

As technology improves, agents' systems for matching people's skills and attributes to the client's requirements have become more and more sophisticated. However, most of the agents I know tend to use their own brains as the major repository for candidates' skills. You need therefore to be in their minds reasonably frequently in order to be placed (assuming, of course, that you are skilled).

If your contact in the agency is leaving do not assume that they'll do the right thing by you. They have many other candidates like you and they are all great workers. Find out who is taking over their portfolio, and contact them as soon as possible.

how agents and brokers work

So how do agencies work?

All agencies take a rate, often a percentage, off the top of what they charge a client. This can be as high as 30-50%, depending on how much of their time is involved in managing the job. You need to know how much you can afford to charge and let the agency know this. If you don't know how much you can afford to charge go back and work through Chapter 6.

Most agencies do not take away from your daily rate. In general, they add a percentage on top, so if you say you need \$500 per day they will give you \$500 per day. It pays to check how it works for them before you agree on anything. The only reason they would pay you less than the agreed daily rate up front would be if they are legally obliged to pay superannuation or take tax out for you (this would be if you are not working through a proprietary limited company, or haven't supplied an ABN).

Finding and choosing an agent

The most sensible place to start is with the job advertisements in the papers. If you see people advertising for contractors or consultants on a contract basis, contact them even if you are not interested in the job they have. Let them know what you are interested in.

Another place to find agents is in the Yellow Pages (under Employment Agencies, or Brokers). Call before you email through a hundred résumés - many agencies only do permanent work, or specialise in particular industries - and their Yellow Pages advertisements don't necessarily say so.

One important thing with agents. When you are building a relationship remember that they have the power in the relationship at that point.

Do not be surprised if they do not return calls. If you want work call them back (although don't make a nuisance of yourself).

Go out of your way to be the nice one in the relationship even if sometimes their behaviour may seem to be unprofessional. After you have built a relationship they will call back because they know that good consultants are hard to find!

I have relationships with two or three major agencies that place people in the types of work I provide (consultancy and training services). One of them was a source of short-term contracts on and off for five years. My daily rate increased several times over that period. I dealt with three