



# Getting Started

## Searching for Jobs

Before you pound the pavement with your resumé in hand, reflect on the career you want.

### What You'll Learn in this Chapter

- researching jobs
- identifying your target companies
- the pros and cons of using agencies
- preparing your resume

Step 1. Consider your skills, your training, and your experience, then look at how you place in your target market. Think of your career as a series of case studies; this should help you see some pattern in your work experience.

Step 2. Examine your needs and wants. What does your utopian company look like—big, small, entrepreneurial, structured? What kind of work do you want to do? What type of technologies satisfy you the most?

Step 3. Decide whether you want to work independently using your own contacts, using the Internet to bid on new projects, or using professional agencies. Most professional contractors choose to use all three to their advantage.

Your first step is to articulate specifically what you do and define your area of specialization—this is your professional label.

*The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and, if they can't find them, make them.*  
—George Bernard Shaw

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## Preparing your Professional Label

You should be able to articulate in one or two sentences who you are, what you specialize in, and how you stand out as a professional contractor. This is your label, your professional tag that you want to teach people to always associate with you.

In any social or business exchange you should be able to tell someone you meet for the first time, when they ask the inevitable question “So what do you do?”, “I am a contract software developer specializing in Visual Basic, I have been doing this for the past five years.”

In this example, you have said:

- who you are—a contract software developer.
- what you specialize in—Visual Basic.
- how you stand out—you have five years experience.

Another professional contractor may have defined themselves as:

“... a contract testing specialist, I utilize automated tools, and I was responsible for the quality release of the ABC.com web site.”

You are responsible for creating your own unique label and broadcasting it all of the time. Think of yourself as your own radio station, with one message—your professional label. The more people that know and remember you as a unique professional, the more people there are that can hire or refer you for the right position. Don't have a vague, floaty label that is difficult for people to understand and remember. A person who says “I have my own company, I work with computers,” won't get remembered.

Every time you meet someone tell them your professional label so that they can then forward it to anyone relevant they may meet. Remember to focus on your core strength, be an expert in one thing and be proud of it. Too many people put everything they have ever learned in their professional label. These are the people with business cards and websites that say something like:

Bob Jones - computer programmer, web designer, project manager, and technical writer.

This type of label is too broad and too blunt—it has no sharp edge. Imagine if you were looking for a doctor and you met someone who gave you a card saying:

Dr. Bob Jones - general practice, plastic surgery, heart surgeon, foot disorders, and home care.

Would you remember or recommend that doctor to friends? Not likely, it is human nature that no matter how talented we all are, we are most believable when we pick a specialty area. It doesn't mean that you can't do all of the other things that you may get called upon to do at a client site, it just means that your label starts and ends with your best foot forward.

*I have always wanted to be somebody. I guess I should  
have been more specific.  
—Lily Tomlin*

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## Researching Agencies, Internet Sites, and Companies

Do your research before you market yourself. In addition to broadcasting your professional label to friends, family and peers, you must broadcast your message to the companies in your defined target area. Focus your self-promotion to take you where you want to go. To research potential clients, Internet portals, and agents:

### See these web sites to view job opportunities

[www.myjobcafe.com](http://www.myjobcafe.com)  
[www.monsterboard.com](http://www.monsterboard.com)  
[www.sisystems.com](http://www.sisystems.com)

- Look in the career section of the paper each weekend to see who is hiring.
- Read newspaper and trade magazine articles to find the companies that are hot or growing.
- Look on the web to research industry areas and specific target companies.
- Look on the web for job portals such as [www.myjobcafe.com](http://www.myjobcafe.com).
- Network with people you know and people you want to know, in the city where you want to work.

### See this web site to view job opportunities in newspapers

[www.careerclick.com](http://www.careerclick.com)

## Reading the Newspaper

Read the business and career sections of newspapers to find out what is happening in the IT industry in the city you want to work in. This is one of the best ways to find out which companies are looking for someone with your skills.

Look at the past six months of career ads to get a strong sense of the players. You can find out which companies are expanding and which are undergoing change. Mergers and takeovers always appear in the newspaper and indicate when a company is about to undergo significant change. Use this to your advantage.

## Looking on the Web

You can also research companies on the web, remember though, corporate web sites typically give only a cursory image and a biased view of the company. At the least you can get an idea of the company's attitude and core values. Most corporate pages also contain a career or employment section where you can see

the kinds of positions that are available and how and to whom you can apply.

You can also go online with contracting portals. These are places where companies and agencies post their jobs, and professional contractors bid for them. Portals often allow contractors to place their resumes online for potential clients and agencies to view.

## Networking

The real key to finding out what companies have to offer is through networking.

- Talk to your peers and ask them about the places they've worked, who they've liked most and why.
- Join and attend a professional group or user group in your area of interest. Some web sites and newsgroups provide access to user groups where you can network online.
- Check the yellow pages under "Associations" for listings of local professional associations and check on the Internet for user groups.

See this web site to set up or join an online user group free of charge

[www.myjobcafe.com](http://www.myjobcafe.com)

This is the best way to get to know your market and to find out where you stand amidst your peers. See *Networking* on page 57 to learn skills that enhance your ability to network.

Remember, broadcast your professional label and exchange business cards with everyone you meet.

## Defining your Targets

To identify a job where you will be successful, you should decide what you want for your next project before you start your search. Think about these things:

For...	Ask yourself...
Company Size	Do you prefer large corporations or smaller, entrepreneurial companies?
Type of Work	Do you like maintenance and enhancement, or pure development of new applications? Do you want to learn to use new technologies, or are you most comfortable with what you know?
Type of industry	What kind of industry you are most interested in—a mature industry like Oil and Gas, or a fast-growing industry like Internet services?

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*Set short-term and long-term goals.*

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Once you know what type of work you want to do and which companies you want to work for, you can then decide whether you want to pursue opportunities by yourself or work through an agency.

## Working Directly or Using an Agency

There are advantages and disadvantages to working directly on your own or through an agency. Know which risks you are willing to take and what level of security you need. Decide for yourself.

### Working Directly—the Pros

As an independent contractor you are responsible for finding your own contracts. The Internet contract portals make this easier. The advantage to this is that you know what you want better than anybody. You do all your own research, negotiate all

**See these web sites to view job opportunities**

[www.ijive.com](http://www.ijive.com)  
[www.myjobsearch.com](http://www.myjobsearch.com)  
[www.myjobcafe.com](http://www.myjobcafe.com)

your own contracts, and you have direct control over how you are presented for each job and what you will bill.

### **Working Directly—the Cons**

There is a great deal of administrative work associated with having total control over your project. Research, marketing, interviews, contract negotiation, and task assessment all take time—unpaid time. You also have to invoice the client directly and wait for the client to pay you. Some companies take up to three months to pay contractor invoices.

The big paradox in working directly is that it is difficult to market yourself to new clients while you are already working on a project. If you are immersed in a six month contract, do you have the time to seek out placement for when that contract is finished? Probably not. Especially when deadlines approach, you may be working 8-12 hours a day.

Contractors that work directly must be prepared to be without work between contracts, while they ramp up their marketing and bidding process to generate work. Fortunately, the Internet portals are making this time between contracts shorter. On the other hand, Internet portals are also making the rates more competitive. Contractors who avoid agencies typically follow a feast and famine cycle for work.

More serious than a short break in revenue, are tax consequences. If you work directly for a company, and your contract is extended for more than a year, the government revenue agency may deem you an employee of your client and demand that you pay additional personal income taxes.

Ask yourself:

- Do I have the marketing and bidding skills to find jobs for myself?
- What is my contingency plan if I can't find a new contract right away?
- Can I wait up to three months after invoicing to get paid?
- Can I support myself between contracts?



**See these web sites to view a list of available agencies**

[www.gocontinental.com/  
recwww.htm](http://www.gocontinental.com/recwww.htm)  
[www.ijive.com](http://www.ijive.com)  
[www.recruiterscafe.com](http://www.recruiterscafe.com)

## Using an Agency—the Pros

The most obvious advantage of working through an agency is that while you are busy on a contract, the agency is already looking for your next client and project. You can maximize your search for new contracts using the resources of your agency, or better yet, multiple agencies. Agencies not only have large databases of contractors whose skills they market, but also large numbers of companies requiring professional resources. The key reason for a company to request resources through an agency is to get qualified, interviewed, screened, and reference-checked resources.

*While you work, the agency looks!*

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Another advantage of using an agency is that they provide administrative support, at least all the good ones do. After doing the background research to ensure a good match between you and a potential client, they contact the client, set up an interview, negotiate your contract, and once work begins, invoice the client and pay you directly and regularly. Make sure that any agency you use pays you within 30 days of your invoice, regardless of whether the client pays on time or not.

The other advantage of using an agency, if you are incorporated, is that your contracts can extend for more than a year without the risk of being assessed by the government tax department as an employee of the client.

## Using an Agency—the Cons

There are risks of working through an agency, and these mostly depend on the agency you choose. Do your research, ask your peers. Find out about agency policies and know how they treat their contractors.

## Finding a Quality Agency

Specifically you want to find out:

- What premium does the agency charge clients? The markup on your rate should be reasonable—the industry average is 15% to 30% markup.
- How does the agency work to provide you with the right job? Do they match you to client jobs not only on skills, but also on your preferred working environment?
- Does the agency have many clients who frequently require someone with your skills? If not, they may be marketing you in fresh, unfamiliar industries.
- Does the agency have experience marketing someone with your skills? You want to make sure the agency understands the kind of work you do and in what industries they can successfully place you.
- Does the agency frequently update their records, keeping your information in their database current? This is important so that they know how to market you for your next job.
- Is the agency financially secure and able to pay you even if the client withholds or delays payment? Agencies that pay you only when the client pays them, should be avoided. You are not responsible for financing your agency.
- Is the agency flexible in the event the client wants to hire you directly? It's a good idea to always keep this option open.
- How quickly will the agency pay you after you invoice them? It's reasonable to expect payment within 30 days of your invoice.

Not all agencies operate the same, so ask around.

## **Making the Decision**

Once you weigh the pros and cons and realize the compromises involved, you can decide whether to join an agency or work on your own. Overall, remember that when you work independently you are solely responsible for finding all your contracts. When you work through an agency, you leave the placement and bill collecting up to them.

## **Preparing your Toolkit**

A career toolkit is useful for keeping all of your job-search resources in one place so that you're ready to present yourself whenever the need or job arises.

Your toolkit must contain:

- A current and simple resumé that describes your skills, experiences, and history of projects; think of it as a sequence of case studies.
- Testimonials by project managers concerning your performance on past projects.
- A collection of reliable references, both professional and personal, and of varying roles (e.g. supervisors, peers, subordinates, and so on).

When preparing your resumé it is less important to focus on length and design than to emphasize your skills and experiences relevant to the position of interest. Read your resumé from a client's perspective.

## **Preparing your Resumé**

Remember that your resumé is likely the first impression a potential client has of you. The contents of your resumé will either get you in the door for an interview, or consign you to a filing cabinet.

Your focus when preparing your resumé is to describe the jobs and professional experiences you've had, the skills and

aptitudes you've acquired, any value you've added in your past positions, and how you've progressed in your career and skill mastery.

### **Resumé Preparation Tips**

Following are some tips for preparing an effective resumé that will get you an interview.

Do:

- Put your contact information at the very top of your resumé, beneath your name. Include only telephone numbers at which you are willing to accept calls.
- Put your professional label at the top of your resumé, just below your contact information—customize your label for each client, agency, or job you are applying for.
- List your career experience from current to least recent, detailing tasks you performed, responsibilities you had, technologies you used, and what you gained from the experience. Even if you've worked for only one company, describe your experience there as a series of projects.
- Illustrate a progression of responsibility or technical mastery from one position to the next.
- Include tools and technologies used with each position you've held—don't summarize them all in a block at the beginning of your resumé.
- Specify how you added value to the organizations and projects. For example, did your project reduce costs, increase productivity, or increase revenue?
- Include a list of your personal interests with your education if they reflect what a well-rounded, or healthy and active person you are.
- Reference your reviews and testimonials, but keep them in a separate file for requests only.
- Make note of any industry-related awards you've received or associations of which you're a member.

- Be honest about your talents. Don't exaggerate even a little bit: it is deadly to your career if you are found out. Honesty about your shortcomings is as important as honesty about your best skills.
- Include only jobs or projects you've had that are relevant to the position you are pursuing.
- Exclude private information about yourself, including your marital status, religious beliefs, and the number of children you have.
- Exclude your personal interests if they are political or could be construed as socially subversive in nature.
- Exclude your list of references. If clients need these, they can request them at the interview.

## Perfecting your Resumé

Following is an example resumé chosen by the staff of a well-respected IT talent agency. See *What to Include in Your Resumé* on page 48 to learn about what information to include in your resumé.

**Note:** For a detailed example of this resumé, see *Appendix A: Sample Resumé* on page 173.

John Doe  
Software Services Inc.  
Phone (111) 222-3333, Cell (222) 333-4444  
jdoe@home.com

Contract software developer specializing in Visual Basic for over five years.

### EXPERTISE

*Visual Basic Development*  
*C/C++ Programming*  
*Oracle Development*

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

#### **ABC Company, November 2000 to February 2001**

- As lead developer on a three man team, developed and maintained a Suite of Well Log Analysis Tools for the oil and gas industry.
- Responsibilities included: requirements analysis and specification, cost estimation, object-oriented design, implementation, and testing. Designed, developed, and implemented a Data Browser to provide information on Mineral Leases, Surface Files, Land Contracts, Unit Agreements, and Wells through a tab style graphical user interface. Designed and developed 22 custom user screens. Developed several of the standard VB controls for the rest of the team.
- Tools and technologies used for this project were: Visual Basic version 5, TrueGrid, Visual C++, HTML, and JavaScript running in a Windows 3.1/95/98/NT environment.

#### **ABC Company, December 1999 to October 1999**

- Your role on the project (developer, systems analyst, project manager etc.) and a one line project summary describing the application and the industry.
- Your responsibilities on the project including what you accomplished, managed, and delivered.
- A complete list of the tools, methodologies and technologies you used to execute the project.

### EDUCATION

University of Calgary  
B.Sc. in Electrical Engineering 1989

### SPECIAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Leonard E. Gads Teaching Assistant Award 1990

## What to Include in Your Resumé

Following are suggestions for the type and level of information to include in your resumé:

In this section	Include this information...
Contact Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Your first name and then your last name.</li><li>• The name of your incorporated company. <b>Note:</b> Many companies will not contract a consultant who is not incorporated.</li><li>• Your e-mail address, phone number, and cell phone number. <b>Note:</b> Don't include your address. 99% of clients contact you by phone or e-mail.</li></ul>
Professional Tag Line	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• One or two sentences that clearly describe who you are, what you specialize in, and how you stand out as a professional contractor.</li><li>• This is your professional tag that you want to teach people to always associate with you.</li></ul>
Expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In 3-6 words, headline the technologies, methodologies, or tools with which you excel.</li><li>• Prove that you're a specialist, not a generalist:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Visual Basic, Crystal Reports, and SQL Server are synergistic technologies.</li><li>• C++, Visual Basic, PowerBuilder, and MS Access are all very different and make you appear as a generalist.</li></ul></li></ul>

In this section	Include this information...
Professional Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The name of your most recent client and the date range for which you worked for that client.  <b>Note:</b> If you worked through an agency, type the name of the end client—not the agency. If you did multiple projects for a client and each was significant, list them separately. <i>Remember, all of your projects must be IT-related.</i></li> <li>• A summary of your role, the task you performed, the end product from that task, the tools you used, and the environment in which completed the work.</li> <li>• Try to demonstrate a progression in responsibilities across projects and highlight your significant contributions to the team and project.</li> </ul>
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institute or facility at which you studied and the date range for which you studied.  <b>OR</b>                      Type professional development as the heading and then list the courses you have completed.</li> <li>• Although your professional experience is what sways clients, your education shows you commitment to learning.</li> </ul>
Special Accomplishments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any awards or honours you've received.</li> </ul>



See this web site to view information about resumé preparation

[www.quintcareers.com/curriculum\\_vitae.html](http://www.quintcareers.com/curriculum_vitae.html)

## Tuning your Resumé

Preparing your resumé is not as straightforward as it sounds. A successful resumé takes time and is always a work in progress. A successful resumé is not generic. Tailor your resumé to fit the position you're seeking as well as your target company. To do this, a bit of research is required.

## Researching before Writing

A little bit of research goes a long way. If you're applying for a specific type of position, it's helpful to tune your resumé to highlight your experience relevant to that type of position.

The person who's reading your resumé will be looking for specific skills and knowledge. Your resumé is more likely to be successful if you make it easy for them to find what they're looking for. Find out what they want and emphasize these key points on your resumé.

See *Preparing your Resumé* on page 44 to find out what you should include in your resumé.

## Preparing your Reference List

Always keep in mind people you can ask to act as references for you. Have a well-rounded list of references: supervisors, co-workers, subordinates, and so on. The most important reference to your next client is that of your most recent supervisor, the person who hired you and authorized payment for your services. Make sure these references are from recent and current positions, not from your first summer job four years ago.

You may also want to have quasi-professional references, for example course instructors, or associates from professional organizations to which you belong, or personal references from activities outside of your profession. Do not use your Mom or your buddy just because they will give you a good reference. Most clients and agencies can tell the real reference from the staged one very quickly.

Do not include references with your resumé. If the potential client requests references at the interview, offer to send your reference list by e-mail.

### **Ensuring a Good Reference**

When you prepare your list of references, consider the kinds of questions that may be asked of them.

Some typical questions are:

- Was there ever a discrepancy between spoken commitments and actual work completed?
- Tell me about the candidate's behaviour. Was it professional at all times?
- In what kind of working environment or corporate culture would the candidate best fit?
- Were there ever outside influences that distracted or prevented the candidate from performing tasks?
- What can you tell me about the candidate's ability to plan and forecast?
- How did the candidate handle criticism?
- If you could, would you hire this candidate again?

Remember that the interviewer may also contact people you've worked for or with, who do not appear on your list. For this reason it is critical to behave in a professional manner at all times and with all people. Think about it once a week: what would people say about you if they were asked these example reference questions?

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You've researched companies and agencies, prepared your professional label, and composed your resumé, now proceed to *Making the Call* on page 55 to learn about networking and getting an interview.

## Frequently Asked Questions

**Q** Is there a monetary difference between working independently or through an agency?

**A** No, there is no difference in terms of what a contractor is paid. The contractor's rate remains the same whether they work on their own or through an agency. Clients are willing to pay a premium in order to use an agency to recruit talent for them, relieving them of the time, effort, and responsibility associated with that task. Clients usually develop relationships with two or three agents that they use repeatedly. The agency usually charges between 15% and 30% above the contractor's rate, but they also offer guarantees to the client for their selection and a backup candidate if the contractor doesn't work out.

**Q** How can I find out what my strengths and weaknesses are?

**A** Ask your supervisors and co-workers what they value about you and what areas you need to work on. Tell them you appreciate their honesty.

**Q** How do I know when I've added specific value to an organization?

**A** Again, ask previous and current employers how you have impacted the organization and which, if any, infrastructure changes you implemented were most valuable. Better yet, ask them to fill out an evaluation on you.

**Q** I recently moved to a new city. How do I start networking?

**A** The best way to network is to look for several user groups or professional organizations in your field that meet locally. Attend as many professional functions as you can and try to meet at least eight new people each time. Remember to introduce yourself with your professional label—this also applies to any social event you attend. And don't forget your business cards!

## Getting Started Checklist

Check off completed tasks:

- Create your professional label
- Identify your utopian company
- Identify two target industries
- Research ten potential companies
- Update your resumé
- Compile a reference list

Prepare reviews and testimonials

Notes