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Working with Employment Agencies

As a professional recruiter and the owner of an agency that places technical writers, I have heard horror stories about some candidates' experiences with employment agencies. Just as there are trustworthy car mechanics and those who are out to steal your money, there are reputable agencies and agencies that are, let us say, less than reputable. If an agency misrepresents you, you could lose a great job.

Do the benefits of working with agencies outweigh the risks? I think so, especially if you are an independent contractor: Many companies will hire contractors only through agencies because of current tax laws.

Just as the trick to avoiding problems with difficult clients is not working for them in the first place (see "Dealing With Difficult Clients," *Intercom* May 1998), you

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can avoid problems with agencies by choosing a reputable agency (or agent). The following suggestions won't guarantee a positive experience, but they will minimize risk and improve your chances for a successful job search.

1. Do your preliminary research.

Check out the agent/agency before you send your résumé. How long has the agency been in business? How long has the individual agent been working as a recruiter? Visit their Web site, then pick up the phone and *call* them. Better yet, if they're local, ask if you can meet the recruiter in person.

If the agent doesn't want to talk with

you or says something like "We don't actually meet our candidates," that's a good indication they don't care about you, the candidate. Their sole concern is making a sale.

And if *that's* true, I'll bet you dimes to dollars that they will just shotgun your résumé to every job opening they see that says "technical writer." And that brings me to the next suggestion.

2. Require permission to forward your résumé.

When you send your résumé to an agency, specifically say in your cover letter, "Do not send my résumé to a company without my written permission," or a similar statement.

Many agencies apply what I call the Pasta Approach to recruiting. You know how you can tell if pasta is done by throw-

ing some at a wall to see if it sticks? These agencies throw as many résumés as they can at a job opening to see what “sticks.”

This is a bad thing, especially if you’re working with multiple agencies. While most companies have clauses in their agency agreements stating that the first agency to submit a résumé becomes the “agency of record,” some companies will ignore candidates sent by multiple agencies rather than risk a lawsuit from a greedy agent who claims, “I sent his résumé first!” To avoid this situation, keep a log of where your résumé has been sent (by you and the agencies that represent you) and do not let an agency submit your résumé to a company that already has it.

On the other hand, I know people who have found great jobs by posting their résumés on job boards like dice.com and monster.com: Agents saw their résumés and forwarded them to their clients without notice or permission. While this method is certainly a valid route for finding a job, keep in mind that when you post your résumé to a job board, you no longer control how it is distributed.

As a final note on this suggestion, let me warn you that many agents will refuse to tell you who the client is, presumably so you won’t send your résumé to the client yourself. Personally, if an agency won’t trust me enough to tell me the name of the client, I won’t trust them with my résumé. Each situation is different, so use your judgment.

3. Educate the agency (or agent) on the technical writing profession.

I am not suggesting that only agencies that specialize in technical writers can represent you effectively. But since most people in your own company don’t understand what makes a good technical writer, a random agent may not either!

It may take some work to teach an agency why you are (or are not) a good match for a position. Far too many recruiters just do a key word search and then apply the Pasta Approach to your résumé, so be sure your agency understands your strengths (and weaknesses) before sending your résumé to a company.

But since you have established a relationship with the agency per suggestion 1, your agent should know all about you, right?

4. Take the personal approach.

While I wish I had personal relationships with all the companies I recruit for, sometimes that’s just not possible. But most of the time, I can contact someone at the company (either the human resources or hiring manager) and pitch a candidate’s suitability for a position—even if the candidate may not look like a perfect match on paper. Likewise, I’ll know whether the candidate’s personality and the company’s culture mesh. You may have the necessary skills, but if you’re a long-haired dot-commer interviewing with a conservative bank, you two may not make good dance partners.

Establishing a personal relationship with an agency that, in turn, has personal relationships with its clients will dramatically increase your chances of getting a job.

5. Know the details.

While this is really an extension of suggestion 4 (since the agency is not going to have that kind of information if it does not know its clients), it’s important enough to list separately.

Many agencies recruit for jobs under such vague descriptions as “Technical writer needed; must have *RoboHelp*” without finding out more detail. Then you go on the interview and learn that the manager really wants someone with experience in molecular biology, *FrameMaker*, *AutoCAD*, and oh, yeah, “*RoboHelp* is a plus.”

Any agent worth his or her salt (or fee) will find out what the client really wants, so feel free to ask the agent about the particulars of the job. If the agent doesn’t know, have him or her find out—that’s part of the recruiter’s job!

6. If you’re not successful, get feedback.

I must confess that I have clients who simply will not give me feedback (it’s like sending a résumé into a black hole), but I always try to get *some* information after a candidate has been turned away. If you are not getting results from my recruiting work, one of three things happened: (1) I failed to follow my own suggestions 4 and 5, (2) the company found some-

one who fit the position even better than you, or (3) you (the candidate) flubbed the interview.

Have your agent get feedback so you can correct anything you—or your agent—are doing wrong, and improve what you’re doing right.

7. Don’t be too selective.

If you have been out of work for months and the repo man is trying to take the car and you have an eviction notice nailed to the door, then heck, get busy and do anything you can do to get a job—even working with less than perfect agencies. After all, such agencies must be doing *something* right if they are still in business during these tough economic times.

But if you have the luxury of taking your time in finding your next job, research agencies and get to know the contact you finally select.

No one can state rules that are 100 percent true 100 percent of the time. But if you use these suggestions as guidelines in choosing an agency, I think you’ll find that they will pay off in the long run.

Good luck with your job search! 🍀

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SUGGESTED READING

While the distinction between temporary employee and contractor is outside the scope of this article, you should know the difference if you are going to work as a contractor. For advice on how the United States Internal Revenue Service determines your status, visit the Web at www.smallbusiness.com/80/sb/advice/display/56374/wosid=ko2r8Rt9l77z3TwCRv41eRPRQMm.