

Being an Interim: how to make sure it works for you

Working as an Interim is an increasingly attractive option for many communication professionals seeking flexibility, high quality work and job satisfaction. Employers are benefiting too as interims are an ideal solution in times of change and transition with interims often brought in late into the process at times of near crisis for the client.

However, the interim life is not for everyone. If you're someone who craves certainty and security and a sense of belonging, look away now: this article is not for you.

But assuming you seek out adventure, thrive on constant change and positively enjoy a little risk, I hope you will find some good advice here. It's advice directly from experienced interim communicators who have taken part in a recent poll for [Comma Partners](#) and shared their experiences of being an interim.

Why choose to be an interim?

So what are the reasons behind the decision to have a career as an interim? Being an interim is well suited to you if you get a kick out of completing a difficult project, more often than not, one that brings with it significant organisational change. Interims are typically used at times when organisations are under strain and therefore the assignments are frequently challenging. From a practical point of view, interim work can be appealing to those who have other commitments be they family or alternative work streams – coaching, writing, studying, for example.

"After working on a lucrative assignment I write and edit books. This would not be possible without doing contract work to fund it"

When we probed a little more and asked for three reasons why internal communicators choose to work as an interim, the top five reasons given were:

- 63% The ability to work outside of organisational politics
- 58% Improved work-life balance
- 53% A preference for working on projects
- 49% Ability to gain experience across a variety of sectors quickly
- 42% The flexibility to work at home



Sort out your finances

Interims tell us time and time again that the hardest decision to make was exactly just *when* to become an interim. The biggest risk – and cause for procrastination – is not having a guaranteed income. The very nature of interim work can mean that there are periods where you are not earning so the advice is to make sure you have enough money set aside to keep you going for at least three months – six months would be ideal.

“Ensure you save a significant amount during your first couple of contracts - build up a survival pot very early on.”

“Always keep an amount of money in reserve to cover the times when you may not be working - at least three months living costs.”

You also need to keep on top of the management of your business. This includes things like setting up a limited company, registering for VAT and becoming familiar with IR35.

29.5% of interims are moderately or very concerned about managing their finances and tax.

Finding assignments

There is always work out there but it takes work to discover it. Make sure you network as much as you can. Being known within your specialist field certainly pays off and embracing the power of platforms like LinkedIn will help get you noticed. There is a strong network in the IC sector as many people have worked together before in-house or on client programmes and it is certainly beneficial to pay attention to your networks. Join industry associations, attend networking events: just get out and meet colleagues old and new. It all helps. And get close to one or two recruitment agents that you can really trust – some are extremely well-connected. In our survey, more than 50% of the interims found the majority of their assignments through agency introductions.

57.8% of interims typically find assignments through agency introductions

20% of interims typically find assignments through word of mouth

“As far as possible I try to find assignments through word of mouth or direct contacts. However while I build my network I tend to rely on agency introductions.”



Marketing yourself

We asked how much time interim managers spent actively marketing themselves to find work. Unsurprisingly, when on assignment, marketing activity dipped with 83% of respondents claiming that less than 10% of their time was spent on building their pipeline of work. As expected, marketing activity did increase between assignments, although perhaps not to the extent it might, suggesting that for some interims it is the flexibility and the opportunity to 'have another life' between assignments that holds their attraction.

"Usually the interim assignment is full-on, so not much spare time to devote to marketing oneself. Although it would be sensible to do so in the interests of the contract pipeline!"

"Given the nature of interim roles are typically 6-12 months I always like to keep my profile in good shape and look for networking opportunities."

Keeping skills up to date

One of the most valued attributes of an interim is, according to employers, the fact that they know their stuff and 'hit the ground running'. Employers do not expect to provide skills training for interims so keeping up to date with latest skills and methodologies is up to the individual. Our survey revealed that the five most highly rated ways of keeping abreast of the latest developments and making sure skills are up to date are:

Reading	77.3%
On the job	70.5%
Industry communication events	59.1%
Courses or workshops	50%
Online learning	36.4%

"I do career and leadership coaching around my interim assignments. That requires a pretty constant focus on updating my skills and techniques."

"It pays to enjoy being a perpetual student as an interim."

"At the start of each year I put together a development plan for the year ahead which includes a mix of the above. I typically review this in December ready for the next year."

Managing downtime

It was by asking a question about how interims used their time between assignments that revealed exactly what being an interim is all about. It's about the individual. It's



about being able to work on your terms; as far as possible making your working life as flexible as it needs to be to meet your desired work-life balance. Our survey suggests that around 1 in 5 interims plan to work continuously, using their time actively between assignments to find new work. A little more than 10% intend to 'take a break' with the majority using the time to enjoy a well-earned rest before they seek out their next role.

These three comments sum this up:

"Life is for living. Work is just an enabler with a few social benefits"

"Between assignments I enjoy travelling and living in my beach home abroad."

"I rarely take time out between contracts"

Concerns

Concerns were relatively few indicating perhaps that working as an interim was indeed a positive lifestyle decision for those in the field. Interestingly, the single biggest concern was that client expectations are unrealistic with just over 20% of those polled suggesting they were very concerned about this. But there was plenty of advice on this issue too:

"Ask as many questions about the role and team as you can, make sure the client really knows what it wants and that this is deliverable."

"Be clear about where you are willing to be flexible and where you are not and stick to that."

"Be prepared to throw yourself in and ensure you've got clear goals/performance criteria. Even if the goals change, it really helps to keep focused and maximise the value of your time, effort and contribution to the client."

"Be clear on what is expected of you and regularly feedback to your stakeholders how you are doing against these targets."



How to get the best from being an interim – top tips from those in the know:

1. Be comfortable and clear on your motivations and expectations
2. Value yourself - the professionalism, expertise and knowledge that you bring
3. Keep open to new ways of working
4. Be flexible and pragmatic
5. Keep your skills up to date and your networks fresh
6. Don't give up after just one contract - be tenacious
7. Be resilient and ready to use downtime productively
8. Don't panic
9. Never underestimate the power of your network
10. Be flexible on price

Comma Partners provides internal and change communications managers to clients who need high calibre expertise on an interim basis. Clients and candidates can contact Virginia Hicks on 0208 943 0686 or visit www.commapartners.com.

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All comments and data are from a survey of Internal Communication interims conducted in the last two weeks of September 2015 by Comma Partners. 46 respondents completed the short survey.

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