

May 13, 2021 Muse-ings

This month's Muse-ing addresses contract employment, which composes a growing portion of employment opportunities in the field. Authors Jeanine Nault, Judith Andrews, and Caitlin Haynes are former or current contractors at the Smithsonian Institution, and offer advice from their personal experience that does not reflect the official position or policies of the Smithsonian or the federal government. If you have had a training, work, or job search or hiring experience that you think could benefit others, propose a Muse-ing by sending us a short one-paragraph email that describes your angle at museumstudies@udel.edu. Commentaries no longer than 600 words.

Top 10 Tips for Competitive Contracting

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Many emerging museum professionals began their careers working as contractors, or short-term project team members who are not permanent staff at a given organization. Contracting is often a gateway to full-time employment and gives those early in their careers a chance to get on-the-job experience and increase their skillset or provides more established professionals a more flexible schedule. However, securing a contract is not the same as accepting a job. Contract work often does not come with as many (or any) formal benefits, and is more restricted and specific in terms of tasks. Because professionals new to it often have questions about how to pursue and manage contract positions, here are some tips and tricks from those with some experience:

1. **DO NOT** undervalue your bid. Your bid, often called a quote or proposal – many contracts are sent out as “Requests for Quotes” (RFQ), or “Request for Proposals” (RFP) – should include the amount of desired take home pay (living expenses, as well as a reasonable profit/savings margin) + overhead costs + taxes/insurance. Calculate taxes, Medicare, and Social Security costs by adding 30-35%. If a multi-year bid has “Option Years,” factor in inflation and any desired raises – this is not renegotiable later.
2. **DO** read the Statement or Scope of Work (SOW) very carefully to understand what tasks are to be performed. Focus on where your abilities can be applied rather than areas in which you are inexperienced. Remember that many skills are transferable, but be prepared to describe how yours are. Also, look in the SOW to see who is responsible for supplies and equipment, such as computers, workspace onsite, or other materials necessary to complete the work successfully. If it is your responsibility to supply certain supplies and equipment, factor those costs into your bid.
3. **DO** read the Schedule of Deliverables in the Request very carefully as well. This section will outline what work product you are expected to deliver and when you can submit invoices for payment. Invoice schedules vary, from monthly, bimonthly, or upon the completion of a percentage or entirety of the project.
4. **DO** only provide references who are prepared to answer questions positively and enthusiastically about you and your professional skills.
5. **DO** discuss the boundaries of your role in the organization during the interview process. Are you permitted or expected to attend staff meetings, or all-staff events, such as holiday parties? Are you expected to work a set schedule, or are there flexibilities? Are you

permitted to participate in organizational committees, or professional opportunities such as conferences or workshops? What is the leave or time off policy, including vacation and sick time?

6. DO investigate resources and rights available to you at the organization before you sign your contract. Are you permitted to seek assistance from Human Resources (HR) or other employee/workplace offices for questions about pay, benefits, harassment, or mediation? If not, to whom do you turn with such questions?
7. DO read your contract very carefully before signing. Make sure you understand all sections and ask questions if you have them.
8. DO be careful about “Other Duties as Assigned,” or helping with work that is not specified in your contract once you start your work. Some organizations, such as the federal government, have strict limitations about who may assign billable tasks, and only work considered a deliverable in the contract can be included on invoices.
9. DO NOT necessarily expect to be paid regularly biweekly. Contracts are paid once invoices are submitted, approved, and transferred for payment, and this process takes different amounts of time at different institutions. Invoices include a description of deliverables and working time. Many organizations have a standard invoicing form and procedure.
10. DO remember to pay quarterly taxes. Receiving a 1099 form at tax time means that the organization is not withholding taxes.

For more information on contracting work in museums, [Collections on Contract](https://collectionsoncontract.com/) (CoC), is “a collaborative community forum for individual contractors from diverse areas of the museum profession to share stories, experiences, advice, and resources” and can be found at <https://collectionsoncontract.com/>