Finishing Up

Reviewing and Assessing your Performance

What You'll Learn in this Chapter

- reviewing and assessing your performance on a project
- searching for your next project
- leaving the client site
- keeping in touch with clients and co-workers

During the course of your contract, make sure you keep a detailed, professional timesheet and a journal or log book to track the day-to-day decisions, contacts, and meetings. Then, 2-3 weeks before the end of your contract, review them. Your timesheet should detail the tasks you did and the time you spent on them; this timesheet is the primary source upon which your performance assessment is based. It is also a good idea to document the following information in a journal:

- A list of all your deliverables
- What you did that increased productivity
- New technologies or business areas you learned
- Issues that affected your work
- How you felt about being on the project

> For example, "I really enjoyed working on a smaller team" or "I really enjoyed working as a team lead, rather than doing direct programming."

At the end of a contract, you should have your timesheets and your journal and that's it.

Meeting with your Client

Schedule a meeting with your client 2-3 weeks before your contract expires to review your project performance. By meeting them before your contract expires, your client can take action to renew your contract, if desired.

Before meeting with your client, gather all the facts from your notes that exemplify your accomplishments and summarize them into brief, statements. Stay away from "I think" or "I believe" statements. Stick to the facts.

Discussing your Accomplishments

In the meeting, tell your client that you've enjoyed working with them (unless you really didn't and you do not want your contract to be extended) and then present the factual statements that show your strengths and accomplishments on their project. This can be especially helpful if you've been on contract with the same client for over six months.

You want to leave your client with an accurate image of you and give them a brief refresher on everything you've done on this contract. For example, "I did the design and layout on the Data Mark team. I really enjoyed my role as the developer. I developed the common code that we use at this site. I enjoyed being included on that part of the team." These are all facts.

Don't ask your client for specific and detailed performance feedback. Most clients find it difficult to deliver an accurate assessment directly to the person they're assessing. If they don't have more work for you, they tend to boost up the value of your work. If they do have more work for you, they won't see value in having a performance review meeting.

The purpose of the meeting is to make sure the client is aware of and remembers your contributions on the project, and to find out if they want to extend your contract.

When you're working through an agency, the agency checks in on your performance monthly. A third party, such as an agency, eliminates any emotional charge there may be between you and the client, and usually is able to give you a clear sense of where you stand.

Making Suggestions

You can also use this meeting to make suggestions that you feel will help the client in the future.

For example, “Here are some suggestions that I think could add value. I think adding these objects to the code repository would save some time in later development. Also, now that you’ve finished the AFE system, it would be great to integrate a roll into the PO system. I think that will have a time savings worth evaluating.”

This part of the conversation leaves the client thinking of the ways you could continue to add value for them. They might say, “That’s a great idea. Can you stay on and do these things for me?” That is the goal anyway.

If you have the meeting 2-3 weeks before the contract ends, you are giving the client time to sift through your ideas, talk to a few people, and decide whether or not to ask you to stay on.

Usually you will know right away if there is an extension in line for you. If you enjoy the client site, the people, and the work, an extension is always better than a new contract for a new client.

Finding your Next Contract

Assuming that the project went well, you are statistically far more likely to see your current contract extended than not. It's easier to keep you on than to hire someone new, since you already know the company's culture, team members, business needs, and written and unwritten rules. As a contractor, however, you need to remember that all contracts end. Therefore, you should start actively seeking your next contract 2-3 weeks before your current contract expires.

Don't begin interviewing for your next contract too early. Nobody wants to hire someone in a month, they want to hire someone today. Also, unless your contract has an immovable completion date, it may be hard to accurately predict when it will end. Your new client may agree to hire you at a pre-defined time but your old client may extend a couple of extra days or weeks, forcing you to either abandon the old project or lose the new project. Either way, this situation presents you in an unfavorable light. Starting to interview 2-3 weeks before expiration of your current contract is about right.

When you go for an interview, inform your current client of the times you will be unavailable, and if your client asks where you are going, be honest and tell them you are interviewing for your next contract. It makes your client feel better to know you are actively interviewing for a new contract as they will feel no guilt about your future economic success. The knowledge that you are seeking a new contract may also press your client to renew your contract when they realize that you'll be moving on soon.

Self-promotion as you near the end of your current contract is simply getting in touch with your past clients and agencies to let them know about when you'll be available. Tell them you would enjoy working with them again. Ask that they consider you for future requirements.

When you talk to your past clients and your agency contacts, be sure to tell them about what you've done and learned since you last worked with them. Emphasize any training you've had and how your skills have improved. Follow up by e-mailing an updated resumé, whether they request it or not.

Parting on the Best Terms

When a current client says you're done, you're done. You might need a few days more on the contract to tie up all the loose ends, and clients generally understand that. However, the client will tell you what you need to do, and you need to complete the formal disengagement process—the metaphorical handshake. Make sure that you are explicit with the client in your last meeting about where you have left all your work, how you can be contacted for future work, and assure them that you are not taking anything with you that is their property.

Offering Development Ideas

In *Reviewing and Assessing your Performance* on page 155 we discussed how you can offer development ideas to the client in a review meeting before the end of the contract. This is one of your best opportunities to leave the client in a good frame of mind. You're offering ideas based on expertise, even if you don't end up doing the work. If your client doesn't initially respond by renewing your contract, they still have a few weeks to consider and discuss it and then to follow up with you before your contract ends.

The talent of success is nothing more than doing what you can do well, and doing well whatever you do.
—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Asking for a Reference

Before your contract ends, think about who you can use as a reference from this job. Ask your client, your supervisor, and your peers at the client site if you can use them as references for future contracts. Also ask if they'd mind getting a phone call for a reference. Don't ask for a letter—future clients would far rather talk to someone about you than read a canned letter.

Staying Top-of-Mind

The best way to ensure you get contracts with current or previous clients and with agencies is to stay top-of-mind. Top-of-mind means that when they have a project that matches your skills, they think of you first. There is something in our hardwiring as people, that friends help friends. Staying top-of-mind is really investing in a friendly relationship with someone who can help you in the future.

There are several proven methods for staying top-of-mind:

- Maintain a database of all your previous clients and contact them every three to four months for a phone call or coffee. Do this whether you are available for work or not. Too many consultants leave this out until they need work. Maintaining a relationship is an ongoing exercise.
- E-mail industry-related articles to clients once in a while. Select articles you know they'll find interesting and that are related to your professional skills in their industry. This is a good way to remind them of your skills and interest.
- Update clients when you change your career path or enhance your professional skills. Send clients your updated resumé once a year. In your cover note or e-mail, overview the changes since your last resumé. Do this for all past contacts at the same time every year.
- Contact former co-workers and clients for project and industry updates. You can do this at special interest groups and industry events.
- Stay in touch with the agencies that have the best jobs in your area of expertise.

Enjoy your career as a professional IT contractor! Refer back to this handbook from time to time to refresh what you learned. Proceed to the next chapter *Continuing Success as a Contractor* on page 165 to create your long term goals to ensure your ongoing contracting success.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q How should I record the accomplishments I want to present to the client at the end of my contract?

A Document events in a journal and a detailed timesheet. Then write a summary at the end of your term.

Q If I'm working through an agency should I wait until the end of my contract before I ask how I'm doing?

A Your agency should check in with you and your client monthly to resolve any problem areas, to let you know how the client feels about you, and to get your client thinking about renewing your contract.

Q What should I tell my client when I have to go for an offsite job interview?

A Tell your client the time period for which you will be unavailable, and if they ask why, tell them you have a job interview.

Q Should I ask clients and co-workers for verbal or written references?

A Future potential clients prefer verbal referrals over written reference letters.

Things to Remember

- Use a detailed timesheet to document all your tasks and the time you spent on them.
- Keep a journal to document issues, meeting resolutions, and your decisions and motivations.
- Meet with your client 2-3 weeks before your contract expires to review your contributions.
- Start seeking your next contract 2-3 weeks before your current one expires.
- Ask your client, supervisor, and peers on the client site if you can use them as references.

Notes