

The value of freelance networks

According to John Knell, co-founder of Intelligence Agency, tomorrow's winning businesses will be those that have built up a bank of key freelancers and trusted advisers that they can use to leverage value and ideas into their businesses. "They will have built freelance relationships of real quality and trust," he says, "that allow them to be agile and competitive."

PCG member Matthew Billingham was the SAP Development Manager at Coats plc in late 2001. When the requirement arose to build interfaces between SAP and a legacy system for their US operations, it was decided to split the project into two, with the UK office handling the SAP data extraction, and the US office managing the legacy elements.

As a former contractor, Billingham decided to use freelancers for the UK side of the project. "I picked fellow PCG member Jon Bowes as project lead," he says, "because I had worked with him before and knew that he was very competent. On his recommendation, I also engaged Furqan Khan, another PCG member. The third member was recruited via the PCG portal, and the fourth via an agency."

A major benefit of engaging PCG members was that they all used the standard PCG direct contract. "I would be able to get rid of them with immediate effect," he says, "whilst they were tied in until the end of the project. They also had to provide their own equipment, in the form of laptops. I was able to secure good pay rates for them – this was in 2001, and we were paying 1999 rates – to ensure quality and commitment."

Billingham left Coats before the project was finished, but says that it was gratifying to learn, a few months' later, that his chosen team had delivered early, under budget and to quality. He is now freelancing again, through his company Yireh GmbH, based in Switzerland.

Jon Bowes, whose company is Kinetic Experience Limited, confirms that the project goals were achieved on time, using just over 50 per cent of the budget. "When I returned to the site some time after the

implementation," he says, "I was told that some of the code I'd developed had required no changes for at least 12 months after the system went live.

"In my experience, engaging a network of contractors directly can result in higher rates for the contractors and better quality for the client," says Bowes. "A large proportion of my company's contract work is sourced in this way; I was not interviewed for my current contract, because decision-makers in the organisation already knew me."

"Freelance contractors clearly have a valuable role to play in complementing the permanent workforce. When the demands of specific projects are highly variable and lead times short, a team of highly skilled and competent freelancers can provide the level of responsiveness and agility needed to deliver the desired results."

*Hizmy Hassen
European Supply Chain Manager, Coats plc*

Khan is the principal consultant at Paksoftware Services, which specialises in system design, development and programming, and has over 25 years' IT experience in the manufacturing, oil, petrochemical, aviation and banking sectors.

"As a freelance contractor, I enjoy the challenge of new assignments, being able to work with different teams, transferring ideas, skills and positive attitudes," he says.

Hizmy Hassen, the European Supply Chain Manager at Coats plc, says, "Freelance contractors clearly have a valuable role to play in complementing the permanent workforce. When the demands of specific projects are highly variable and lead times short, a team of highly skilled and competent freelancers can provide the level of responsiveness and agility needed to deliver the desired results. We were very pleased when Jon Bowes' team completed the SAP interface project within time and well within the budgeted cost."

A novel approach to winning work

In freelance contractor parlance, being out of contract is referred to as being "on the bench". It was in this unhappy state that contract project manager Robert Menlove found himself a couple of years ago.

Approaches through agencies, the local Job Centre, newspaper advertisements and careers consultants proved fruitless, so Menlove, being a positive sort of chap, decided to try an unusual tack. Suited and booted, he braved the morning rush hour from 5:30am at Winchester station, handing out leaflets with eye-catching slogans to commuters.

"I wanted to get to the people who might make a difference," he says, "and so I targeted professional commuters. Delivering an instant sales pitch on platform 2 at Winchester was an unusual challenge. People were amazed at the novel and innovative idea, and were generally very pleasant, although of course some were too busy or rushed to listen. One minute I would be explaining my skill set, the next a business card would be shoved in my pocket."

With the help of an unemployed purchasing and supply manager, he also set up the Hampshire Careers Network, a self-help executive club aimed at bringing out-of-work professionals together to share ideas, inspire each other and help maintain morale.

Menlove's novel approach attracted media interest, and he was interviewed on radio and television. It was, however, newspaper coverage that directly led to his winning a project at global logistics company DHL. On Menlove's recommendation, another five freelance contractors were engaged to work with him as a team on an 18-month project.

A firm believer in the power of networking, Menlove says, "It is not what you know, but whom you know and whom they know. My current contract came about after I had emailed everyone in my address book. Three weeks' later, a call from someone who was part of the Hampshire Careers Network two years ago led to an interview and another contract for me."