

# My Project Broker Experience

By Paul Bednar

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Self-employed people are consistently searching for new and innovative methods to get clients. Inevitably, one comes across a company or service that offers to serve as a project broker for free agents, independent consultants, contractors, and clients. This article explains how these services work, the experience I had, and items to consider when evaluating these companies and services.

Why are independent consultants, free agents, and freelancers drawn to these companies and services? There are two main reasons.

First, these people either do not know how or do not like to market their services to others. The idea of potential clients coming to them is very enticing since it requires little effort. You just have to sit back and wait for the assignments to be posted. When you see an assignment that fits your experience and expertise, all you have to do is submit a proposal and then wait for a decision.

Second, these companies offer a means to broaden your exposure in the marketplace. The thinking goes that if enough people are aware of the services I offer, I'll get a client.

Now, let's talk about how these services work.

In order to view a list of projects, submit proposals, and ultimately get clients, you need to "join" or "sign up" with a particular company or service. Generally, this process requires 3 things:

1. You provide detailed information about your expertise and the services you offer. This information is placed on a web site and is accessible to potential clients and other free agents looking for joint venture partners or subcontractors.
2. You pay a fee that is billed either monthly or annually. This fee gives you access to the database of projects that are currently listed. For each assignment you get through the company or service, you may have to pay a percentage of your project's total cost as a "finder's fee."
3. You provide references that potential clients can contact to inquire about your work. The company or service you join may want to verify your references to make sure you're as competent as you describe. There is a possibility your references may have to fill out a questionnaire or participate in a phone survey regarding your work and professionalism too.

Once you've provided all the relevant information about your expertise and services, your references are verified, and you've paid the appropriate fees, the "sign-up" process is complete. You are now free to search the current project database, submit proposals, and hopefully get clients!

Some years ago I signed up with one of these services for one year. I will not disclose the company's name but here's what I learned:

1. You can sign up with these services or companies even if you don't meet all of their stated requirements. When I was contemplating joining a particular company, I didn't have enough previous clients the company required. However, when I explained my situation, I was permitted to join. Remember, the organization doesn't make money if they turn you away.
2. Don't be fooled by the advertising hype touting thousands of available projects. If 95% of the projects listed are not in your area of expertise or industry, that sure doesn't help you get a client.
3. You may not get any clients. During my year's time, only one project somewhat fit my skills and experience. I had to partner with another consultant in order to meet the project's requirements. Together, we submitted a proposal but didn't get the project.
4. For each project, you compete against a group of people that provide similar services. This competition further reduces the probability you'll get the project. However, if you get clients through people you know or through a friend-of-a-friend, the competition doesn't exist.
5. It can take a long time to get a project. The person I partnered with on my lone proposal said it took him 3 years to get a project through this company. While his project more than made up for the cost he incurred up to that point, he was strongly considering not renewing his account.
6. Some of the projects submitted are only ploys to test the marketplace for a particular kind of service. Others are a means to satisfy a company's policy that requires "competition" for each project. The reality is a free agent was selected before the "competition" search began. However, this should not deter you from submitting proposals. You never know if you'll get a project unless you submit a proposal.

Here are some thoughts to consider when evaluating the various project broker services:

1. Are there a sufficient number of projects listed in your industry that match your skills and experience? If a large portion of the projects involve unfamiliar industries, be cautious.
2. Can you get your money back if you are not completely satisfied within 30 days?
3. Is there a clause that you get your money back if you don't get a project within the first year? This way you can't lose. The worst that happens is the company uses your money free for one year.
4. Does the company or service perform marketing in the offline world? Just because you are in cyberspace doesn't mean your potential clients reside there too. Exposure in the real world through press releases, magazine ads in appropriate industry publications and trade journals are a good indication the company is getting the word out.

If you are a new free agent or if you haven't had many clients, it is best to spend your time strengthening your local relationships. These contacts are an excellent means to get your first few clients. Consider joining these services when you become more experienced, have an adequate client list, and can afford the risk.

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