to promote a person to higher levels of responsibility, and is compensated with higher pay and benefits. In the contracting profession, a junior, senior, lead, and principal technical writer may all earn the same pay because the title is meaningless; what is important is the billable rate that the contracting organization can charge a client.

Contractors seeking a promotion will relocate to the corporate office where visibility is higher and the opportunity to meet decision makers is greater. Contractors who stay at the customer site and do their job are not likely to be promoted.

It is important for technical writers to transition into other occupations that leverage their skills and experience. The occupations in demand and for which there are not currently enough skilled people are cyber-security and information assurance (IA) analysis. Entering these fields means returning to school to earn a certification, and looking for new employment opportunities. College tuition is tax deductible, so if you can afford the cost to return to school, follow your ambition.

Where Contractors Work

If given the choice to work at the client site or corporate office, I will always choose the corporate office. Having worked at both corporate offices and customer sites, I have learned the importance of adapting to my environment, and of being resourceful and innovative with what is available to me.

Contractors assigned to the corporate office can call upon staff that have specialized skills, use the latest tools and technologies, and resolve project constraints and issues with seasoned staff.

Contractors who work at the customer site have constraints about calling upon outside resources with specialized skills, they must use the tools and technologies available to them (which are not always the latest and best), and must work within their team to resolve project constraints and issues.

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Final Thoughts

The benefits of contracting are the ability to have more of a say in what you do and when you do it, and the opportunity to earn significantly more money than you would in a permanent (or captive employment) role. The downside is that you are responsible for finding work when a project or contract ends, and you are responsible for your training and development.

I am not worried about losing seniority because I have none. I am not worried about the choice of health and retirement benefits because they are all the same nowadays—you pay into it yourself.

Circumstances such as end of contracts, budget cut-backs, shorter commutes, and a desire to do something else, were reasons for me to leave and follow better opportunities. I don't want to be stereotyped as the go-to-guy for templates and meeting minutes. I welcome opportunities to help my coworkers achieve success, even if it means doing something I have never done before. In this way, I have learned how to be successful in contracting and to obtain the necessary skills to transition into new and challenging opportunities. **i**

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