



# **Working on the Project**

## Understanding your Role

### What You'll Learn in this Chapter

- understanding your role in the project
- planning your time
- respecting your co-workers
- maintaining your professionalism

As a contractor, your job is to provide value to the project by applying your skills and knowledge, and to complete project tasks as directed to make the project a success.

Unless you're specifically hired as a project manager or team leader, don't take responsibility for running the project. Ensure you're clear on which deliverables and services you're expected to provide and take responsibility for delivering only those items.

*Only professional project managers know how to manage a client's expectations, decisions, and scope changes without getting caught in the "But I wanted..." trap.*

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Watch out for fixed-price deliverables. Sometimes a client will request a deliverable for a fixed-price, is vague about the scope and the deliverable details, yet still expects you to deliver for the original price. They can also assume that you'll absorb all additional scope changes along the project cycle. This can lead to many free hours contributed just to get paid. To avoid the fixed-price trap, bill your time by the hour. Make sure your contract is clear on this.

Finally, ensure you're clear about whose lead you follow on the project. As a contractor, you need to know who is responsible for giving you direction. This helps reduce confusion during the project.

It's always a good idea to confirm via e-mail what your one month and three month deliverable targets and expectations are up front and which tasks are your top priority.

## Planning your Time

As a contractor, you have to be good at planning and forecasting your time. If your tasks are scheduled for you by the project manager, ensure the projected delivery dates are realistic for the tasks assigned to you. It doesn't do anyone any good if you try to impress your peers in a meeting by committing to a two day timeframe when it really takes two weeks to complete the task.

It's important to remember that when you're working in a team that other team members have their own deadlines that may be contingent on yours. When you're planning your time, consider the schedules of your co-workers and be aware of how your schedule impacts them—your team needs to be able to rely on you.

If you forecast an unpopular project schedule, yet you're sure it's accurate, list the tasks required to meet that commitment and explain how you arrived at your forecast. You'll never get fired for being realistic, but you will be perceived as unreliable for repeatedly giving unrealistic deadlines.

*Impress people by committing to realistic deadlines.*

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Your ability to accurately schedule your time significantly affects your professional image. One of the questions your current client may be asked about you in future reference checks is, "Was there a difference between their spoken commitment and what they actually did?" If you understand what you can and should be doing within the given timeframe, and agree to only those things, your client will be able to say that you deliver on your commitments. This is a strong reference.

## Working with your Peers

Keeping up with the team's project deadlines is just one way for you to bond with other members of the team. Getting along with your peers is critical to meeting your own deliverables and making the project a success.

Following these guidelines will help you earn and keep the respect of your peers:

- Keep your pay rate confidential—your peers may want to know what your rate is so they can compare themselves to you. How much you make has no bearing on their job. The last thing you want is one of your co-workers to find out that you make more than they and then use that information to go and ask for a raise themselves. Your client won't appreciate it.
- In all discussions with peers and supervisors, always stick to the facts. Sticking to the facts means presenting measurable, quantifiable information instead of feelings and assumptions.  
For example, instead of saying, "I think we spend too much time in meetings." Say, "Our team collectively spent 120 hours in meetings this week, this is time taken away from doing actual work."
- Increase the level of professionalism at a client site with a neat, tidy appearance, punctuality, and by keeping your commitments.

- Listen to what your peers are saying. Use the four steps to effective listening discussed in *Learning to Listen* on page 121.
- Be sensitive to and respect the values and norms of both the team and its members.
- Be approachable, yet know that you can say no to a request. Remember, it's fine to tell other people on the team "I can't complete your request because I'm doing this right now, but I can do it this afternoon." This shows you're realistic about your time and abilities.
- If a request is really a problem for you, brainstorm some possible solutions and discuss them with the project manager.

## Being Professional

Staying out of trouble is easy as long as you remember that you are a professional hired by a business to perform professional services. The next section deals with serious topics that should be read and understood by anyone working in a professional capacity.

### **Abiding by the Textbook Rules of Professional Conduct**

The standard rules for professional conduct are as follows:

- Only accept those assignments for which you are qualified.
- Diligently, competently, and honestly complete assignments.
- Contribute creative and resourceful ideas to your client while making a positive contribution toward establishing a stimulating, safe, and comfortable work environment.
- Uphold the health, safety, and welfare of other contractors and employees at the project site.
- Properly use time in the client's interest, and properly care for the client's facilities.
- Avoid any conflict of interest with the client and immediately disclose any real or potential problem that may develop in this area.
- Work to the client's schedule. When you are ill, immediately contact the client. Absence on a project creates burdens that can be difficult to deal with, and can result in dissatisfied clients.

- Major breaches of professional conduct include: fighting, working under the influence of alcohol or drugs, theft, harassment, discrimination, using the client facilities for personal use, obscene language, promoting obscene materials/conversations, damage to client property, breach of client confidentiality.  
Any and all of these breaches of professional conduct may result in the client or agency you're working with taking direct legal action.

### **Discrimination and Harassment**

See the legislation for your country or region for information about human rights, discrimination, and harassment laws.

Discrimination and harassment, because of their nature, deserve special treatment. Canadian Human Rights Legislation defines harassment as:

“Any comment, conduct, contact, or gesture which:

- embarrasses or humiliates.
- undermines work performance.
- is used as a condition of employment.
- is used as a condition of sale.

It is a course of vexatious comment or conduct that is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome.”

Harassment is a form of discrimination.

Human Rights Legislation Overview:

- “Every person has a right to equal treatment with respect to employment without discrimination.”
- “Every person has a right to equal treatment with respect to services, goods, and facilities without discrimination...”
- Human Rights Legislation supports: dignity, respect, and self-esteem.

**Discrimination based on the following is prohibited, and is justification for dismissal:**

- race
- ancestry/nationality
- place of origin
- ethnic origin
- colour
- citizenship
- marital status
- family status
- receipt of public assistance/social conditions
- language
- sexual orientation
- sex
- pregnancy
- handicap/disability
- age
- civil status
- political beliefs
- religion/creed

**Some examples of harassing behaviour include:**

- inappropriate jokes or innuendo
- name calling
- invitations/solicitations/requests
- invasion of personal space
- physical contact—purposely touching
- belittling comments
- leering
- ridicule
- practical jokes
- pictures/graffiti
- indecent exposure
- assault



## **Professional Behaviour**

Visible demonstrations of professional behaviour include:

- productivity in completing your tasks
- positive attitude, no negative or disparaging remarks
- cooperation with client staff and other contractors at the client site
- dependability
- accurate time keeping and prompt time reporting
- punctuality
- enthusiasm
- honesty

## **Avoiding Big Black Marks**

Following the rules of professional behaviour, and understanding and abiding by the discrimination and harassment laws, are the bare minimum you can do to protect your professional reputation. Along with those rules are some actions that, though you may be tempted, must be avoided to protect your career.

### **Big Black Mark #1, Walking Out on your Contract**

The worst thing you can do as a professional IT contractor is quit your contract before the finish date. When you commit to a contract, stick to it. If you break a contract, word gets out and spreads, and you can count on it coming up on every reference check for the next two to five years. Clients don't want to hire people that may jump to another project for \$5 more an hour, or a chance to work with a new technology. Clients are looking for professional commitment and follow through.

### **Big Black Mark #2, Asking for a Raise During your Contract**

When this happens the client feels you are trying to take advantage of them. You knew the rate when you signed, and you knew the term of the contract. When you commit to a rate, stick to it—this is proper business etiquette. You wouldn't be

happy if you went into a store and when you got to the checkout counter the clerk said “I see you really like these items, we want to charge you 10% more.” It is the same affront to a client when you try to raise your rate in the middle of a contract. The client will not forget this when asked to give a reference.

### **Big Black Mark #3, Yelling at Someone**

Getting angry on the job and yelling at someone, or slamming something, doesn't do anyone any good, especially you. You may get terminated immediately for this type of behaviour. Even if someone is yelling at you, getting angry to this level is not what anyone expects from a contractor. You are expected to have superior conflict skills and emotional control. If someone is abusive to you, leave the situation and discuss it later with a supervisor describing factually what happened. Remember to maintain your composure when talking to the supervisor. See *Managing Anger* on page 111 for ideas on how to handle situations where anger gets out of control.

### **Big Black Mark #4, Client Site Romances**

Client site romances are taboo. Nobody will ever bring it up directly, but it makes everyone uncomfortable, especially when the romance fades and the breakup and hurt feelings influence the project. You might even find that people are guessing at your intentions in normal business relationships. If you are really being pulled into a relationship with a co-worker ask yourself “Am I willing to commit to this person?” If the answer is no, then you can bet that the relationship is not worth the risk to your reputation. You will work better too, if you can leave the strong emotions in your life outside of the worksite.

## **Tuning in to the Corporate Culture**

### **What is Corporate Culture?**

Corporate culture is a difficult concept to define, and every organization has a unique culture. Culture includes the look and feel of the company, the written and unwritten rules, the real and enforced hierarchies, the level of formality preferred and required, and many other underlying and intangible behaviours. As a contractor, it's important to know that the corporate culture will affect the project team's behaviour. It's also important to remember that you're a temporary member of the culture.

*When it comes to culture, there are no facts, only interpretations.*

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It takes about six months to really understand a corporate culture; if your contract is for less than six months, you may not have the chance to understand the nuances of the corporate culture.

### **Why Bother?**

How does corporate culture affect you? Why should you worry about it? Corporate culture can affect your reputation, if you unknowingly break one of the unwritten rules of behaviour. For example, if the way someone is doing their job adversely affects you, you'll need to deal with it using the method endorsed by that culture. If you don't know what that method is, you could inadvertently upset someone.

### **Navigating Corporate Culture**

The length of your contract is out of your control. The corporate culture is out of your control. The point is that there could be any number of behaviours that are or are not acceptable to the culture and you won't know about until it's too late.

So...what do you do?

When you're interviewing for the contract, ask the following questions:

- What are the traits of a successful person on this team?
- What are the behaviours that make people successful here?
- My supervisor, what are his or her irritants?
- What are the values of the executives of the company? Can you tell me how these values are exercised?

The answers to these questions will generally give you enough clues to stay out of trouble.

Having said that, never forget: your job is to focus on doing your task, and show leadership by talking about only the facts. If you stick to the facts, you're safe from political interpretations and are free to accomplish your tasks.

### **Remaining Objective**

Don't take sides.

Remain business-like at all times, whether on the job site, during lunch time, or after hours at company functions. This is difficult as you're likely to meet many people. Keep in mind, however, that if you associate with co-workers after hours, even if you keep your conversation above reproach, they may not.

### **Don't Make Business Relationships Personal**

If you don't want to be immersed in politics or other personal issues, don't go to lunch with or date your client's employees. The best way to immerse yourself in politics is to socialize with employees from the client site. During social events the bulk of your conversation will likely focus on being an interpretation of company events. As a contractor, it's better to say "I get along with the people at work, but I have my own life."

### **Stick to the Facts**

If someone at the client site tries to involve you in a political battle, stay out of the conflict as best you can and focus on doing your work. As long as you focus on your tasks and remain neutral to the team, you cannot be faulted. If you are asked to comment on what is happening, detail the facts as you know them, without speculating about how the conflict started or who is responsible.

As a professional, it's important to remember that you must always deal in the facts. Politics and opinions are based on interpretations of facts and inferences. In your personal life, you rely on inferences, but in your professional life, you rely on facts.

## Managing Anger

Everyone experiences anger at work. Depending on the situation, it's OK to be angry, even at the office. As a contractor, however, the rule is "Never lose your temper!" Nothing is more unprofessional than losing your temper at work. How do you stay in control?

If you find yourself in a situation where you're about to lose your temper, leave, get out and do something physical. Go for a walk, go for a workout, go climb a set of stairs—just get out. You need to remove yourself from the situation before you lose your temper.

*Take charge of your attitude. Don't let someone else choose it for you.*

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When your temper is under control, return to the office, and think. Try to find a constructive way to deal with the situation.

Here are a few guidelines from Harriet G. Lerner's book *The Dance of Anger* (1985, Harper & Row) to help you stay out of trouble at work:

- Step 1. If you're angry with someone, that's the person you should tell—don't triangulate your conflicts.
- Step 2. If you want to go up the hierarchy with your anger, make sure you go through the appropriate channels and be open about it—if you are open about bringing in another party and you make sure to use the appropriate hierarchy, you may avoid forming a triangle that will escalate anger and stress in the long run.
- Step 3. When you are angry, speak in your own voice—don't bring in an anonymous third party. Nameless, faceless criticism increases anxiety and is neither fair nor helpful.

- Step 4. Avoid secrets—don't swear people to secrecy about critical comments or about the source of critical comments.**
- Step 5. Don't become the third party in someone else's triangle—if someone complains to you, listen sympathetically, but without blaming or taking sides. Be concerned but neutral.**

## Keeping Good Attendance

As a contractor, your professional attendance should be above reproach. This means that you need to understand your client's expectations completely, and then meet them.

### Understanding the Client's Expectations

When you begin your project, make sure you and the client are clear about attendance expectations. You'll find that these expectations vary from project to project. Some clients want you onsite all the time, some clients want you onsite for specific tasks, and some clients want you to work offsite. Make sure you are clear about the client's expectations. Then, to the best of your ability, meet those expectations.

Also make sure that you are punctual or early for all client events and meetings and are prepared to take notes. Bring the back up materials that you will need to refer to during the meeting.

*Try to be a combination of boy scout and Spock at all meetings.  
They would never be late or unprepared.*

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### If you Must be Away

If you must be away from work, be sure to tell the client as soon as possible. This doesn't mean that the client has to hear your whole personal life. Your responsibility is to tell the client "I'll be unavailable on Tuesday from 3:00 p.m. on. I'll make sure that the deliverables due on Tuesday afternoon are complete by 1:00 p.m. on Tuesday. Is there anything else happening on Tuesday afternoon that I need to be aware of?"



**If you're ill, call and leave a message on your supervisor's voice mail as early as possible. If your absence for the day impacts the deliverables, suggest alternate solutions. Perhaps someone else on the team can pick up the slack while you are away.**

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Learning and nurturing the soft skills in this chapter will increase your success as a contractor and make your contract term a positive experience for you, your client, and your co-workers. In *Communicating Effectively* on page 119, learn how to deal with difficult issues that can happen on any project.

## Frequently Asked Questions

**Q** Who is responsible for delivering the project?

**A** The project manager is responsible for delivering the project. Don't take responsibility for delivering or managing the project unless that's what you were specifically hired to do.

**Q** Should I commit to working for a fixed price?

**A** Unless the parameters of the deliverable are clearly defined, you are entirely clear on what the client wants, and you have built this exact type of application before, never commit to producing a deliverable for a fixed price.

**Q** What is corporate culture?

**A** In a nutshell, corporate culture is the overriding social contract about how the company's business takes place. In many companies, the number of unwritten rules is greater than the number of written rules. Knowing those unwritten rules is understanding the corporate culture.

**Q** What if I don't understand the corporate culture?

**A** If your contract is less than six months, you probably won't ever understand the corporate culture. Ask the interviewer specific culture-related questions to help you identify the generalities of the culture. Then, when you're on the job, focus on your task and stick to the facts in any dialog.

**Q** One of my co-workers asked me out after work. Is that so bad?

**A** While you're on the project, don't overly socialize with your co-workers. Quite likely, you'll end up talking about work. Even if you remain objective, your co-worker may not, and their opinions can prejudice yours.

**Q** There's a specific person on the project that really angers me. How do I manage that?

**A** Never lose your temper or yell at someone at work. If you're about to lose your temper, as soon as you can, excuse yourself and go do something physical to get your anger under control. Then plan your conflict resolution strategy, and remember, stick to the facts.

## Time/Task Checklist

Check off completed tasks:

- Define deliverables and required tasks
- Discuss schedule with Project Manager
- List tasks by priority
- Discuss team deliverables and deadlines with co-workers
- Start a log book to record tasks and schedule

Notes

## Things to Remember

- Be professional and understand the general textbook rules.
- Avoid the big black marks.
- Never harass or discriminate.
- Work to understand the corporate culture and fit in as best you can.
- Remain objective at the client site—don't overly socialize with co-workers.
- Keep a good attendance record.

**Notes**