


How to Apply for Employment as a Contract Security Guard in Canada

By Robert Ing, DSc, FAPSc, FInstMP(UK), CPO

Having spent more than a decade as a Senior Security Advisor being involved in the interviewing, screening, commissioning and training of contract security guards I decided to put my thoughts and experience on paper with the objective of providing a practical orientation on how to effectively obtain employment as a contract security guard. I felt this was both necessary for, and useful to potential candidates as for every year of my involvement as an employer of contract security guards I would see the same mistakes made again and again by candidates who otherwise would have received an offer of employment but fell short of the mark by their own errors in not understanding the culture or subtleties of the industry and position.

Scanning the Help Wanted section in most newspapers or online job posting websites you will come across advertisements from various contract security guard firms seeking employees. First off, if you see any ad that promises an hourly wage of \$5.00 above the current minimum wage, offers employment “at the airport” or offers to train people with no experience with a “job guarantee,” be very cautious. While it may be true, there is a 95% chance that you won’t get even close to what is promised. Typically the firms that run ads such as these are actually out to sell you their training course which will see you end up a few hundred dollars out of pocket with a nice certificate but no tangible employment unless you find employment yourself.

In order to be employed as a security guard you must have completed a government approved security guard training course in most provinces and personally possess or have a licensed contract security agency endorse you, for a valid security guard license. If you do not possess both of these prerequisite items, no contract security guard firm will or is legally authorized to hire you.



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In April 2010, the Province of Ontario established the requirement that individuals wishing to obtain a Security Guard License would have to attend a 40 hour training program and pass a multiple choice examination consisting of 60 questions with a minimum acceptable passing grade of 62%. From July 2010 to June 2014, I conducted a study of 268 random security guard job candidates. The volunteer candidates allowed me to document their security guard licensing examination scores anonymously in order to determine the level of training competency within the security guard candidate pool in the Greater Toronto Area.

The top 4 percentiles for candidates were: 12% of candidates achieved a score of 79% on their exam, while 9% achieved a score of 84%, 8% of candidates achieved a score of 75% and 7% of candidates scored 70%. While 5% of candidates just made the exam pass mark of 62% and 1% of candidates surveyed had scored the highest on the exam at 95%. In my sampling no one obtained an exam score greater than 95% and 1% of the candidates I sampled had failed the security guard licensing examination on their first attempt. As a candidate competing for a contract security position, information such as this is useful in obtaining a sense of the candidates you may be competing with for the same position, and as only you know your own exam score, as a general aid to determine where you personally rank in the candidate pool.

Contract security guards are those who work for a contract security guard agency. The agency solicits clients and is contracted to provide security guard service for a defined period of time (the contract period) and sends a security guard (hopefully, you) employed by them to work the contract. Once the contract is finished, the contract security guard (possibly you) will be assigned to another contract to provide service. A contract security guard agency is similar to a clerical or industrial help temp agency except it provides security guards not office staff or general labourers. The only people that make any real money in the contract security guard industry are the agency owners not the contract security guards.



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Contract security guards earn at the high-end of the wage band typically not more than 35% above the standard established minimum wage, while over 65% often work at minimum wage up to about 18% above this level. Unfortunately, this places the average hourly minimum remuneration paid to contract security guards at approximately 10% below the hourly rate required to meet the annual poverty line income for an adult with one dependent child.

Despite the training, licensing and responsibility for millions of dollars of property entrusted them; the service provided by contract security guards is quite often a legal or contractual requirement placed on clients by their insurers or legislated industry, and clients often find it difficult to see the direct but subtle relationship how the physical security services provided by a contract security guard can affect their project balance sheet. This inability to fully understand the importance of contract security guard services from the client point of view has clients undervaluing these services resulting in the contract security guard industry acquiescing to the demand for below fair market values for services quoted in order to win client contracts. This situation equates to tighter profit margins for agency owners, but the most affected are the contract security guards themselves when it comes to what is and what is not available with regard to the amount of remuneration to be paid. It is primarily due to this situation that contract security guards often hover around the minimum wage rate for what they do; and why for the most part, those working as contract security guards are typically students, retirees, people entering or re-entering the workforce, and new immigrants.

However, all in all working as a contract security guard does offer some flexibility and will certainly offer practical on-the-job experience in customer service, health & safety, fire & crime prevention and of course, security. Skills, training and experience obtained while working full or part time as a contract security guard for at least eighteen months are, if presented properly within context, easily transferable to other occupations and industries.



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Likewise, customer service, hospitality, health care, retail, safety, logistics, and industrial training and experience acquired from employment other than contract security, regardless of country of origin, within context may be transferable to a contract security position, and could provide the candidate with an edge over other applicants. This is pretty much the background you need to be made aware of so you may enter the world of contract security guard employment with eyes wide open.

Employment as a contract security guard is considered an unskilled entry level job with its minimum wage remuneration. As a result, there are a large number of people seeking to be employed in this field; while with any unskilled minimum wage position, there is a high turn-over of employees. An employee who worked for company "A" may leave in a few months to work for company "B" while another company "B" employee may seek employment with company "A" or company "C." In many larger Canadian cities, the adage, "... if you have a Security Guard License you can always find work somewhere" is not far from the truth as contract security guards outnumber most municipal police constables by 3 to 1, and the average number of licensed contract security agencies in major Canadian cities is 27.

While in one way this is good news for those seeking work as a contract security guard, it also means competition may be tougher and those seeking a position have to go the extra distance. From personal experience and in conversations with other people in the contract security industry, here is what everyone who may hire you would tell you:

1. They get a lot of applicants.
2. Out of all the applicants they see, they feel only about one-third of those are quality applicants.
3. A large majority of applicants don't make a very good impression in the way they apply for, or interview for a contract security guard position. Should these individuals do get hired, they are often considered "B" or "C" list candidates and are given assignments of less responsibility, of shorter scheduled hours and are offered lower starting wages regardless of experience.



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It is very important to bear these three points in mind while applying and interviewing for a contract security guard position.

Here are 7 main points that will make you an “A” list candidate:

1. Know Who You Are Applying To

Not all contract security companies are the same. Some specialize in servicing specific industries from construction, industrial to residential. Some provide specialized services from mobile security patrols, stationary security guards, bodyguards to guard dog services and armed guards. Before contacting a company you must find out about the company by visiting the company’s website or perhaps speaking to one of their guards you may encounter in public. If you don’t have a driver’s license, it would be pointless to apply to a company that only does mobile security patrols. If you do not have experience working with dogs, it would be pointless to apply to a firm that only has guard dogs. Do your research and save yourself time and embarrassment. Be sure to make statements and ask questions based on what you know about the company during an interview.

2. Know Your Availability

Understand that it is far easier to find work as a contract security guard if you can work 4:00 pm to Midnight or Midnight to 8:00 am shifts and on weekends. Companies usually need security guards after employees go home. However, there are 8 am to 4 pm, weekday shifts available but there are not as many of these to be had, and when they are, they are quite often given to guards who have experience or seniority in the firm. Before you apply for employment, have a reasonable and practical idea of the shifts and days you can commit to work. Also be aware that as a contract security guard you may be required to work on statutory holidays or on short notice at times.



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3. Understand the Challenge of Working for a Contract Firm

Whether you work for a contract security firm or contract industrial temp agency you understand you do not work in the office of the firm you work for but are sent out to a client's premises to do your job. The client location could be minutes away from your employer's office or it could be at least an hour travel time from your home. This is one of the challenges of working for a contract firm. Many candidates feel an hour travel time to and from a client location is not practical. However, a maximum one way one hour commute to work in reality is not an unreasonable request or expectation, given the availability of public transit or traffic congestion in most major cities. As a candidate you must understand this challenge. This does not mean every assignment given you will be not less than an hour commute, but it does mean you should not seek employment with a contract firm expecting, or placing as a condition of your employment that your assignments must be within the neighbourhood of where you live. To do so is a definite fail.

4. Telephone First

Always telephone the agency you are interested in applying to so you may either obtain an appointment or find out what hours they are accepting employment applications. Never just show up at their office unannounced and unprepared; telephone first. If you are applying by e-mail, fax or mail be sure to include a cover letter with your resume.

5. First Contact

Whether you are going to the office to complete an employment application, deliver a resume or for an interview; you must be dressed appropriately for a business environment, be clean and neat in appearance. Rather than tell you what to wear, let me tell you what not to wear unless you really don't want to be employed. Do not wear a track suit, t-shirt, shorts, sandals, beachwear, another firm's security uniform, blue jeans, a baseball cap, rapper or club wear. All of these clothing items have a place where they can be worn, but that place is not to obtain employment as a contract security guard.



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6. Resumes & Employment Applications

Before you leave your home ensure you have a black ballpoint pen and your security guard license on your person. Be prepared to spend at least ninety minutes if you are to fill out an employment application. Showing up to fill out an application for employment and having to beg or borrow a pen to fill out that application makes you look like you put very little thought into what you do and are not attentive to details. This makes you look bad. When filling out an employment application, always read the form first completely; then go back and carefully complete it by printing your information, ensuring you complete every section. Be sure to print your information. If a section does not apply to you, indicate this by printing "N/A" (Not Applicable) in the space or section, which indicates you have reviewed what was asked. If you have a resume, it is acceptable to attach the resume to the application and for only the sections regarding employment history and experience may you print on the application "See Attached Resume." On resumes and employment applications you should list at least five years of your employment history, even if part or all of it was outside Canada or not in the security industry. If you were in school for part or all of the five years, you should indicate this as well. The major mistake most immigrants make is they omit listing their employment back home or their years spent in school, or simply if their work was not security related believe that it is not relevant and therefore leave questionable gaps in their employment history. All work and school experience is relevant regardless of where it has been obtained, as it has contributed to the sum of your skills and experiences in life to make you the person that you are; take pride in it, show it off. If you have previous security, military, police, safety, customer service or facilities management experience regardless of how long ago or from what country, be sure to include it on your resume or employment application. Some firms may also include a pre-employment test as part of their employment application process. Pre-employment tests for contract security agencies are usually one of two different types of tests; a basic English literacy test or a test of basic safety and security procedures.



7. The Interview

Be sure to arrive for your interview at least fifteen minutes before your scheduled time. Be prepared to spend at least ninety minutes. Bring an extra resume, a black ballpoint pen and your security guard license. Have at least three questions to ask during your interview. Never accept a job unless you know exactly how much you will get paid and the scheduled hours of work – perhaps this might be two of your questions. Be sure to mention at least three things you know about the company based on your research.

Be prepared to answer questions such as those listed below during your interview:

How and why did you choose to apply for a position at our firm?

(A chance to show you researched the company and what the job is all about.)

What type of security experience have you had?

(Tell them the types of security assignments you have worked or the types of non-security related jobs you have had with emphasis on customer service, problem solving, safety, supervisory skills, etc.)

Why do you want to do security work?

(This is often asked of those with no security experience to ensure they realistically know what is expected of them in this line of work. This is your chance to genuinely relate what you know about the job and how you see yourself doing it. Avoid making general statements such as that you want to help people.)

Where do you see yourself in a year or five years?

(This question disguised as a personal motivation question, is usually asked to determine if you are committed to working in the industry or if you are just passing through. Realistically, you should at least set your sights on staying at a contract security position for one year to a year and a half. This ensures you have gained a reasonable amount of experience and looks much better on your resume than changing jobs every few months.)



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Have you ever had to deal with difficult people and if so, how did it turn out?

(This question is asked to see if you have had previous experience in dealing with difficult people and your judgment under stress. This question may be asked in different ways but you will recognize it once it is asked.)

As a security guard, what do you think would be the best working conditions for you?

(This question is often used to determine if you have realistic expectations about the job and to determine how flexible you may be with regard to assignments.)

If I hired you and you ended up quitting, what would be the most likely reason?

(This question is asked to test you with regard to how serious and committed you are to getting and keeping the job. It is often asked if you have listed employers where your employment lasted less than a year, or if you have little or no Canadian work experience. The interviewer needs you to convince them that if you did leave, it would be a situation not directly related to the position, company or industry but something of a totally unforeseen, unrelated matter.)

What type of customer service and people skills do you have, and how do they relate to this position?

(The interviewer is looking for practical, real examples of how you have used your customer service and people skills whether you have used them within the security industry or you have used them outside of the industry. This is also a question to see how you literally think on your feet.)

Do you have any questions for me?

(This question is usually asked towards the end of the interview and is often used as a test to see if you have any concerns about the job, how interested you are in the job and company, and to determine if you are seriously looking for employment or just looking around to see what's available in the industry. You must ask some questions if you want to leave a good impression.)



Having read this article and hopefully taking at least some of the information I have provided to heart, you will find it much easier to receive an offer of employment as a contract security guard, and you may even be offered a slightly better starting rate. However, there are no guarantees. Opportunities are earned not given.

About the Author

Dr. Robert Ing is a forensic intelligence specialist and has appeared on North American news networks on the issues of technology crime, computer security, privacy and identity theft.

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