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Job hunting for Interims: Part 3, Agencies

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In today's action packed episode I'm going to discuss my experiences working with agents. Every job I've ever had in Procurement has involved a recruitment agency. In the interim market they are a constant; I reckon I have the names of at least 70 recruiters in my list of contacts. The next time you're in the market for a contract you will spend a lot of time talking to them. And "talking" means "talking" for once; in spite of all the new communications technology out there, an agent's principal tool is still the good old fashioned telephone.

Why Use An Agent?

The answer to this question is that most of the time you wouldn't be able to do without them. Last time we talked about the way in which digital media such as LinkedIn are changing the way we market ourselves for roles. There has been an increase in direct approaches from clients to candidates, and there have always been opportunities arising from someone in your network calling you up because their current client needs more people.

But most of the time agents are central to the recruitment process, because the clients and their HR infrastructure route their contract opportunities through agencies on their Preferred Supplier Lists. Even if an old friend who's working there has identified you as their preferred candidate, you may still have to go through an agent on the PSL.

This is usually to your advantage – an agency that is on the books of all the big clients can get you opportunities you'd never find by yourself, and they take away a lot of the work involved in dealing with HR and hiring managers, tracking the progress of roles from inception to offer and keeping you informed. They're also useful for making sure you get paid. With a good agent in place, payment follows timesheet and invoice without any fuss as far as the interim is concerned; but your agency is the one dealing with the client's 45-day payment terms and challenging accounts payable department. Friends have told me this side of things is easier if you use an umbrella company, but when you are running your own limited company it helps to have an agent.

What makes a good agent?

A good agent is extremely valuable. They are the ones who build up relationships with clients to get hold of the roles you want, getting you an interview, trying to get you the best rate and making sure you get paid on time. If they're a good agent, that is.

It's not easy to find out who the good agents are other than by (sometimes painful) experience. Recommendations from people you trust are important; a friend of mine once said "If your life depended on someone getting you a contract, the agencies I'd call would be - " and gave me two names. Needless to say, I gave them a call.

Other than that, I've found you get a feel for the good agents as you are dealing with them, and a good one:

Has a good client list. You'll only find this out over time, as they call you more often than other agents and are on the books of more clients. Lots of clients these days operate preferred supplier lists, and the agents who managed to get on and stay on those PSLs are the ones you need. Keep track of who calls with roles - rather than just saying they deal with the good clients. Talk to other interims about this, and find out as much as you can from agencies when you talk to them. Try and find out as much as you can from clients about how their recruitment is structured, such as whether they have a single agency handling all their interim opportunities on a service desk basis.

Understands the job. When you talk to the agent they should understand what you're talking about when you explain what you do and specialise in, and they should be able to talk intelligently about the proposed role when they call you up. They should also know enough not to call you up with roles that have nothing at all to do with your experience or are at the wrong level for you.

Calls you back. This is something you can only find out through experience. A good agent calls you back when you get in touch. Maybe not immediately - good agents are busy, so don't be alarmed if it takes a while. But if you call up to find out about the market or for an update on a role, you should get a call back.

Deals with you personally. There are agencies that tell you to upload your CV or fill in an online application and won't put you through to speak to a recruitment consultant. There's nothing wrong with adding your details to their system, but I've never had a call back from any of those agencies.

Has a good system for timesheets, invoicing and payment. It's not rocket science, and you don't have to be a giant company with a massive IT department to have a decent payment system. It can be Excel spreadsheets and email for timesheets and paper or PDF invoices, but the process should run smoothly and you should get paid on time. And a good agent notices if you haven't submitted your timesheet or it hasn't been signed off, and is on the case if there's a problem anywhere on the system.

Is experienced in dealing with interims. It's not the same as permanent recruitment and there's no problem with specialising in one or the other. But if they're not really set up for interims then it can be problematic.

Lets you know what's going on in the recruitment process. This isn't easy, because sometimes the client's recruitment process is unclear despite the agent's best efforts. Whatever they know, however, they should tell you. That might not be very much but a good agent gives you as much transparency as reasonably possible at each stage of the process.

Dealing with agencies

If you're not actively looking, just waiting for the phone to ring, this advice is less important. If you are actively looking, this is what I have found helps me.

Maintain a list of agencies – include contact names of people at each agency, what roles they have mentioned to you already (to avoid multiple agencies putting you forward for the same role. For the larger agencies you want to make a note of what roles or clients each person is responsible for. Some people cover everything, some are interim only, others divide up their team by industry sector. The latter may mean that several different people have potential roles in your Procurement category, just one in Financial Services, one in Manufacturing, one in Pharma etc. Find out if there's one single contact point you should be calling for all roles or if you should contact each consultant directly.

How many agencies? This is up to you. If you want to deal with just one agency, that may be fine for you. You might have a group of four or five that you always prefer to deal with and that's also fine. There's nothing wrong with more than that having your phone number to call you if they have a suitable role, so you have to decide how many agencies you want to be actively dealing with on a regular basis.

How often to contact them? This can depend on a few things. If you call an agent and they've nothing on, you should leave it a couple of weeks before you call them again. If they have a role for you, you'll tend to be in touch more regularly. If you get put forward for a role and don't hear anything at all for a few weeks, that mostly means the role is no longer available. It doesn't hurt to make a note of who you've called and when, to keep track.

A couple of final thoughts:

Don't assume everyone talks to everyone else at an agency – deal with each contact you have directly, including to let them know you're looking. Some agencies have seamless systems that keep everyone you deal with in the loop, but a lot don't and that doesn't mean they aren't good agents with good client list.

Don't assume they will always remember to call you. They promise they'll call you when they have a role, but they're busy people and life isn't perfect. It doesn't hurt to check in just in case something good has just landed on their desk.

Be discreet. Your clients mostly understand that you might be looking or get offers from elsewhere, and flexibility goes both ways. But the basic rules of common courtesy apply. Naturally you'll keep your eye on the ball in your current contract while you're looking for a new role; and naturally you'll ensure necessary interviews and calls work around your day job. One challenge can be that interview attire is mostly a lot smarter than daily business wear these days. Most interims, the male ones anyway, keep a tie in their bag. So you're not just salespeople, you're masters of disguise.