



Working with a Recruiting Firm: The Candidate's Perspective

The professionalism, courteousness, and honesty that you expect of a firm are the same attributes firms are also seeking in their candidates.

BY SHANE MOORE

About the Author

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Working in the contracts industry, whether you're a full-time employee, consultant, or a self-employed independent contractor, I predict that you will probably work with a recruiting firm at some point during your career, perhaps even this year. From my perspective, a top-notch recruiting company can serve as an excellent resource in your quest for rewarding employment in the field of contract management.

Over the past decade, the rapidly changing employment landscape has forced recruiting firms to reinvent themselves for the new millennium workforce. Gone are the dinosaur days when fat and happy recruiters, formerly known rather disparagingly as "head hunters," could sit back and collect sizable commissions simply by vetting the résumés of job candidates and faxing the information to hiring managers.

As a means of survival, today's next-generation professional recruiters have evolved into full-fledged talent managers and skilled negotiators, functioning as expert human capital connectors and proactive partners with both their candidates as well as their clients. Additionally, the most successful recruiting organizations, in an effort to differentiate themselves from competitors, have expanded their service offerings to include a host of value-added extras such as fully loaded benefits packages for all consultants and educated recruiters who act as long-term career counselors rather than just people who help a candidate find the next job.

If you are unsure of what to expect from a relationship with a recruiting firm, don't miss the "Bill of Rights" for candidates and recruiting firms that we've compiled to provide helpful tips, explanations, and a short guide to working with recruiting firms. But, most important, listen to the personal stories of seven contracts professionals who have extensive experience working with recruiting organizations and who conduct business in the competitive metro Washington, D.C., region, a central hub of contract management activity.

These individuals' first-hand encounters with recruitment and outsourcing specialists offer a helpful how-to guide for establishing a successful long-term, profitable, and mutually beneficial relationship with a recruiting firm. In the interest of fair and balanced disclosure, they share the ups and downs of their experiences, but they all admit the pros far outweigh the cons.

A Crafty Consumer

As an experienced senior contracts administrator with a company in the metro Washington, D.C., region, Tracie Carrier never expected to need the services of a recruiting firm. But, when she was unexpectedly laid off in mid-2005, she became a contracts consultant virtually overnight and registered with multiple staffing specialty companies—four, in fact—in an effort to land a new job in one of the nation's most competitive markets for contract management professionals.

Although Carrier was a newbie to the world of working with recruiting firms, she sounded like a savvy consumer when sharing her no-nonsense strategy for a successful job search. "You have to shop around for a recruiting firm just like you would when buying a car," said Carrier, who wanted to maintain a controlling interest in her next career move. "I made no secret that I was working with other firms, because I wanted them to work hard to place me in a position that was the best for me."

In late 2005, one of the recruiting firms placed her in a six-month contract-to-hire position as a senior contracts analyst for a global IT services outsourcing consultancy. "It's an ideal situation because I can test the job and the company to see if I like it before going full time," she added. "During the first six months, I'm working as a W2 employee for the recruiting firm and am eligible for a great benefits package beginning on day one. With some recruiting firms, you have to work several months before you can qualify for minimal benefits. That's something to consider when choosing a recruiting firm to affiliate with."

More lessons learned:

- Work with recruiters who are enthusiastic about your credentials. At two firms, the recruiters immediately began calling around to set up interviews while I was in the office. At other firms, the reception was more ho-hum.
- Be prepared for a wide range of expertise and professionalism among various recruiting firms. For example, one firm provided individual interviewing rooms for maximum privacy, which was appreciated. One firm sent me on an interview to a location that I had specifically requested not to work in.
- Long-term friendships with recruiters can result when the communications are open and honest. I have already referred a colleague to the recruiter who placed me because I was so impressed with her.

Working on His Terms

After working as a contracts director for a number of years, Bob Arnold quit his job and took a multiyear sabbatical aboard his 42-foot sailboat, the *Firena* ("Mermaid" in Spanish). Although he's now back in the workforce as a consultant on assignment with a major consulting firm, he values the maximum flexibility that attracted him to being a contracts consultant in the first place.

According to Arnold, the single most important thing he looked for in a recruiting firm was a good benefits package. "Benefits are not only expensive, but often difficult to get on your own, so look for a recruiting firm that provides them as a standard feature," he advises, noting that everything really depends on what you and your family need.

He especially praised a recruiting firm's ability to market the talents of candidates and to effectively promote them to various potential employers. "If you want to stay busy and employed as a consultant, it's difficult to market yourself and to deliver a high-level

performance at the same time,” he admitted. Good recruiting firms act as intermediaries to present candidates in the most favorable light and also to negotiate salary, hours, benefits, and other employment essentials on the candidate's behalf.

More lessons learned:

- I don't like to work with recruiting firms that charge a fee to the job seeker for their services. Usually, they don't earn the fee, and they're trying too hard to fit me into the jobs they have, not the jobs that are the best match for my skills.

the call came from a recruiting firm about an intriguing direct-hire opportunity for a senior position with a large government contracting organization.

Gola was wary about pursuing the position, mainly because he was apprehensive about working through a recruiting firm. “I had heard rumors about firms that don't always represent the candidate's best interests or that aren't honest about the job openings,” he explained. But the professionalism and enthusiasm of the recruiter won him over. “The recruiter got me excited about the job, even though I really didn't need to go out on any more interviews.”

- Don't necessarily believe negative rumors about recruiting firms. They're not always true. I was surprised by how excited the recruiters were to work with me.

Do Your Homework

Charles Davis, a 30-year veteran of the contract management business, currently works on a consulting assignment through a recruiting firm. His seen-it-all voice of experience shares some words of wisdom about working with recruiting firms.

First and foremost, thoroughly investigate the firm. Look at the federal agencies or corporations that the firm has placed candidates with. Review the salary ranges and benefits the firm offers. “You don't want to work with a firm that just wants to put a warm body in a job slot,” he cautioned. “Recruiting firms look at me as a dollar figure, so I'm going to look at them the same way. Can I support myself and my family with the salary and the benefits that they're offering?”

Davis addressed the topic of whether to work as an independent contractor, sometimes referred to as a 1099 employee (meaning the candidate is virtually self-employed and would need to cover the cost of all insurance and other benefits, as well as pay 100 percent of all applicable taxes) or as a W2 employee of the recruiting firm (where the company may cover a significant portion of benefit premiums, provide paid vacation, paid holidays, and taxes would not only be deducted for the employee but also partially matched, thus covering a portion of federal taxes that the 1099 employee would normally have to cover on his/her own).

“It all depends on what you ultimately want to accomplish as a consultant,” he commented. He explained that on some assignments, candidates might want to be a 1099 employee and get a higher salary, especially if they have benefits covered under another source, such as a spouse or a pension. On other assignments, it might be more advantageous to be a W2 employee

It's important, regardless what stage of your career you are in, to develop a solid relationship with a recruiting firm—one that takes the time to get to know you, understands your technical skills and capabilities, provides constructive criticism, encourages career-enhancing education and affiliations, invests in you, respects your career objectives, and works diligently to market you to the right audience.

- It's important to feel comfortable with the recruiter. If they understand you and your goals, they'll work harder to find the right position for you.
- As a consultant on assignment through a recruiting firm, you have two bosses—the recruiting firm and the corporation or agency with which you are under contract. A good recruiting firm will keep in touch regularly via calls or e-mails, so you don't become alienated from the firm.

Enthusiasm Made the Difference

After 10 years as a senior professional with a major U.S. corporation, Amod Gola found himself back in the job market following a layoff. He was deciding between two job offers that he'd found through other sources when

Within days, Gola had accepted the position through the recruiting firm and has been working there for more than a year. “I'm convinced that a recruiting firm can sell me better than I can sell myself,” said this satisfied customer.

He was impressed to discover that his new employer works nearly exclusively with the recruiting firm that placed him. “This speaks volumes for the credibility and reputation of the firm,” he commented. “Over the past year, several of the recruiters routinely visit my employer to thank us for doing a good job. I like getting positive feedback from the recruiters about my work. It's great to stay in contact with them.”

More lessons learned:

- Choose a recruiting firm that's very professional and that provides a high comfort level during the relationship.

through the recruiting firm. "You have to do what's best for you," he added.

More lessons learned:

- If a recruiting firm requires the candidate to pay a fee, walk away. There's such a need for contract management professionals that it's not necessary to ever pay a fee as the candidate.
- I won't recommend certain recruiting firms to my friends. Professional consultants want positions that are challenging and rewarding. Just because a firm throws some bucks in front of me doesn't mean I want to work with them.
- The recruiter has a job description, but may not really know everything that's involved with the position. An experienced contracts professional knows. You have to analyze the job description and read between the lines to negotiate a salary that reflects what the job is really worth.
- Have some scruples and integrity. Commit to the assignment for the complete time period. If another recruiting firm calls you in the middle of your assignment, tell them to check back with you when the current assignment is getting ready to end.
- The first interview with a recruiting firm reveals a lot. If you get a bad feeling, say goodbye.

Trust Is a Must

Arnie Shaver, a senior acquisitions manager for a prominent consulting corporation, found this challenging direct-hire position through a recruiting firm. He stated emphatically that the most important element in the candidate/recruiting firm dynamic is, quite simply, trust. "I have to trust that the firm is looking out for my best interests. Sure, they're going to make money by placing me. But I can't be forced into taking a position that's not right for me."

Knowing that trust is cultivated over time, Shaver mentioned several

examples of trustworthy actions by a recruiting firm. "You need a firm that is honest about evaluating your strengths and weaknesses—one that will critique your résumé, your interviewing skills, your appearance. You need to hear things that will help you get ahead, not just what you like to hear about yourself."

And the trust factor works both ways. "The recruiting firm needs to trust what I'm telling them, so that they won't overestimate my skills or underestimate my salary requirements."

He was completely won over when his recruiting firm encouraged him to feel free to distribute his résumé on his own, if he heard about a good opportunity. "That small gesture indicated that they were interested in pleasing me and in building a long-term relationship. If a recruiter wanted me to sign an exclusive agreement, I would shy away from them. It means they are trying to limit my interviews only to the jobs they have on file, not in finding the perfect fit for me."

Miss Manners would be proud of Shaver's business etiquette practices. He recommends sending a thank you note or e-mail to the recruiter who places a candidate in an ideal position. "You never know when you might need the recruiter's assistance again, so kindness and consideration go a long way," he said. "Tell the recruiter that you like your new job and appreciate their hard work on your behalf."

More lessons learned:

- Recruiting firms are usually good about accommodating after-hours discussions when you're looking for a new position. It's hard to conduct a job search during work hours.
- The recruiting firm should tell you its expectations for the relationship up front; everything starts with an honest and open dialogue.
- If you post your résumé online on a source such as **Monster.com** or **NCMA (www.ncmajobs.com)**, you'll know very quickly whether it's well written if a recruiter calls you within

a few days. The good firms will want to get to know you and find out what you're really interested in.

- The objectivity of a good recruiting firm is essential to your success as a candidate. If I think I'm worth more than I really am, a reputable recruiting firm will level with me and tell me where I stand in relation to my peers.

Flexibility Is Key

The life of a consultant suits Chris Parker* just fine, especially the flexibility of schedule and work hours, which allows him to be home in the afternoon with his children. When one of his sons was diagnosed with a long-term medical condition that required injections and subsequent monitoring throughout the day, Parker valued his career choice even more.

In his experience, there are multiple reasons for using a recruiting firm that specializes in contract management. "I've heard some people say that recruiting firms just want to place anyone, anywhere, in order to earn a fee, but I don't subscribe to that philosophy," he remarked.

A recruiting firm's expertise lies in filtering through the jobs and employers to save time for the candidates and to make the best career match possible. Also, it's like getting an automatic job reference when you're working with a good recruiting firm known within the industry as being reputable. Otherwise, your résumé is just a piece of paper in a pile with hundreds of others.

"Recruiting firms offer an excellent path for working with a variety of different companies without the stigma of being a job-hopper," he said. "You can explore employers and corporate cultures, and your résumé won't suffer at all. It's a wonderful bridge if you're between jobs or if you're retired from a full-time career but want to bring in some revenue doing work that you really enjoy."

More lessons learned:

- Consultants are expected to be valuable from day one on the

assignment. Recruiting firms expect you to walk in and get to work. Your job performance is a reflection of their expertise.

- When an assignment is coming to an end, the recruiting firm should notify the candidate well in advance and also let the candidate know about other assignments that might be a good fit rather than just renew the current contract because it might be easier.

- Take advantage of a recruiting firm's negotiating skills. They can serve as an objective and diplomatic intermediary on sensitive employment issues such as salary and benefits.

- When a recruiting firm gets bigger and more successful, you don't always have direct access to the more senior recruiters with the most industry knowledge. Make sure the recruiter representing you knows what's going on.

A Contracting Mercenary

A retired quarter officer who also was a GS-11 contract specialist with the U.S. government for four years, Michael Smith* accepted a contract-to-hire assignment in 2005 through a recruiting firm. He believes that more full-time contract specialists would venture into contract consulting if they could get an ironclad guarantee that a new job assignment would be waiting at the conclusion of the current contract assignment.

"But that guarantee doesn't exist,"

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he said. Even though job security is normally a hallmark of government jobs, nothing is totally secure, especially in a post-9/11 world. "Any position can be cut at any time. However, I've found that if you do a good job as a contractor, you'll always be able to find a new position either as a contractor or as a full-time employee."

For aspiring contractors who are curious about the compensation levels for these contract consulting positions, Smith doesn't mince words about his motivations and his loyalties. "I'm like a contracting mercenary who will work for the highest bidder. I'm 100 percent loyal to the person or company who cuts my paycheck, and I owe it to them to provide high-quality service."

According to Smith, good recruiting firms have the inside scoop on the best job opportunities with the most lucrative salary levels for contract consultants. "When you've reached a point where you are paid really well for what you do, those jobs are not advertised," he remarked. "It's a plus to be registered with a recruiting specialist who has established a great network of federal and civilian contacts."

More lessons learned:

- Work with a recruiting firm that treats candidates and their résumés with respect. I wouldn't want my résumé to be put in a holding pen with a bunch of other applicants.
- Work with a recruiting firm that communicates regularly throughout the duration of the contract consulting assignment. If the firm supports the consultant and keeps its promises, the consultant and recruiting firm are going to have a more successful, long-term relationship.

Candidate's Bill of Rights

- The right to ask as many questions as possible about the recruiting firm, the position, the salary, the location, etc.
- The right to approve where the

recruiting firm will submit the candidate's résumé before the actual submittal.

- The right to negotiate compensation requirements through their recruiter with prospective employers.
- The right to be fully engaged throughout the entire employment/hiring process.
- The right to contact the recruiting firm anytime and to expect a prompt return call/e-mail with an update.
- The right to expect the information being provided to the candidate is honest, accurate, and to the best knowledge of the recruiting firm.

Recruiting Firm's Bill of Rights

- The right to have an open and honest relationship with the candidate in order to represent the candidate in the most honest and favorable way to hiring managers.
- The right to ask every question that's legally allowed, including salary requirements, past salary compensation, location/commuting needs, motivators and values, current ongoing interviews, technical capabilities, reasons for leaving past employers, and any other potential information a client hiring manager may require.
- The right to perform background checks on employment and education records.
- The right to meet the perspective candidate in person.
- The right to get timely, honest, and complete feedback from the candidate.
- The right to provide suggestions to candidates regarding career decisions and interviewing techniques and skills.
- The right to expect candidates to honor their commitments and

relationship with the recruiting organization.

Replacement Possibilities

While typically determined by the end hiring client, the following is a condensed narrative of the three most likely ways a recruiting organization can assist you in your next career endeavor.

Direct-Hire Position

The recruiting firm places a candidate directly into a full-time position with an end client (also known as a "permanent position").

Pros

- Negotiation process concludes upon hire and ends the interviewing cycle.
- Salary and benefits are firmly established upon hire.
- Candidate goes immediately onto hiring firm's benefits plan.

Cons

- If candidate dislikes position and leaves, candidate could be viewed as a job-hopper.
- Candidate typically does not get paid for every hour worked as they typically do when consulting through a recruiting organization on a contract or contract-to-hire position.

Contract-to-Hire Position

The recruiting firm places a candidate with an end client on an initial contractual basis (typically 6–12 months), after which time the candidate normally transitions into a direct-hire "permanent" status with the employer (generally used as a means of diversifying recruiting costs over a longer period of time).

Pros

- Candidate gets paid for every hour of work and can "test-drive" the position and the company before

agreeing to accept the position permanently.

- Candidate has final say whether to go full time or not at the conclusion of the contract-to-hire period.
- During the initial contract duration period, candidate may be a W2 employee of the recruiting firm (if offered by the firm) or a self-employed independent contractor (1099 employee), depending upon what is negotiated as best for the candidate.

Con

- With most recruiting companies, all benefits, including paid vacation, start from the first day of the permanent position, not from the first day of the contractual duration period. However, there are a few companies that offer these benefits on the first day of the consulting/contract-to-hire engagement.

Contract/Consulting Position

The candidate is a consultant/contractor, placed by the recruiting company either as a W2 employee or independent contractor with corporations or government agencies on contract engagements of varying lengths of time.

Pros

- Candidate is not considered a job-hopper when working through a recruiting company on many different assignments.
- There may be more flexibility over location/commuting time, work hours, and schedule.
- There may be a difference in compensation for each new contract assignment.
- Candidate may be a W2 employee of the recruiting firm or an independent contractor (1099 employee), depending upon what is negotiated as best for the candidate.

- Oftentimes a candidate's career can actually grow because of the vast number of industry colleagues met on assignment and picking up of additional knowledge and experience through exposure to numerous corporate environments.

Cons

- While all employment is "at will," this type of employment is less consistent due to engagement transitions.
- At times, a candidate will not be involved throughout the entire life cycle of the project/contract.

Conclusion

Many people who have worked with recruiting firms have encountered and/or heard both positive and negative experiences. Because of an ever-changing market and personal preferences that can create a biased perception, it is always best to see for yourself. Conduct your own research by engaging in initial contact and going out to actually meet the recruiter in person. Get to know multiple firms until you find the one that suits you best.

You should look for the distinguishing aspects that differentiate an elite recruiting firm from others, including a staff of top-notch recruiters who have industry-specific knowledge, a solid foundation of long-term clients and open positions, competitive benefits for contract and contract-to-hire-type positions, and a proven track record of not only building successful teams to help organizations grow but also one that demonstrates the firm's ability to establish, develop, and maintain relationships with candidates and/or consultants through testimony. A firm that is successful in meeting this criteria can not only catapult your career as it serves as your long-term career counselor but also may one day help support you as a hiring manager with the growth of your own contracts teams.

Do not wait until you're facing a possible downsizing, layoff, or com-

pany reorganization before starting to develop an affiliation with a recruiting organization that best fits your needs. Quite simply, during these times of uncertainty, you're not always able to be as selective. It's important, regardless what stage of your career you are in, to develop a solid relationship with a recruiting firm—one that takes the time to get to know you, understands your technical skills and capabilities, provides constructive criticism, encourages career-enhancing education and affiliations, invests in you, respects your career objectives, and works diligently to market you to the right audience. Elite recruiting organizations can provide guidance to the entry-level candidate and collaborate and provide direction to the mid- and senior/executive-level professional who desires a historically significant or even more challenging assignment. Candidates at any level can benefit from a long-lasting relationship with a trusted recruiter.

Once you have found a recruiting firm that demonstrates genuine interest in you, anticipate setting mutual expectations of what the relationship will consist of along with the objective at hand. Trust is important between both you and the recruiting firm; with an ethical firm, your best interests are its as well. The elite firms seek to provide the best service for their clients and the candidate. The elite firm is selective with which client companies they work with, as well as the candidates they work with. The professionalism, courteousness, and honesty that you expect of a firm are the same attributes firms are also seeking in their candidates. *CM*

* Names have been changed for privacy purposes.